



MEDIA COVERAGE OF JUDICIAL ISSUES: PERSPECTIVES OF THE JUDICIAL AND MEDIA COMMUNITIES

Findings of a Survey on the Communication
and Dialogue Needs of Representatives
of the Media and the Judiciary



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Translators: Kobziak Nataliia, Tipper Alisiia, editor: Diachuk Olesia.

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The publication is based on the findings of a survey on the communication and dialogue needs of representatives of the media and the judiciary, conducted by the Human Rights Vector NGO in partnership with the Council of Judges of Ukraine and the National Union of Journalists of Ukraine.

The report was developed primarily for representatives of the judiciary and the media community for the purpose of strengthening judicial communication and covering judicial issues in the media. The materials will also be of interest to representatives of other governmental bodies, non-governmental organizations, as well as the expert, academic, donor, and other professional communities.

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The views expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of CEELI Institute, Prague.

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INTRODUCTION

The transparency and clarity of the judiciary are essential prerequisites for public trust in the justice system, especially in the context of ongoing transformations, martial law, and heightened public demand for accountability of state institutions. In this regard, the interaction between the courts and the media plays a decisive role, as it is through the media that most people receive information about the judiciary, court proceedings, and decisions that directly affect the exercise of fundamental human rights and freedoms.

At the same time, communication between the judiciary and the media remains one of the most sensitive areas of institutional interaction. It lies at the intersection of professional standards, legal constraints, ethical requirements, public expectations, and contemporary challenges. For the courts, it involves striking a balance between the principles of openness and judicial independence and the limitations imposed by law; for journalists, it entails difficulties in accessing information, the need to interpret legally complex proceedings, covering sensitive issues, and operating under a high level of public pressure.

These issues have become particularly acute since the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Society has high expectations of the judiciary and a strong demand for justice¹, which may contribute to increased trust in the judiciary, while simultaneously creating the risk of profound disappointment and loss of trust if these expectations are not met². The scope and number of war-related cases have expanded significantly, as has the public demand for truthful, accurate, and reliable information. In this context, communication between the courts and the media has become not only a tool for informing the public but also a factor in shaping public trust, stability, and a sense of justice.

It is in this context that the Human Rights Vector NGO, in partnership with the Council of Judges of Ukraine and the National Union of Journalists of Ukraine, with the support of the CEELI Institute, Prague, implemented the project "Dialogue Between the Media and the Judiciary to Enhance Judicial Transparency" and conducted the current study, the findings of which are presented in this publication. A survey of representatives of the judiciary and the media from different regions of Ukraine was conducted to identify the actual practices, needs, challenges, and expectations of both professional communities and to generate empirical data on the state of interaction, existing problems, and potential areas for development.

This report summarizes the findings of two surveys: one among representatives of the judiciary and one among representatives of the media. This approach enables the examination of the situation from two perspectives, facilitates comparisons of assessments, and highlights both shared challenges and divergences in the perception of problems and potential solutions. It is important that the study focuses not only on areas of concern but also on positive practices, examples of effective interaction, and promising practices with potential for scaling and replication.

1 A nationwide telephone survey, "Opportunities and Obstacles Facing Ukraine's Democratic Transition," conducted by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology on 2-9 August 2022, demonstrated that fair and equal justice ranks second among the most important characteristics of a fully functioning democracy identified by respondents. Publicly available at <https://bit.ly/3LViRZV>

2 Media Monitoring and Analysis of Court Websites Regarding Coverage of War-Related Cases (Monitorynh media ta analiz saitiv sudiv shchodo vysvitlennia sprav pro voieni zlochyny) / A. Rozlutska, V. Lebid, edited by V. Rybak — Kyiv: Human Rights Vector NGO, 2023. — 25 pp. Source: <https://hrvector.org/assets/files/monitoryng-1.pdf>

This report combines quantitative and qualitative analysis: alongside statistical indicators, it presents in-depth respondent comments, which allow for a deeper understanding of the motivations, context, and reasoning behind their answers. Special focus is given to communication channels, mechanisms for the broadcast of court hearings, the role of court communication teams, the quality of court reporting, as well as identified needs for training, standardization, and institutional strengthening.

The purpose of this report is not only to assess the current state of interaction between the judiciary and the media, but also to provide an analytical foundation for further practical steps, including the development of dialogue mechanisms, training programs, and recommendations for the judiciary, media, and donor organizations. The findings are intended to contribute to the shaping of more systematic, predictable, and professional interaction, which, in the long term, will support the transparency of the system of justice and public trust in the judiciary at a high level.

This report is addressed to representatives of the judiciary, the media community, civil society, donor organizations, as well as all those interested in the development of a transparent, accountable, and fair system of justice in Ukraine.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Survey Findings: Representatives of the Judiciary

The report analyses 97 completed questionnaires from respondents across 22 regions of Ukraine, with the exception of Luhansk and Ternopil regions. The respondents represent administrative, commercial and local courts of general jurisdiction (79%), appellate courts (20%), and the Council of Judges of Ukraine (one questionnaire – 1%).

The majority of respondents are court staff members (59%), and 41% of responses were received from judges, including court chairs and judges serving as court spokespersons.

Experience of Interaction Between the Judiciary and the Media

Experience of interaction with the media varies considerably among representatives of the judiciary, and being a member of a court communications team does not necessarily equate to having such experience. Notably, one-third of respondents (33%) who identify themselves as part of a court communications team reported no prior experience interacting with the media.

Among those with such experience, the majority rated it as neutral (74%) or positive (24%).

Respondents also cited examples of communication difficulties, yet generally characterized their experience as positive.

Communication Channels Used by the Judiciary

Although the main communication channel used by the judiciary is court websites (90%), engagement also takes place on more interactive platforms, such as social media platforms (68%). In their detailed responses, court staff cited examples of various activities carried out in collaboration with media representatives, including recording podcasts on legal topics, producing video explanations of court rulings, conducting interviews with judges — including judges serving as court spokespersons, court chairs, and other court representatives — providing video commentary, organizing court open days, and holding press breakfasts for media representatives, among other initiatives.

Mechanism for Broadcasting Court Hearings Using Court Technical Facilities

Another important tool for ensuring openness of judicial proceedings and the overall transparency of the judiciary is the mechanism for broadcasting court hearings using court technical facilities, developed and implemented by the Human Rights Vector NGO in cooperation with the judiciary of Ukraine. The study shows that courts report using broadcasts either occasionally (44%) or regularly (7%), while an equal share (44%) report never using them.

Most representatives of the judiciary believe that the most effective way to increase the number of online broadcasts of court hearings is to provide adequate technical equipment (58%) and additional staff (54%). At the same time, 47% of respondents also cited the need for clearer procedural guidance on conducting broadcasts.

This suggests that the challenge is not limited to technical capacity, but also concerns organizational and staffing factors. Courts, therefore, require sufficient resources, procedural clarity, and designated personnel to ensure the openness of hearings through online broadcasts.

Key Difficulties in Judiciary–Media Interaction

The survey findings show that challenges in judiciary–media interaction are multifaceted, relating both to the professional training of journalists and to the resource constraints faced by courts. The dominant response to the question “What difficulties most often arise in interacting with the media?” was “low level of legal awareness among media professionals” (70%), confirming a significant demand for the development of court reporting, improved legal literacy among media professionals, and more systematic, two-way communication.

At the same time, the lack of time and legal restrictions on the part of courts point to the need for institutional strengthening of court communication teams — including enhanced staffing, organizational capacity, and financial resources.

The fact that 7% of respondents reported positive cases of cooperation, noting that “no difficulties arise” in their interaction with the media, demonstrates that effective interaction between the judiciary and the media is not only possible but is already taking place. This reinforces the argument for regular dialogue formats, methodological support, and training initiatives on both sides.

Judiciary Assessment of Media Coverage of Judicial Issues and Court Communication Teams

The disparity between assessments of judicial coverage in general-interest and specialized media further underscores the importance of developing court reporting. The survey invited respondents to evaluate media materials, identify which outlets they consider specialized, and provide relevant examples.

The average rating assigned to general-interest media was 6 out of 10, which indicates a moderately positive assessment, yet with substantial room for improvement in the quality of coverage. In an open-ended question inviting comments on the scores provided, representatives of the judiciary primarily reiterated previously identified concerns — most notably, the limited legal literacy among media professionals (35%). They also highlighted additional issues, including one-sided reporting and lack of balance between parties’ positions (15%), negative or biased coverage of courts (14%), dissemination of inaccurate, distorted, or manipulative information (12%), and violations of journalistic standards, sensationalism, and “hype” (10%).

The average rating assigned to specialized media was 8 out of 10. The absolute leader in terms of mentions as a “specialized” outlet was Sudovo-Yurydychna Hazeta (72%), perceived by the courts as the primary specialized media source. It was followed by Zakon i Biznes (33%) and the publishing house Yurydychna Praktyka (18%).

In the open-ended responses commenting on the scores, representatives of the judiciary largely emphasized the higher quality and greater professionalism of coverage provided by specialized media. These outlets were described as demonstrating a stronger balance between parties’ positions, explaining complex legal issues in accessible language, adhering more consistently to journalistic standards, possessing greater legal expertise, referring more frequently to legal acts, incorporating commentary from experts and court representatives, and providing deeper analysis without seeking to generate public sensationalism. Respondents also noted that specialized media tend to cover not only individual court proceedings but also the broader activities of courts and the judiciary as a whole, with fact-based and unbiased reporting. At the same time, respondents acknowledged that certain shortcomings observed in general-interest media are likewise present in specialized outlets.

Representatives of the judiciary rate the effectiveness of court communication teams in Ukraine at an average of 7 out of 10, reflecting a moderate level of trust and recognition, while also indicating the need for further development — particularly in strengthening proactivity, responsiveness, and the overall quality of media engagement.

Analysis of open-ended question regarding difficulties encountered by representatives of the judiciary in communicating judicial issues shows that the challenges are multifaceted. Respondents attribute them to factors within the judiciary itself (40%), the media (25%), society (9%), legal restrictions (5%), and the ongoing war (4%). Notably, 5% indicated that no difficulties arise. This suggests that locally established effective working relationships between the judiciary and the media already exist, representing promising practices with potential for scaling and replication.

Respondents note that courts face shortages of professional staff and the absence of specialized press secretaries, excessive workload and limited time, low salaries for staff performing communication functions, a lack of coordination among courts, and the absence of a unified communication center within the judiciary, as well as limited participation of judges in communication activities. Respondents also highlight shortcomings in media work, including distortions or inaccuracies in coverage, a focus on negative, conflict-driven, and sensational topics, insufficient judicial specialization and basic legal expertise, limited interest in presenting the court's position, and instances of pressure exerted through media campaigns. Society more broadly is described as demonstrating limited interest in constructive dialogue on judicial topics, a strong demand for sensational topics, scandals, and “hype,” low levels of legal literacy, and general distrust toward the judiciary. In recent years, additional factors linked to the ongoing war have further complicated the situation, manifesting in security concerns, the sensitivity of war crime cases, and, more broadly, cases related to wartime events.

Changes in Media Coverage of Judicial Issues Over the Past Four Years

Representatives of the judiciary reported that over the past four years — corresponding to the period of martial law — there have been changes in the coverage of judicial issues. These changes are generally assessed as positive, though uneven and more fragmented than systemic. Overall, 68% consider the changes to be positive. The developments concern both the media (improved interaction, increase in analytical content) and the courts themselves (more proactive communication, presence on social media platforms). However, 29% of the respondents do not observe improvements due to persistent systemic challenges such as staff shortages, limited resources, and the absence of a unified communication strategy. During the ongoing war, security requirements, restrictions on public disclosure, and the sensitivity of certain categories of information have increased significantly.

Responses to questions on strengthening competencies for the judiciary-media partnership demonstrate a strong and consistent demand within the judiciary for the following:

- A platform for an ongoing dialogue with the media.
- Professional training and the standardization of communication practices.
- Practical tools, as well as technical and methodological support for covering court proceedings.
- The development of sustainable partnerships with journalistic communities.
- Rethinking the balance between transparency, security considerations, and legal constraints.

These results confirm that the project “Dialogue Between the Media and the Judiciary to Enhance Judicial Transparency” not only responds to the actual needs of its audiences but also addresses the greatest systemic vulnerability — where public trust, transparency, and access to justice are established.

Topics/Issues Important for Joint Discussion Between Representatives of the Media and the Judiciary

In response to the question, “What topics or issues are important for joint discussion between representatives of the media and the judiciary?”, the answers reveal a strong interest in substantive, policy-relevant discussions. These priorities reflect the key challenges confronting the judicial system. The responses show a pronounced need for professional and ethical dialogue between the courts and the media. The most frequently mentioned topics can be grouped into five thematic categories:

1. Strengthening Public Trust and the Authority of the Judiciary
 - shaping the public image of judges;
 - ensuring clarity of court language and communications;
 - countering negative stereotypes.
2. Quality of Media Coverage
 - countering disinformation;
 - standards for reporting on judicial matters;
 - issues of “trial by media” and media pressure.
3. Ethical and Legal Boundaries of Communication
 - the presumption of innocence;
 - sensitive topics;
 - personal data protection and information security.
4. Communication in Wartime Contexts
 - war crimes;
 - security-related restrictions;
 - balancing transparency and security.
5. Digitalization and Modernization of Communications
 - engagement with online platforms;
 - interaction via social media;
 - broadcasting court hearings.

The need to address these topics indicates that communication between the judiciary and the media is evolving, yet it requires sustained support and joint efforts to ensure high-quality coverage of judicial issues. This includes responding to current challenges while developing practices that are both stable and adaptable.

Survey Findings: Representatives of the Media

The survey involved 59 respondents across 22 regions of Ukraine, with the exception of the Luhansk and Ternopil regions, as well as several respondents based abroad. The vast majority of participants were journalists (81%), primarily representing regional (54%) and online media (42%). The sample also included editors, media lawyers, representatives of non-governmental organizations, and other professionals working in the media sector.

Current Difficulties in Media Coverage of Judicial Issues, According to Media Representatives

Journalists primarily face restricted access to court hearings, incomplete or delayed information about scheduled proceedings, and difficulties in obtaining case materials and hearing dates. Open hearings often prove to be effectively inaccessible in practice, while comments from judges, prosecutors, or press secretaries are either not provided or delivered with significant delay.

Additional barriers include bureaucratic hurdles, such as frequent postponements of hearings, a lack of explanations for procedural delays, and the absence of timely public information regarding changes to court schedules.

Journalists also point to structural problems, including the uneven performance of press services (ranging from high-quality interaction in some courts to a complete lack of communication in others), technical barriers (limited or poor-quality online broadcasting, issues with court registries), the complexity of legal language, and the impact of wartime conditions and security risks in the regions. Even those who regularly cover court proceedings emphasize that access and communication largely depend on a particular court or individual judges rather than on a standardized institutional practice.

Overall, media representatives identify the core challenge not as the absence of information per se, but as the lack of stable, predictable, and equal access to it.

Changes in Media Coverage of Judicial Issues Over the Past Four Years

Despite significant challenges, the media representatives report tangible progress in the transparency of the judicial system. In recent years, journalists have observed a greater willingness on the part of courts to communicate, the introduction of new or more professional press officers, and a trend toward an increase in the number of open hearings, including those that were previously subject to significant access restrictions.

Particular emphasis is placed on the introduction or improvement of electronic tools, including court services, online user accounts, and improved access to information on court websites. Media representatives also note that courts have become more visible in the public sphere, and that interaction in some courts has become considerably prompter and more professional than in the past.

However, approximately one-fifth of respondents do not perceive any positive developments and continue to view the system as closed and unpredictable. Even these responses, however, underscore the central role of communication: where positive changes have occurred, they are primarily associated with improvements in the quality of communication rather than with procedural or technical reforms.

Media Assessment of the Effectiveness of Court Communication Teams

On a scale from 1 to 10, court communication teams receive an average score of approximately 5.7. This suggests that media representatives perceive their work as moderately effective, albeit with considerable variation across courts. The most frequently assigned scores are 5 and 8, which points to substantial differences in journalists' experiences: for some, communication functions at an acceptable level, while for others it is assessed as merely satisfactory.

It is noteworthy that a significant proportion of respondents report having no experience interacting with court press services at all. Others share both positive and negative

examples — ranging from the high-quality work of individual press officers to a complete lack of openness; from professional support to situations in which journalists had to contact judges directly, bypassing press officers due to a lack of response. This points to considerable inconsistency within the communication system: where press services function effectively, they play a key role in facilitating interaction; where they are absent or overstretched, a communication vacuum emerges, which the media perceive as a closed and inaccessible judicial system.

Topics/Issues Important for Joint Discussion Between Representatives of the Media and the Judiciary

The media demonstrate a strong willingness to engage in dialogue with the judiciary; however, this dialogue is associated with clearly defined priorities. First and foremost, journalists seek to address issues related to court transparency and access to information — ranging from the actual accessibility of open hearings to transparency in high-profile cases, from the consistent practice of online broadcasting to the clear and timely publication of court decisions.

A second key area concerns the establishment of systematic communication mechanisms: the designation of responsible contact persons within courts, clear procedures for obtaining comments, improved performance of press services, and the development of transparent and comprehensible guidelines. Journalists emphasize that interaction with courts should be the norm rather than the exception, and that judges should have both the motivation and skills to engage professionally with the media.

Another important dimension concerns the quality of coverage of court proceedings. Journalists seek to address the balance between public interest and privacy, ethical standards, the accessibility of legal language, and clear explanations of court decisions.

A further area of discussion relates to broader systemic issues within the justice system, including war crimes, corruption, procedural delays, and public trust in the judiciary. This emphasis reflects a societal demand for transparent and accountable justice and suggests a readiness on the part of journalists to act as partners in ensuring its responsible coverage.

CONCLUSIONS

1. Interaction between the judiciary and the media remains uneven and is often shaped by individual actors rather than institutionalized procedures

Experiences of cooperation vary significantly across courts and among journalists. While there are examples of effective interaction, these are frequently driven by the personal initiative of press officers, judges, or journalists rather than by standardized processes. This situation creates a perception of unpredictability in terms of access to information on the part of the media, and, from the courts' perspective, contributes to excessive workload and a lack of systematic support.

Overall, cooperation between the judiciary and the media requires structured institutional support, as it currently depends largely on individual efforts, resource availability, and local practices, resulting in uneven conditions for both sides.

2. Both professional groups identify resource constraints as a key challenge

The representatives of the judiciary most often refer to staff shortages, excessive workload, low salaries for press officers, the absence of a centralized communications center, and technical limitations. The representatives of the media, on the other hand, emphasize limited access to court hearings, the lack of timely information, and technical issues with the judiciary's online tools.

3. Limited legal literacy among media professionals emerges as a significant challenge, contributing to tension and mutual misunderstanding

The representatives of the judiciary point to insufficient familiarity with basic procedural rules, instances of inaccurate or distorted reporting, and a tendency toward sensational or high-profile framing, which they identify as a major difficulty. The media, in turn, note challenges stemming from complex legal terminology, insufficient explanation of court decisions, and what they perceive as a lack of openness or overly formalized communication from courts.

4. There is a shared demand for standardization of communication and professional standards of engagement

The representatives of the judiciary seek standards, methodological materials, well-defined procedures, and formal mechanisms for processing media inquiries. The journalists, in turn, expect transparency, predictability, clear rules governing access, and prompt communication.

5. Both groups acknowledge that progress has been made in recent years, although developments have been uneven

Both the judiciary and the media observe improvements, such as an increase in professional press officers, a more active presence of courts on social media platforms, and enhancements to electronic services.

However, this progress remains fragmented rather than systematic, and the overall level of satisfaction remains moderate.

6. The introduction of martial law has affected communication practices

The introduction of martial law and the resulting security risks have led to the following:

- restrictions on the openness of hearings,
- an increased demand for additional information and training on covering sensitive topics, particularly war crimes,
- introduction of additional legal and security constraints.

Both sides recognize the need to maintain a careful balance between openness and security.

7. There is a high demand for dialogue as a continuous format of engagement

This indicates the need for a regular, institutionalized platform rather than ad hoc or one-off meetings.

8. Both sides express a demand for training, methodological support, and the institutional strengthening of communication capacities

Representatives of the judiciary and the media alike demonstrate considerable interest in regular cooperation and professional exchange.

Among judicial representatives, 40% prefer online dialogue meetings, 26% favor offline formats, and another 26% support a hybrid approach, indicating a strong willingness to engage in joint activities across different formats.

Demand is even higher among journalists: 73% express interest in online meetings and 67% in offline events. Media professionals emphasize that such dialogue should not be merely formal but should serve as a practical mechanism for establishing direct communication with courts, improving access to information, and enhancing understanding of court proceedings. This creates a foundation for building a sustainable network of interaction between the judiciary and the media community.

At the same time, both groups articulate a structured and clearly defined need for further training and capacity-building.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. For the judiciary

- **Strengthen court communication teams institutionally** by establishing a dedicated position of court press officer, without assigning these responsibilities to other staff members; clearly define and systematize functions; update shared operating standards; introduce an appropriate degree of flexibility in the employment arrangements between courts and communication professionals; ensure competitive remuneration for members of court communication teams.
- **To safeguard the rights to open hearings and enhance court accessibility, continue the positive practice of broadcasting court hearings in socially significant and high-profile cases using court technical facilities, including on the Sudova Vlada Ukrainy YouTube channel**, including at the court's own initiative. Proactively disseminate information about the possibility of such broadcasts through the court's communication platforms (court premises, official websites, and social media), as well as through direct outreach and cooperation with media outlets. Media representatives should be considered a key target audience for this information, as they may also initiate requests for broadcasts using court technical media. Provide dedicated training for court staff on the technical and organizational aspects of broadcasting court hearings using court technical media.
- **Enhance the technical capacity of courts, in particular for online broadcasts.**
- **Expand and professionalize courts' presence on social media** by using clear, accessible language and proactive communication formats.

2. For the media

- **Strengthen professional training in court reporting** by incorporating core elements such as the legal framework of court proceedings, ethical standards for covering court cases, and practical skills in working with court documents and judicial decisions.
- **Strengthen cooperation with the judiciary**, particularly with court communication teams, while adhering to professional standards, ensuring balance of perspectives, and maintaining accuracy in reporting.

3. For joint action by the judiciary and the media

- Establish a platform for regular dialogue to facilitate discussion of sensitive issues, transparency procedures, and operating standards.
- Organize joint training initiatives, including on the following topics:
 - the presumption of innocence;
 - responsible reporting on sensitive issues, particularly court proceedings related to wartime events and gender-based violence;
 - effective use of various sources of information on court activities and proceedings, including judicial registers;
 - recording and broadcasting court hearings, conducting court monitoring;
 - responsible dissemination of information about court proceedings to prevent violations of the rights of participants;
 - adhering to ethical standards in reporting on the judiciary;
 - countering disinformation;
 - strengthening digital communication practices etc.

4. For donors

- **Continue and expand support for dialogue initiatives**, with a clear emphasis on long-term engagement and sustainable interaction.
- **Support the institutional development of court communication teams.**
- **Invest in professional training of court reporters and foster the development of court reporting as a specialized field.**
- **Support the enhancement of courts' technical capabilities**, including infrastructure for online broadcasting of hearings.



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