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THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA IN SHAPING PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF NARCOTICS TRAFFICKERS: A CASE STUDY OF DECISION NUMBER 1235/PID.SUS/2025/PN MDN

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the role of mass media in shaping public perceptions of drug dealers and its impact on the judicial process and judicial independence. The focus of the research is directed at mass media coverage of narcotics crime cases in Decision Number 1235/Pid.Sus/2025/PN Mdn, in which the defendant was sentenced to life imprisonment despite the public prosecutor demanding the death penalty. The findings indicate that mass media play a highly significant role in shaping public perceptions of drug dealers through mechanisms of framing and agenda setting. Media coverage, particularly that which emphasizes the large quantity of evidence and the disparity between the prosecutor's demand and the judge's decision, constructs a specific social reality that influences how the public understands narcotics cases. Such coverage has an indirect impact on the judicial process and perceptions of judicial independence. Although normatively and factually judges continue to render decisions based on the law and facts presented at trial, confrontational and sensational media framing has the potential to create moral pressure and affect public trust in judicial institutions. There is a correlation between the intensity and type of media framing and the level of public support for court decisions: the greater the intensity of coverage and the stronger the framing highlighting disparities between prosecutorial demands and judicial rulings, the greater the tendency for the public to be critical of or to reject judicial decisions. However, this correlation is social-communicative in nature and should not be interpreted as a causal relationship that binds judges in rendering their decisions.

Keywords: *Media Role, Public Perception, Narcotics*

1. INTRODUCTION

The development of information and communication technology has fundamentally transformed the media landscape. Social media and digital platforms have become the primary sources of information for the majority of society, especially the younger generation. In the context of reporting on narcotics crimes, social media often serves as the first platform to disseminate information about arrests, judicial processes, and court verdicts.

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In North Sumatra, particularly in Medan City as a regional economic and information center, the dynamics of media coverage of narcotics crimes exhibit patterns that are interesting to study. As a metropolitan city with a high level of media penetration, Medan becomes an ideal laboratory for observing how media shapes public perception of drug traffickers.

Court Decision Number 1235/Pid.Sus/2025/PN Mdn is a highly relevant case to study because it received significant media attention in North Sumatra. This case involves narcotics trafficking, and its judicial process was extensively covered by various media outlets, from the arrest, court proceedings, to the final verdict. The intensity of media coverage in this case provides an opportunity to analyze how media shapes public perception of drug traffickers and how that perception can influence the judicial process.

Based on the above description, research on the role of media in shaping public perception of drug traffickers, using Court Decision Number 1235/Pid.Sus/2025/PN Mdn as a case study, is highly relevant and urgent to conduct. This study is expected to provide theoretical contributions to the development of interdisciplinary media-law studies, as well as practical contributions in the form of recommendations to improve the quality of media reporting and maintain judicial independence in the digital era.

Based on the above description, research on the role of the media in shaping public perceptions of drug dealers, using the case study of Decision Number 1235/Pid.Sus/2025/PN Mdn, is highly relevant and urgent. This research is expected to provide theoretical contributions to the development of interdisciplinary media-law studies, as well as practical contributions in the form of recommendations for improving the quality of media reporting and maintaining judicial independence in the digital era.

2. METHODOLOGY

The data collection location for this research is Medan City, North Sumatra, with a primary focus on mass media operating in the area. The selection of this location is based on Court Decision Number 1235/Pid.Sus/2025/PN Mdn. The type of research employed in this study is empirical research, specifically legal research conducted by examining literature or secondary data consisting of primary legal materials, secondary legal materials, and tertiary legal materials. These materials are systematically compiled, analyzed, and conclusions are drawn in relation to the issues studied. Data sources are the places where research data is

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obtained. In this study, data sources include interviews with informants and relevant library materials. The data analysis technique used in this legal research applies qualitative analysis.

3. RESULTS / CASE STUDY / EXPERIMENT / DEMONSTRATION / APPLICATION FUNCTIONALITY

In the analysis using Pan and Kosicki's framing model, there are four main structures: syntactic, script, thematic, and rhetorical. In the syntactic structure, the news on Waspada.id placed the fact of 22 kilograms of methamphetamine and the death penalty demand as the main lead, while the judge's juridical considerations were placed at the end of the report. This pattern indicates a prioritization of meaning directed at the readers.

The rhetorical structure in reporting is evident from the choice of emotional words such as "escaped the death penalty" and "22 kg meth courier." These terms are not only descriptive but also evaluative because they carry moral judgment. Such rhetoric strengthens the public's emotional reaction to court decisions.

Apart from framing, the role of media can also be analyzed through the agenda-setting theory proposed by McCombs and Shaw. This theory explains that media does not always dictate what the public should think but is very effective in determining which issues are considered important by the public. The intensity of reporting on this case shows that media positioned it as a significant public issue.

The difference in perspective between the media and judges then creates a perceptual gap between the public and the judiciary. The public, receiving information through media framing, tends to assess verdicts from a moral and emotional perspective, while judges operate within a normative and juridical framework. This phenomenon demonstrates the strong influence of media in shaping public perception.

In the context of Court Decision Number 1235/Pid.Sus/2025/PN Mdn, media framing emphasizes sensational aspects rather than educational ones. This causes the public to have limited understanding of why life imprisonment was chosen over the death penalty, even though both fall within the maximum penalty spectrum under the law.

Media coverage of narcotics criminal cases can have direct and indirect impacts on the judicial process. In the case of Court Decision Number 1235/Pid.Sus/2025/PN Mdn, intense reporting highlighting the difference between the death penalty demand and the life

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imprisonment verdict created certain public expectations about the trial outcome. This condition can exert psychological pressure on judicial officers.

Waspada.id's reporting, emphasizing the phrase "escaped the death penalty," potentially frames the judge's decision as a deviation from the public's sense of justice. This framing indirectly affects public assessment of the judge's integrity and objectivity, even though the judges acted according to criminal procedural law.

In this case, the public prosecutor demanded the death penalty based on the weight of the narcotics evidence. This demand became the primary focus of media reporting, so the life imprisonment verdict was perceived as a significant reduction in punishment. In reality, legally, life imprisonment is an alternative maximum penalty.

The correlation between media reporting and public attitudes toward court verdicts is an important issue in legal and mass communication studies. In narcotics cases, high reporting intensity is often directly proportional to public attention to the judge's decision. This is evident in Court Decision Number 1235/Pid.Sus/2025/PN Mdn, which received widespread media coverage.

Waspada.id's reporting used contrast framing between "death penalty demand" and "life imprisonment verdict." This framing creates the perception that the judge's verdict is lighter than expected, although legally life imprisonment constitutes a maximum sentence.

Interviews with Waspada.id journalists indicated that news framing was chosen to attract readers' attention, not explicitly to influence public opinion. However, journalists acknowledged that certain framing could trigger emotional reactions from readers.

Meanwhile, interviews with the presiding judge revealed that the judicial panel did not consider public reaction in rendering the verdict. The judge emphasized that the legitimacy of the decision derives from the law, not public support.

4. Discussion

Mass media plays a strategic role in shaping public perception of narcotics criminal cases through framing and agenda-setting mechanisms. In the context of Court Decision Number 1235/Pid.Sus/2025/PN Mdn, media not only conveys factual information but also constructs social reality by highlighting certain aspects, such as the volume of narcotics evidence and the difference between death penalty demands and life imprisonment verdicts. Through headline choices, fact placement, and the use of emotional language, media builds a

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narrative portraying the defendant as an extraordinary criminal who “escaped” the maximum punishment. Such framing causes the public to focus more on the moral and emotional dimensions of the case rather than the juridical considerations underlying the judge’s decision.

In addition to framing, media agenda-setting determines which issues are considered important by the public. The intensity and continuity of coverage in this case made sentencing a primary issue, while the evidence and judges’ legal reasoning received less attention. Consequently, a gap forms between public understanding and the judiciary, where the judge’s decision is often perceived as insufficient or unjust based on media-driven expectations. Normatively, judges remain independent and decide based on law and trial facts, but sensational media constructions potentially influence public perception of the legitimacy of verdicts and judicial independence. Therefore, more balanced and educational reporting is needed so that public perception aligns with substantive justice principles and legal certainty. Media coverage of Court Decision Number 1235/Pid.Sus/2025/PN Mdn shows a significant influence on public perception regarding the judicial process and judges’ decisions. The intensity of reporting, highlighting the difference between death penalty demands and life imprisonment, creates specific social expectations, potentially giving rise to trial by the press. Media framing using terms like “escaped the death penalty” tends to construct a confrontational narrative, portraying the judge’s verdict as seemingly divergent from societal justice. Consequently, the public evaluates verdicts from moral and emotional aspects, while evidence and juridical reasoning receive inadequate attention.

Nonetheless, judicial independence remains normatively intact, as the judicial panel bases its decisions on evidence, trial facts, and statutory provisions, not on media pressure or public opinion. Media impact on judicial independence is indirect, mainly through shaping public opinion that could influence perceived legitimacy of decisions. Therefore, a more balanced and educational media role is necessary so that criminal case reporting does not undermine public trust in the judiciary. The relationship between media and the judiciary should be complementary, where media performs social control functions without compromising judicial independence and legal justice principles.

The correlation between media intensity and framing type with public support for court verdicts is evident in Court Decision Number 1235/Pid.Sus/2025/PN Mdn. High-intensity reporting, particularly with framing emphasizing contrasts between death penalty

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demands and life imprisonment verdicts, shapes public expectations and attitudes toward judges' decisions. Through agenda-setting, media drives public focus on sentencing severity, while sensational framing directs emotional judgment of verdict fairness. Public support or rejection is therefore more influenced by media narratives than by understanding judicial reasoning. This correlation is social-communicative, not causal, and cannot normatively bind judges in deciding verdicts.

In this context, an ideal model for media coverage of narcotics criminal cases involves balanced and responsible reporting. Media must provide informative and social control functions while avoiding sensationalism that could create trial by press and disrupt perceptions of judicial independence. The ideal reporting model requires proportional emphasis between criminal facts, evidence processes, and judges' legal considerations, respecting the presumption of innocence and journalistic ethics. With more educational and contextual reporting, media can contribute to improving public legal literacy, maintaining trust in the judiciary, and respecting judges' independence in enforcing law and justice.

5. Conclusion

Mass media plays a very significant role in shaping public perception of drug traffickers through framing and agenda-setting mechanisms. Media coverage, particularly emphasizing the quantity of narcotics evidence and differences between prosecutor demands and judges' verdicts, constructs a social reality that affects public understanding of narcotics cases. In this case, media framing tends to position the death penalty as a justice standard, so the life imprisonment verdict is perceived by some of the public as a form of reduced punishment, even though it is legally a maximum penalty. Media coverage has an indirect impact on judicial processes and perceptions of judges' independence. Although judges render verdicts based on law and trial facts, confrontational and sensational media framing can generate moral pressure and influence public trust in the judiciary. Nonetheless, in Court Decision Number 1235/Pid.Sus/2025/PN Mdn, judicial independence is maintained because the verdict is based on Law Number 35 of 2009 concerning Narcotics and legal facts revealed during the trial. There is a correlation between media reporting intensity and framing type with public support for court decisions. The higher the reporting intensity and the stronger the framing emphasizing disparities between demand and verdict, the greater the tendency for the public to be critical or reject the judge's decision. However, this correlation is social-

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communicative and cannot be interpreted as a binding causal relationship for judges. The ideal model of media coverage for narcotics criminal cases is balanced, educational, and responsible reporting. Media must fulfill the public's right to information while also morally and ethically protecting judicial independence and helping society understand the legal rationale behind every court decision.

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