

TEMPO'S WATCHDOG ROLE IN REPORTING POLICE MISCONDUCT

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Abstract. Cases of police-related violence in Indonesia have increasingly drawn public and media attention, particularly in the Ferdy Sambo case, the Kanjuruhan tragedy, and the death of Afif Maulana. Tempo's digital newspaper consistently covered these events and highlighted institutional irregularities. This study aims to see how Tempo frames its news about the police in these three major cases and how watchdog functions are implemented through its reporting. The study is expected to show how Tempo's digital newspaper frames the police as an institution marked by abuse of power and lack of accountability, while at the same time carrying out watchdog journalism through critical questioning, strong critiques, and exposure of institutional misconduct.

Keywords: Framing Analysis, Watchdog Journalism, Police Accountability

INTRODUCTION

The media is widely recognised as the “fourth pillar of democracy” due to its essential role in supervising public power, exposing abuses, and promoting accountability—functions central to watchdog journalism (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2001). Through this function, the media not only informs the public but also monitors state institutions, including law enforcement agencies (Márquez-ramírez et al., 2019; Norris, 2005). In Indonesia, the watchdog role gained momentum after the Reformasi era and the enactment of the 1999 Press Law, which expanded media freedom and enabled more critical and investigative coverage of public institutions, including the police (Manan, 2016; Mulyana, 2008). One of the mechanisms through which media performs this role is framing, allowing it to select facts, craft narratives, and use evaluative diction to highlight institutional failures and pressure authorities (Ramadhanti & Nurlatifah, 2020).

The Indonesian National Police (Polri) is one of the most scrutinised state institutions due to recurring cases of violence involving the police, which have raised concerns over accountability, transparency, and institutional legitimacy. Prominent examples include the Ferdy Sambo case, the Kanjuruhan tragedy, and the death of Afif Maulana, all of which illustrate systemic problems within law enforcement, including misuse of authority, lack of transparency, and inadequate legal accountability (Curtice, 2021; Putri & Imanullah, 2023). These cases demonstrate the media's crucial role in guarding institutional accountability through criticism, evaluation, and public dissemination of information (Manan, 2016).

In other contexts, particularly in restrictive political environments such as China, media exposure, both through traditional platforms and digital activism, has been shown to challenge official narratives, attract public attention, generate social pressure, and even lead to sanctions against officials involved in cases of violence involving the police (Fu & Göbel, 2024; Zhou & Cai, 2020). These findings reaffirm the media's importance as a public accountability mechanism, even when political conditions limit press freedom.

Tempo has emerged as one of Indonesia's most critical and investigative media outlets, known for exposing institutional misconduct and amplifying public demands for justice (Aisyah et al., 2024; Maghvira, 2017). In the Afif Maulana case, Tempo explicitly criticised the actions of the West Sumatra Regional Police, describing them as misguided for prioritising the pursuit of individuals who viralised the case rather than investigating the main perpetrators. This reflects the “no viral, no justice” phenomenon, which indicates declining public trust in formal law enforcement mechanisms (Muhid, 2022; Sudirman & Antony, 2023). Tempo's coverage demonstrates how watchdog journalism can bring institutional failures to public attention and frame them as matters of justice and accountability.

Several previous studies have examined media portrayals of the police. However, most focus on image-building, heroism, and general representation rather than on how the media performs its watchdog function in reporting cases of violence involving the police. For example, Gruenewald & Hipple (2021) found that media coverage in the United States tends to frame police deaths sympathetically and avoids questioning institutional accountability. Similarly, Chan & He (2017) showed that media in Hong Kong and mainland China tend to highlight police performance rather than institutional scrutiny. In Indonesia, Davies et al. (2015) found that regional media often lack the courage to critically investigate police violence or corruption. These studies indicate that media often reinforce the legitimacy and authority of the police instead of challenging or scrutinising it.

Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by examining how Tempo exercises its watchdog journalism function in framing cases of violence involving the police in Indonesia, particularly in the context of the Ferdy Sambo case, the Kanjuruhan tragedy, and the death of Afif Maulana.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach. The qualitative approach was selected because it allows the researcher to gather descriptive information through words, narratives, and meanings that are not easily quantifiable (Hammarberg et al., 2016; Moleong, 2014). Qualitative research emphasizes contextual and subjective meanings, viewing data as an interactive and multidimensional reality. In this study, data were collected through documentation by gathering news articles published by Koran Tempo Digital. News documents are considered stable and information-rich sources, making them suitable as the primary data for analysis (Moleong, 2014)). The selected articles focus on three major cases of police violence in Indonesia: the Ferdy Sambo case, the Kanjuruhan tragedy, and the Afif Maulana case.

The news selection process was conducted using purposive sampling based on two main criteria. First, the articles selected were those published while the cases were still under investigation or inquiry, before the case files were declared complete (P-21), to ensure that the analysis focused on the role of the police. At the same time, they still held control over the legal process. Second, the articles were chosen based on headlines about alleged procedural violations, acts of police violence, or demands for institutional accountability. Headlines were prioritized because they significantly influence readers' perceptions and attitudes toward the institution being reported on (Nabi et al., 2024; Reis et al., 2015). Based on these criteria, 23 articles were collected: eight publications from the Ferdy Sambo case (July 13th – August 26th 2022), eight publications from the Kanjuruhan tragedy (October 4th – November 3rd 2022), and five publications from the Afif Maulana case (June 25th – September 26th 2024).

Data analysis in this study employed Robert M. Entman's framing analysis model. According to Entman (1993), the framing analysis model is based on four key elements: first, problem definition, which involves identifying the central issue presented in the news text; second, causal interpretation, which determines the causes or agents responsible for the problem; third, moral evaluation, which provides a moral or ethical judgment regarding the events or actors involved; and fourth, treatment recommendation, which refers to the proposed solutions or actions to address the identified problem.

RESULT AND ANALYSIS

1.1 Framing the Police as an Institution in Crisis

Tempo's coverage of the Ferdy Sambo case, the Kanjuruhan tragedy, and the Afif Maulana case consistently constructs police violence not as isolated misconduct, but as a manifestation of deeper institutional issues. Rather than framing these incidents as individual criminal acts, Tempo positions them as evidence of systemic accountability failure and a culture of impunity within the Indonesian National Police. This aligns with Ningsih & Tuasikal (2025), who argue that the core problem with policing in Indonesia lies in its weak structural oversight and institutional resistance to accountability, rather than merely individual wrongdoing. Through the use of strong narrative language such as "*rekayasa* (fabrication)," "*tertutup* (secrecy)," and "*impunitas* (impunity)," Tempo emphasizes that the violence stems from systemic dysfunction rather than sporadic procedural lapses.

Tempo identifies the root causes of these incidents in hierarchical structures of power, weak supervision, and legitimized misuse of authority. In the Ferdy Sambo case, Tempo highlights how a high-ranking officer was able to manipulate legal processes, revealing the vulnerability of law enforcement systems to internal power dynamics. In the Kanjuruhan tragedy, the frame shifts to institutional negligence in protecting civilians, pointing to failures in command responsibility, risk management, and professional standards (Nugroho & Muhammad, 2023). Meanwhile, in the Afif Maulana case, Tempo underscores how violence has been normalized in everyday policing practices, revealing a persistent pattern of institutional brutality and moral degradation (Haripin & Siregar, 2016).

Tempo's framing also carries a clear moral judgment. The reporting condemns police misconduct as a violation of ethical and humanitarian principles, rather than merely a procedural failure. Tempo portrays these actions as a betrayal of the state's duty to protect citizens, presenting police brutality as a moral crisis (Fridkin et al., 2017). This aligns with Naoroz & Cleary (2019), who found that most media portrayals of police violence rely on morality/accountability frames, emphasizing ethical transgressions and public responsibility. By highlighting the suffering of victims and families, Tempo frames police violence as a breach of public trust and institutional legitimacy.

Finally, Tempo offers treatment recommendations that emphasize transparency, structural reform, and strengthened accountability mechanisms. Across the analyzed news texts, Tempo frequently advocates for independent investigations, stronger oversight by external institutions such as Komnas HAM and Ombudsman, and cultural transformation within the police (Ansori et al., 2017; Johnston, 2006). These recommendations go beyond punishing individual perpetrators and instead call for systemic improvements to restore public confidence and reinforce the integrity of law enforcement institutions (Cobis & Rusadi, 2023).

Through these framing strategies, Tempo performs a watchdog role by revealing institutional failures, shaping public moral perspectives, and encouraging systemic reform. Its framing shifts the discourse from individual wrongdoing toward a broader understanding of institutional accountability and crisis.

1.2 Watchdog Journalism Function in Tempo's Coverage

Tempo's reporting on the Ferdy Sambo case, the Kanjuruhan tragedy, and the Afif Maulana case illustrates a strong practice of watchdog journalism, where the media not only reports events but actively examines, questions, and challenges the state's exercise of power. Rather than being a passive information channel, Tempo assumes a socially critical role by scrutinizing institutional authority, demanding accountability, and advocating for justice and transparency. This aligns with the concept of the press as The Fourth Estate, which functions as a public watchdog that oversees state actions and prevents abuse of power (Alyatalathaf & Putri, 2022; Soekawati et al., 2020).

Across the three cases, Tempo demonstrated editorial consistency. Although the events occurred in different contexts, the media repeatedly framed them as systemic abuse of power rather than isolated incidents. This indicates that Tempo's watchdog practice is not event-driven, but rooted in its institutional editorial stance. Tempo did not merely document the cases but shaped public discourse, raising moral concerns, highlighting structural failures, and reinforcing calls for institutional reform. This reflects an interventionist watchdog model, where journalists actively promote accountability and encourage corrective actions (Márquez-ramírez et al., 2019).

Tempo's watchdog role is reflected through three key dimensions: intensity of scrutiny, journalistic voice, and independent investigation.

First, intensity of scrutiny is evident in how Tempo aggressively questioned the actions of law enforcement institutions. In the Kanjuruhan tragedy, Tempo highlighted violations of FIFA regulations regarding the use of tear gas, pointing out the fatal consequences of tactical failures by security forces. Instead of neutral reporting, the coverage used confrontational descriptions such as "fatal error by officers" and "misguided security measures that triggered a humanitarian disaster." In the Ferdy Sambo case, scrutiny intensified as Tempo revealed inconsistencies in police statements, exposed evidence manipulation, and questioned internal coordination that concealed the

crime. In the Afif Maulana case, Tempo cast doubt on the police narrative by highlighting what was described as “too much being hidden,” signaling institutional opacity.

Second, journalistic voice appears in Tempo's deliberate use of critical and independent sources. Tempo foregrounded the voices of victims' families, forensic experts, legal academics, health workers, and eyewitnesses rather than relying solely on official police statements. These voices helped construct a narrative that challenges state power and delegitimizes the dominant institutional narrative. In the Sambo case, Tempo used legal experts and law enforcement insiders to expose structural manipulation. In Kanjuruhan, testimony from health workers and survivors reinforced the framing of systemic failure. Meanwhile, in Afif Maulana, forensic specialists countered the official cause of death. These journalistic choices reveal that Tempo positions itself not just as a transmitter of facts, but as an active evaluator of moral and institutional responsibility.

Third, independent investigation is the strongest indicator of Tempo's watchdog role. Instead of relying on official statements, Tempo conducted its own fact-finding. In Kanjuruhan, Tempo visited stadium locations, interviewed eyewitnesses, measured distances of tear gas deployment, and compared death timelines with police reports. In the Sambo case, Tempo accessed ballistic documents and CCTV records that were not released by official sources. In Afif Maulana's case, Tempo investigated independently by visiting the river site, interviewing relatives, and consulting forensic experts regarding inconsistencies in the autopsy findings. These actions demonstrate systemic media oversight, where journalism functions as a mechanism of external accountability for state power.

In summary, Tempo's watchdog role is characterized by strong scrutiny of authority, the use of critical and independent voices, and rigorous investigative reporting. Through these practices, Tempo positions media as a democratic institution that not only informs but also safeguards public accountability, particularly when state institutions fail to protect citizens.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that Tempo consistently fulfills the watchdog function through its coverage of the Ferdy Sambo case, the Kanjuruhan tragedy, and the Afif Maulana case. Rather than treating these incidents as isolated misconduct, Tempo frames them as symptoms of systemic power abuse and institutional failure within law enforcement. Tempo exercises its watchdog role through strong scrutiny of authority, the use of critical and independent voices, and rigorous investigative reporting that goes beyond official sources. These practices enable the media to challenge dominant state narratives, question institutional transparency, and reinforce public demands for accountability and justice. Ultimately, Tempo does not merely act as an information provider but as a democratic institution that actively monitors the use of state power. Through its journalistic practices, Tempo demonstrates that the media can serve as a guardian of public interest, particularly when state institutions fail to protect citizens' rights and uphold justice.

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