



Video links and the reinterpretation of judicial work in Sweden

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Abstract

Since the 1970s, the number of physical Swedish courthouses has decreased substantially. Courts are now situated in the larger cities, servicing greater geographical areas and populations, ultimately increasing remote participation for people without local courthouses. Although video conferencing has been in use since 1995, the implementation of technological tools has failed to fully account for the social aspects of moving a traditionally in-person, democratic ritual into a virtual setting. Asking the question, “How do Swedish judges understand their role and the function of the court in times of remote participation?”, this article investigates the changing judicial landscape in Sweden through semi-structured interviews and observations with judges working in the district and administrative courts. By combining the framing conditions of centralization with the judges’ own sense-making practices, the article illustrates how remote participation, alongside other contemporary changes to the court organization, is altering judicial work in Sweden.

Key words

Video links, courts, judges, Sweden, centralization, sense-making

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Resumen

Desde la década de 1970, el número de juzgados físicos en Suecia ha disminuido considerablemente. En la actualidad, los juzgados se encuentran en las ciudades más grandes y prestan servicio a áreas geográficas y poblaciones más amplias, lo que, en última instancia, ha incrementado la participación a distancia de las personas que carecen de juzgados locales. Aunque la videoconferencia se utiliza desde 1995, la implantación de herramientas tecnológicas no ha logrado tener plenamente en cuenta los aspectos sociales que conlleva trasladar un ritual democrático, tradicionalmente presencial, a un entorno virtual. Partiendo de la pregunta: «¿Cómo entienden los jueces suecos su papel y la función del tribunal en tiempos de participación a distancia?», este artículo analiza el cambiante panorama judicial en Suecia a través de entrevistas semiestructuradas y observaciones con jueces que trabajan en los tribunales de distrito y administrativos. Al combinar las condiciones marco de la centralización con las propias prácticas de interpretación de los jueces, el artículo ilustra cómo la participación a distancia, junto con otros cambios contemporáneos en la organización de los tribunales, transforma la labor judicial en Suecia.

Palabras clave

Enlaces a vídeos, tribunales, jueces, Suecia, centralización, interpretación de los hechos

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1. Introduction

Since the 1970s, the Swedish court system has undergone large transformations. Fuelled by centralization and accompanying efficiency and budgeting demands, the number of Swedish district courts has reduced from 96 to 48, situating courts in larger cities while servicing greater geographical areas and populations. If the government execute pending plans to close or merge additional courts for the purpose of efficiency (cf. Mattsson and Tidana 2019, Agrell *et al.* 2020), between 30 and 40 district courts could be expected to serve a population of about 10,6 million scattered across this vast country (Wångmar 2003, 7, SCB 2026). Where such cuts would occur remains unsaid, yet we can assume that this would increase remote participation for people living in areas without local courthouses. No changes are currently being discussed regarding the administrative courts, but such adjustments to the judicial system in Sweden are likely to impact the population's access to justice while changing the mode of legal interaction. It may also impact the judging profession and how Swedish courts are viewed in society. Thus, the link between the interconnected processes of centralization and digitalization of "democratic" institutions require further investigation.

Building on the question asked by Emma Rowden (2018), *What do we lose if we lose the courthouse*, I move beyond physical courthouses (cf. Kärrholm and Löfgren 2025) and centre on the judges' role and understanding of what an increase of video link usage may do to the representation of the court in Swedish society (cf. Rowden and Wallace 2018). Considering that it is claimed that "courts sit at the heart of democratic societies" (Flower 2025a, 3), the judges leading, documenting and participating in the court ritual hold important roles in how justice is constructed, communicated and understood by the population at large. To answer the question guiding this research, "How do Swedish judges understand their role and the function of the court in times of remote participation?", this article utilizes digitalization as a springboard to shed light on judges' perception of video links as well as other accompanying factors that shape the Swedish judicial landscape today. The analysis draws on material from semi-structured interviews with and observations of judges working in district and administrative courts in Sweden.

The following introduces the empirical and scholarly context framing this research presenting both the Swedish district and administrative courts as well as previous research on video links in different legal systems. I also present the theoretical frame consisting of Saskia Sassen's work on centralization and globalization (2001) together with Karl Weick's sense-making theory (1995). This combination helps illuminate how digitalization of the Swedish judicial organization is experienced by judges today and how this digital shift fits into larger societal developments. The analysis presents emerging tensions involved in adapting to the changing Swedish legal landscape following digitalization and how these changes may impact the view of the court as an institution internally. By combining these perspectives, the article adds to the previous literature on digitalization in courts by accounting directly for the surrounding structural aspects that drive technological processes. Finally, the concluding remarks highlight three different sense-making strategies used by the judges in their efforts to understand and manage their professional role as well as future research avenues that can develop our understanding of judicial work in the digital age.

2. The empirical and scholarly research context

This section presents the empirical and scholarly research context of the current article by presenting the legal system in Sweden, the district and the administrative courts and the previous research on video links in legal processes. For reasons returned to in the methods section, focus is placed specifically on the experiences of district and administrative court judges in Sweden. Turning to Sweden as a case to explore a reinterpretation of judicial work, the next section discusses five central aspects contextualising the study.

2.1. Sweden as a case to explore video links in court

First, as a nation, Sweden often aims at being a leading actor in digital development. For example, the government recently set a goal to be amongst the ten Top AI nations in the world (Palmgren 2026). Secondly, Sweden is the fifth geographically largest country in Europe, spanning an area of about 450 000 sqm resulting in large travel distances when called to appear in court if it is not available locally. Third, a long period of depopulation and a lack of socio-economic investment in the northern regions (cf. Sundvall 2024, Löwgren 2025) has resulted in the majority population living in the central south regions of the country. This has also led to an agglomeration of resources in the capital area (cf. Sassen 2001, 101-110).² Fourth, physical participation in court is stated as the baseline in *chapter 5. 10 §* in the Swedish code of judicial procedure (Rättegångsbalken 1942:740) and *each* departure from this standard requires an assessment from the judge to establish the suitability of remote participation. As such, a tension between procedural efficiency, facilitated by video links, and procedural justice, traditionally requiring in-person participation, may complicate the judges' work. Fifth, although each court is its own authority, the Swedish National Court Administration, *Domstolsverket*, has an overarching responsibility for the central organization. In a recent budgeting appraisal addressed to the Swedish government, they have expressed struggles of recruiting judges (particularly in the north) while noting an increase in the national caseload (Domstolsverket 2025a, 2026a, 10-12). A need to conduct part of the judges' training in the more southern regions of the country can be understood as one reason, among others, that complicates later relocation and ultimately exacerbates the hiring process in more rural areas. To combat this, hubs with itinerant judges have been initiated in the more northern areas to secure enough staffing also on the countryside (Domstolsverket 2022). Without local judges, prosecutors and lawyers may need to adjudicate cases in places other than where they are based ultimately increasing remote participation for all legal parties.

The two courts of interest here, the district and administrative courts, have different jurisdictions and handle different types of cases (see Domstolsverket 2026b, 2026c). The Swedish district court, on the one hand, is part of the general courts in Sweden (including the Courts of Appeal and the Supreme Court) and issue decisions on criminal and civil cases, including family litigation, at the first instance. The administrative court, on the other hand, decide on disputes between authorities and individuals and between authorities and companies. Cases can concern taxes, social insurance or instances of

² Recent reports show how 14 of 21 counties and 180 of the country's 290 municipalities has seen a population decrease in the last year, with the decrease being the largest in the north (Statistiska centralbyrån 2026).

compulsory care involving individuals convicted of a crime, who are mentally ill or children in unsustainable situations.

In the district court, requests to participate remotely comes from the individual actor and it is up to the presiding judge to assess the suitability in each case. In the administrative court, the judges often decide on the use video links without receiving such a request. When using video links, the courts usually suggest that lay actors participate from a courthouse that is geographically closer to them, but lay and legal participants can also join from their homes and offices through a video conference technology called WebRTC (Ask and Lindh 2025). Although other countries offer participation through video chat applications such as Zoom and Teams (cf. Feigenson 2023), this solution is deemed more secure (Domstolsverket 2025c). In other parts of the world, livestreaming of court proceedings is not unheard of, in Sweden, however, the court refers to the public gallery at the physical courthouse if the case is of public interest (cf. Nir and Musial, 2022, for examples from the United States).

In each video link proceeding, the judges are seated in the courtroom with one or more participants joining online. The video screens are fitted on the lengths of the room and vary in size and numbers; most have one large projector screen on each side. If there is more than one remote participant, their pictures will be displayed in a grid formation changing the size of each video. The judges are relayed to the remote participants through cameras installed above the projector screen with one overview camera positioned at the back of the room, above the public gallery. This results in either side-angled renditions of the legal actors or an overview of the courtroom with limited visibility (cf. Feigenson 2023, Flower 2025a, for an overview of different solutions to remote participation). Whether the remote participant joins from their phone, their laptop or another courthouse likely will further impact the visibility of the physical legal environment.

While both courts rely on the same foundational principle in Swedish code of judicial procedure of that physical participation in court being the baseline (Rättegångsbalken 1942:740), this article will show that the frequency of remote participation varies between each courthouse and that video links are used differently in the district and administrative courts. To contextualize the use of video links, the next section presents previous research on the digital development in Swedish and international courts.

2.2. Previous research on video links in the Swedish and international courts

Video links have been in use in cases involving children since 1995 (Bylander 2006, Landström *et al.* 2012), yet the roll out of the digital infrastructure in Swedish courthouses was sped up by a large reform that took place in the mid 2000 called “Modern court proceedings.”³ This reform included, among other things, the submission of digital documentation, recorded testimonies and the potential for videoconferencing on a larger scale. Following the reform, new routines have been put solidly in place; the Appeal Court uses examinations and cross-examinations recorded at the first instance in their proceedings and evaluations, and the lower-level courts

³ Proposition: 2004/05:131 *En modernare rättegångs-reformering av processen i allmän domstol* (Sveriges riksdag 2025).

receive more inquiries for remote participation (Dahlberg 2013). As mentioned in the introduction, the Swedish judicial landscape is slowly, albeit constantly, changing; most recently with the uptick in remote participation by way of audio and video links following the pandemic (Flower 2025a; cf. De Vocht 2022). Swedish courts, like courts globally, are also experiencing case backlogs. As video links facilitate the scheduling of cases and is arguably cost efficient, they are viewed as a solution to said backlogs all the while making the legal system dependent on video links to ensure “continued access to justice”. In Sweden, and globally, video links are broadly considered as the route to efficient case management (Flower 2025b, 65).

Video links in court have similarly been a topic of international interest since the early 2000s (e.g. Poulin 2004, Johnson and Wiggins 2006, Mulcahy 2008), with its usage expanding exponentially in various professional settings following the pandemic (e.g. Góralaska 2020, Gerbutavicius *et al.* 2021, Pokhrel and Chhetri 2021, Rehman *et al.* 2024, McKay 2026). Using video links in court, however, has spurred a global debate in relation to access to justice (Prescott 2017), the rights of the defendants (McKay 2018) as well as other constitutional issues and inequalities (Bandes and Feigensohn 2020, Anozie and Wingate 2023, McKay and Macintosh 2024, Mulcahy and Tsalapatanis 2024). Research has similarly discussed matters of legitimacy in digital court (Flower 2025a, 2025b, Qin and Chen 2025), with Rowden and Wallace (2018) highlighting the need for more comparison regarding the role of the judge, video links and legitimacy struggles outside of Australia and the UK.

Echoing, to some degree, previous findings of how the traditional court ritual can be disrupted with the introduction of technology (e.g. Lanzara and Patriotta 2001, Licoppe and Dumoulin 2010, Thompson 2005), Rowden and Wallace’s article illustrate how the inclusion of video links opens for reflections on what the image of the judge *should* look like in contemporary legal systems centring on problem-solving rather than punitive features. Others have similarly argued that remote participation can increase accessibility both in evidence retrieval and in lowering the threshold for vulnerable individuals’ participation (Schmitz and Alkon 2023, 201-2, 206) whilst challenging the traditional hierarchy and power dynamics in court (Ferguson 2022, Johnson 2024, Ask and Lindh 2025; see also Garfinkel 1956, 424 on the court as a degradation ritual). Correspondingly, Rowden and Wallace’s findings illustrate how the judges experienced a control loss when participants joined remotely. This pertained to several things. For example, the judges reported how they experienced an increased difficulty “to both embody and maintain the authority of the court” when interacting via video (Rowden and Wallace 2018, 515). This was explained by how the positioning of the judge changed through the framing and camera angles used; from an elevated to an eye level position (cf. Flower 2025a). The Swedish judges are rather shown from above and often from a side-angle. Additionally, when the proceeding involved remote participants, the judges in Rowden and Wallace’s study had to rely on the court staff present at the remote location and an “overview camera, where available” to identify any potential risks with collecting the evidence in this way (Rowden and Wallace 2018, 521). Yet, during sentencing, the judges highlighted the importance of participating physically at the courthouse to be able to thoroughly convey their reasoning legitimately and for those involved to experience the emotions spurred by such decisions (Rowden and Wallace 2018, 520-21; cf. Mack and Roach Anleu 2010).

Although the use of video links is seen to challenge the traditional court ritual, most of the previous research caution that technology could also “exacerbate the power disparities between the state and the accused, potentially leading to unfair or biased outcomes” (Schmitz and Alkon 2023, 223). McKay early pointed out that depending on how defendants are displayed in the courtroom, others’ perceptions of them may be negatively impacted while limiting their own participation through poor video feedback of the courtroom and the actors physically present there (McKay 2018, 146-147). Technological breakdowns were also reported to impact the quality of proceedings for both professional and lay actors in immigration cases (Eagly 2015). As Mulcahy and Tsalapatanis point out (2022, 2024), structural obstacles of not having access to the technological devices or internet connection to partake online may lead to an exclusion of vulnerable individuals. Expanding digital infrastructure in central governmental agencies may also lead to the creation of a digital underclass (Helsper and Reisdorf 2017).

Large-scale transformations, such as digitalizing the legal system discussed here, can be marked by discursive and sense-making struggles “over their social and cultural impacts” complicating widespread acceptance of change (Fiss and Hirsch 2005, 29) and its implementation. The symbolic dimensions of space, objects and language in court are additionally often seen to carry “legitimizing messages” that may be obscured over video (Johannesson 2023, 804). Considering this, the present study adds to the current literature and the evolution of the judicial role in the digital age, by exploring Sweden as a case of legal-technological development and by utilizing both macro theoretical insights and micro theoretical tools discussed below.

3. Theoretical backdrop: Interpreting structural change

The previous section outlined how legal systems around the world are increasingly mediating legal procedures through technical solutions whether in fully virtual courts, live streamed interactions or in a hybrid setting where some participants are physically distant. Following these developments, similarities to Saskia Sassen’s *The Global City* (2001) can be identified. In Sassen, a move from the local to the global arena changed the economic relations within the nation shifting focus onto international collaboration and exchange rather than national activities. This article similarly focuses on a move from the physical and rural to digital and urban environments and examines how these shifts play on the representation of the court in society and on judicial work from the judge’s point of view. In both scenarios, there is a shift in resource allocation and capital agglomeration to the central regions within the nation and globally. For courts, this means that the legal know-how and the physical representation of the law may be removed from more remote areas.

Many topics are discussed at length in Sassen’s work, thus, for the purpose of the current article focus is placed on the conditions enabling a global city, such as rearranging resources from local to global spheres and on a redistribution of producer services. If we consider the ideal court as a democratic service, where justice is equally accessible to all, it is possible to see how stripping the countryside of courts can lead to sustained inequality. Simply because a loss in producer services indicates a loss of power (Sassen 2001, 359; see also Löwgren 2025). As with the global city, the spatial configuration of courts, both inside the courtroom and through the geographic positioning of courthouses within a nation, can result in a hierarchical relationship that impacts

citizens' access to both legal knowledge and spaces. This leads the participating judges, as we will see, to experience a "fragmentation of the work process" both "spatially and organizationally" (Sassen 2001, 10) as their courtrooms are expanding by way of video links.

In her book, Sassen uses law firms and their concentration in larger cities as an example to demonstrate her argument. Applying her theory on courts, which comparatively are public and not private, broadens the perspective to a service that should be equally available to all. Following Sassen, this impacts both the economic base and spatial organization of cities, as well as the societal structure, and arguably, the representation of democracy (cf. Manyika *et al.* 2013), which is of interest in this article. In applied terms, Sassen's framework can provide an understanding of how the replacement of physical courts by online interaction in Sweden sits within larger societal developments.

While Sassen's work contributes with a theoretical backdrop of the economic conditions framing contemporary legal-technological developments in Sweden, Weick's (1995) seven properties of sense-making function as analytical tools to dissect the judges' own experiences in the analysis.

Sense-making, the process of understanding and (re)structuring reality (Weick 1995, 4), becomes more visible when we encounter unusual situations. Going to court represents such a situation for most people; introducing video links into court, traditionally of a slow-moving, in person, and bureaucratic nature, can require some reinterpretation by both the legal and lay actors involved. Sense-making begins with a sensemaker", their action and *identity construction* (1995, 18). Seen as a "core preoccupation" in sense-making, identity construction is contingent on how situations and interactions are experienced by the individual. These experiences then play on how one's identity is constructed. As Weick writes (1995, 20):

... to shift among interactions is to shift among definitions of self. Thus the sensemaker is himself or herself an ongoing puzzle undergoing continual redefinition, coincident with presenting some self to others and trying to decide which self is appropriate. Depending on who I am, my definition of what is 'out there' will also change. Whenever I define self, I define 'it,' but to define it is also to define self.

Simply put, video link may require the judges to redefine their self and their professional identity but depending on how they make sense of participating in legal proceedings remotely, their process of identity construction may vary. Sense-making also requires *retrospective reflection*. This means that previous knowledge can be used to make sense of and assign meaning to current change (Weick 1995, 26). Additionally, actors participating within a situation jointly produce and legitimize the environments in which the interaction takes place; judges, for example, can be understood to varyingly *enact* the digital environments functioning as an extension of the court today (Weick 1995, 30-32). Consequently, video links "make sense" to the degree that they are accepted by their users. This emphasises that individual action is *social* and contingent on the conduct of others. Over time, through common language use, prescribed expectations and behaviours, we tend to align in interaction lowering the need of continuous interpretation (cf. Blumer 1969, Nordquist 2025). Yet sense-making is always *ongoing*; an actor cannot avoid acting nor to make sense of the situations in which they participate (Weick 1995, 44).

Sense-making also entails *extracted cues*, that is specific experiences, or “seeds” as Weick calls them, guiding actors as they develop their reasoning. Since sense-making is often swift and unnoticeable, focusing on these “seeds of information” can direct us in identifying sense-making practices in empirical material. For example, in making sense of video links in court, a judge may compare it to video conferences had with their child’s preschool teachers. Although courtrooms and preschools are dissimilar environments that require different things, the judge’s personal experience can become a clue to professionally understand other participants as they are leading a proceeding. Finally, sense-making is *driven by plausibility rather than accuracy* (Weick 1995, 55-56). In practice, plausible reasoning “involves going beyond the directly observable [...] to form ideas or understandings that provide enough certainty” to act (Isenberg 1986, 242-243; cf. Weick 1995, p 56). As we will see in the analysis, these sense-making properties often merge to form wider sense-making strategies. Before that, the next section presents the methodological design of the project.

4. Studying experiences on and off screen

The present article is part of an ongoing research project titled *Trials in Transition: A Study of Video Links in Courtrooms* funded by the Swedish Research Council (2023-01183).⁴ The project investigates how laypeople and legal professionals experience the use of and participation through video links in Swedish district and administrative courts. Utilizing ethnographic observation and semi-structured interviews, the project aims to gain a deeper understanding of how (co)presence, legal security and rituals translate from the traditional in-person court proceeding to remote participation. While laypersons are included in the wider project, this article draws solely on the material collected with judges during interviews and observations in court.

Turning first to the observations, it is important to note that Swedish legal proceedings are open to the public unless the presiding judge decides to close the doors based on the details of the individual case. This means that a researcher could sit in without informing the court about their presence (cf. Uhnöo *et al.* 2023). Yet, in an effort of transparency, the court administration was asked to inform each presiding judge about the researcher’s presence by sharing information about the project. The court administration helped with identifying which cases were expected to use video links during the trial, thus aiding the researcher in facilitating access.

The collection of material relied on ethnographic observations where the researcher would sit in on court proceedings that had previously been identified to involve video links. This type of hybrid research, where one or more participants are present physically whereas others join the interaction by way of virtual means (Przybylski 2021), require an increased sensitivity to the involved actors. Since all participants could not immediately see the researcher, it was emphasized to the court that information about the researchers’ participation should be shared with the remote actors if deemed appropriate by the presiding judge. Additionally, it is important that the researcher scrutinize their own reactions and interpretations as they observe this, at least to them and arguably to the court, new mode of interaction. This was achieved by emotional participation, that is, utilizing the researchers’ emotional responses as analytical cues

⁴ Approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (dnr. 2025-01861-01).

(Bergman Blix 2009, Wettergren 2015). As we have argued elsewhere, “[e]motional participation in digitally mediated fields involves asking how the researcher’s responses correspond to, or clash with, the emotions, atmospheres, and performances observed in the field, while considering how the technological medium conditions these experiences” (Minissale and Nordquist, forthcoming). For example, the technological issues and the accompanied frustration often described by the participants similarly surfaced in the researcher, prompting her to note strategies of how the involved actors managed such situations.

The observations were later complemented with semi-structured interviews and presented an opportunity for the researcher to follow up on observed situations and for the participants to share their experiences of the proceeding (Galletta and Cross 2013, p. 47; cf. Brockmann 2011). Having observed a proceeding prior to the interview allowed for more spontaneous responses as they spring out of recently experienced phenomena. That said, not all participants were observed prior to their interview due to postponed hearings and time constraints. The interview questions, following a semi-structured format, allocated space for observed phenomena, detailed questions on the judges’ experiences and overarching themes to ensure comparison between all interviews (Denscombe 2010, Morris 2015).

The material for this article is collected between October 2025 and May 2026, and material collection for the project is still ongoing. So far, 26 interviews have been conducted with judges, prosecutors, and lawyers, together with 150 hours of observations. The interviews, ranging between 45 and 90 minutes, are transcribed and thematically coded using an abductive approach (Scheff 1990, 30–31, Yin 2014). Approaching the material abductively allows for the identification of themes derived from previous research while remaining open to emerging aspects and understandings of video link usage. Put differently, deductive codes, such as technological issues known to shape the experience of video links, are accompanied by inductive codes that include, for example, experiences of dis/trust and feelings of professional loss or unease. The analysis includes examples of both types of coding.

As material collection is still ongoing and the layperson perspective (of witnesses, victims, and defendants) remains to be collected, this article examines the central role that judges hold in legal proceedings that utilize video links in Sweden. This means that 14 semi-structured interviews with judges, equally split between the district and the administrative courts, make up the foundation for the analysis. Out of them, eight are women and six are men, and their professional experience ranges between 5 and 30 years. While this is a smaller sample size, the combination of the interviews and the insights provided by the ethnographic observation in two different courts begins to illuminate the complexities of adapting to the changing Swedish legal system. In the analysis, the interviews are used as a primary source of material, and the observations provide contextual insight into the field and the issues on which the participants reflect. The excerpts included in the analysis represent larger themes found across the material. Each participant is given a fictitious name, and any identifying information is removed in accordance with ethical requirements. All excerpts are translated by the author from Swedish to English.

Ethical approval was sought and granted by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (dnr. 2025-01861-01), and each participant is informed about the project aims, the use of the collected material, and their rights before participating. Participant consent is collected in written form when the interview takes place in person, and verbally during online interviews. Conducting interviews online when researching video link usage in court proceedings opens for interesting comparisons, where the participants deem one-on-one interactions mediated by a video link as efficient and acceptable, and the larger format used in trials as complex and often accompanied by technical issues, as shown in the analysis below.

5. Networked justice: Reshaping the Swedish judicial landscape?

This section presents the analysis of the material collected with judges currently working in the Swedish administrative and district courts. The following interview excerpts illustrate current tensions within the Swedish judicial landscape, ranging from judges who largely accept the inclusion of video links into court and others who instead reject them and link the expansion of remote participation to a closure of local courthouses.

In the following we meet judge Thomas who works at a district court located in a mid-size city in the central south of Sweden. During the interview, Thomas differentiates between the centralized authority of The Swedish National Courts Administration and the importance of having local courthouses. While fewer authorities, i.e., administration offices, are not a problem for the organization of the court in his opinion, local courthouses can function as a “moral symbol” in society:

There is a *very simple* answer here, we can have fewer authorities, I have no compelling reasons either for or against, but we *should* have courtrooms in more places than we do today. Previously, there were four district courts [in this region], now there is one. [...] So, we can have a central authority, but we will need to have [...] hearings locally. I think we should have that, precisely because the distance between the citizens and the court must not be too great. [serious tone] You must see the court in real life, that it is populated by people, and if I do something wrong, then I must go into that room (Judge Thomas, District Court 2).

Although the Swedish National Court Administration has been in place for half a century (Domstolsverket 2025a), Thomas’ view of the court indicates how he interprets his role; courts, and consequently judges, should be represented locally and in person. A decrease in local courthouses threatens his interpretation of his professional identity as it does not correspond with his idea of what being a judge entails (Wieck 1995, 20). For him, the courts’ connection to the local community is a requirement as courthouses can serve as a reminder of societal norms (“if I do something wrong, then I must go into that room”) and potentially add communal stability. The building, however, is not enough, “you must see the court in real life, [and] that it is populated by people.” This indicates a need to witness and experience law in action for such a moral reminder to come into effect, and for the judge to be locally available. This corresponds with the judges in Rowden and Wallace’s study, who expressed the importance of carrying out sentencing hearings with the involved actors physically present in the courtroom to fully understand the solemnity of the moment (Rowden and Wallace 2018, 520-21).

Conventional opinions, like Thomas', may be disregarded as over-generalizations of how the Swedish court is experienced considering digitalization, still I argue that such examples illustrate "seeds" or extracted cues of key information where sense-making begins. Here, this seed provides insight into how Thomas makes sense of his professional role and how it may correspond or clash with the inclusion of video links in his work (Weick 1995, 50). Additionally, as Thomas told me with more urgency: "[t]his development with fewer district courts is also related to the fact that we are in a *very short* supply of judges. We *can't recruit*. The judging profession does not have the same attractiveness as other professions."

The difficulty of recruiting judges has been ongoing since the 2010s when many judges retired (Sveriges Radio, 2010). While it is not possible to know whether said recruitment issues correspond with the closure of courts within the scope of this article, Thomas' statement illustrates a potential "locational concentration" of capital within the Swedish judicial landscape. The current developments with video links, lesser courthouses and a lack of judges seem to shift the legal know-how away from the countryside to the larger cities affecting the geographic, locational capability (Sassen 2001, 35). The newly instated hubs with itinerant judges may combat these issues to a degree, but when accounting for the shifting dynamics in the judges' everyday practice by including online interaction, it may be possible to explain how the judging career has moved into the periphery of status professions.

Judge Malin, working in a district court in the north of Sweden, echoes judge Thomas' view on staffing. In her opinion, the issue of recruitment links to the "supply of skills" available to each judicial district and the unequal national distribution due to certain requirements in the judges' training:

I mean, I think of... like the supply of skills also out in the countryside... If everyone is expected, like, after the judges' training, [mimics, serious tone] you have to go down to Stockholm because that's where the jobs are [stops mimic], [annoyed tone] how can you then get a judge up [north]? Coming to [small town in inland northern Sweden] in 10 years... It's *not* that easy! So, I think it's *really* important [to have local opportunities], and I also see that things are starting to happen. More workplaces are starting to let go of the fact that you have to be on site (Judge Malin, District Court 4).

Following the judges' track in Sweden, which most people begin directly after completing their law degree, entails doing stints of work in appeals courts located in the larger cities and often in the capital, Stockholm. Many trainee judges are between 25-35 years of age and relocating at that time may impact plans to settle down. This can explain Malin's apprehension to "go down to Stockholm" to complete her training. Moreover, this way of organizing work can further complicate a redistribution of legal expertise back to the smaller cities after having completing the program. Thus, video links in Malin's opinion, open for alternative solutions ("workplaces are starting to let go of the fact that you have to be on site") and local opportunities for individual judges. In making sense of her situation, and her professional role, Malin enacts video links as a "sensible environment" (Weick 1995, 30) that not only facilitates remote participation for others but secures legal representation locally, thus contesting a complete centralization of work. For Malin, and some of her colleagues, video links are seen as facilitating devices allowing for the populations' participation in legal processes and by simultaneously simplifying individual judges' personal lives (cf. Schmitz and Alkon 2023).

In addition, several of the participants spoke of video links as saving time and money and as devices combatting climate change. Using a common language in this way, by which the judges make sense of their new reality, emphasizes the sociality of sense-making processes (Weick 1995, 38-40). By bringing in larger societal aspects into their understanding of the Swedish contemporary legal landscape, the judges arguably enter a phase of what I call *networked justice* (cf. networked economy in Sassen 2001, 121-122; video-mediated justice in Rossner and Tait 2023) where the use of video links in court follow a global economic narrative. The closure of more rural courts further corresponds with Sassen's theory: while a networked economy connects global cities through digital connection (here remote citizens with the legal system), there needs to be physical command centres. These centres then become centralized within each nation. Importantly, in adapting to these changes, centralizing courts and deeming remote participation a sensible environment, simultaneously cements the dependency on video links to deliver justice across Sweden, in the face of recruitment problems and rural divestment.

As judge Rebecca, a district court judge in the northern parts of Sweden, points out; although discussions on the number of district courts tend to "flare up in the debate", some courts' capabilities are already strained and require collaboration with neighbouring districts by way of technology, making this the priority for her:

[W]e have some courts here in [name of region] that are quite small units, and it is quite difficult for them. So, I think more about the staff at the courts. If you have two judges and one gets sick, it will be very tough for the judge who is left. So, it can be difficult to get it right. There is a shortage of judges in Sweden as well. [...] So then small units become vulnerable, we probably need to look at it... But in my head, I think more collaboration... Judge Rebecca, District Court 4

Although the number of courts have decreased, particularly in the countryside, the caseloads have not (Domstolsverket 2025b). This means that judges who work in these "small units" quickly become "vulnerable" if someone, for example, falls ill. When this happens, the use of video links can administer some relief. Still, with centralization, as with digitalization, innate inequalities can emerge (cf. Sassen 2001, 24-23); over time, this vulnerability may manifest as a closure of more courthouses in more rural areas. Rebecca indicates that the issues with recruitment and divestment need to be assessed ("we probably need to look at it") but is ready to compromise and use video links as they can aid an already strained organization; which, simultaneously, makes the existence of smaller courts dependent on its use. Judge Kristina further illustrates the need for video links in northern courts by comparing them to more metropolitan ones: "I've only worked in the northern courts, and there I think they're quite generous with video links, because the distances are *so long*. Whereas I think they're stingier in the metropolitan regions. Just because it might be more often like this: [mimics] Yes, but you have a court nearby, you can get to us [stops mimic]." While video links are frequently used in all courts regardless of their geographic location, the reasons behind their use can vary. For the more northern courts, it is likely that the need to use video links depends on the locational capability and is governed by structural constraints (cf. Sassen 2001, 35). Nevertheless, as Rebecca and several of her colleagues point out, balancing video links as sometimes facilitating and sometimes inhibiting devices "can be difficult." This

difficulty illustrates the current tensions in making sense of the presence of video links in legal processes in Sweden.

Among the inhibiting aspects, technological problems are frequently reported to shift the judges' focus away from the content of a proceeding to the format of the interaction, while challenging the enjoyment that the profession initially brought them. Early in our interview judge Eva explained how she really enjoys the analytical work of being a judge and that this quality can be lost due to the technical issues often accompanying video links:

[I]t's the technology that sometimes messes things up. And then you have to consider cancelling, because it can't be the case that the irritation over the technology has somehow taken over... We must feel that we have *full focus* on the matter at hand [...]. It takes too much focus if you have to ask about, [mimics] I didn't hear, can you turn to the microphone? [stops mimic] [...]. Those negotiations are not as long, but they still get a little... chopped up if you have to ask and interrupt, [mimics] Excuse me, we don't hear what you are saying [stops mimic] (Judge Eva, Administrative Court 3).

Eva's remarks echo those of many other judges I interviewed. As judge Jonas put it: "there's nothing wrong with video links, if the technology works!" The only problem? It rarely does. Having to ask, like Eva, "can you turn to the microphone", or repeating "we don't hear what you are saying" several times undoubtedly does something with how justice is experienced. Not being able to keep "full focus on the matter at hand" seem to lead judges to experience a sense of unease and to begin questioning of how these technical issues are potentially impacting the legitimacy of the court as well as the judges' office (cf. Rowden and Wallace 2018, Flower 2025b, Qin and Chen 2025). Eva's concerns are echoed by judge Peter. He also adds another dimension by describing how he must control the technology on his own during any weekend proceedings: "I'll be handling that aspect on weekends now, too; if there are technical issues right in the middle of the hearing, I'd end up missing something. So, I think we need to ensure that we can at least focus on what we're supposed to be doing—sitting there and listening." The judges' experiences, and often frustrations, with technological breakdowns adds to the previous research by showing that these issues persist despite technological advances and that they impact both the enjoyment of and focus on their job (cf. Eagly 2015).

Although the judges emphasize how they experience technological issues, they are lacking insight into how such disruptions are experienced by the lay participants. To surpass this deficiency and to make sense of video links, the judges are engaged in plausibility rather than accuracy, that is, making sense of a situation based on incomplete information (Weick 1995, 55-56). Focus is instead placed on economic gain when making sense of video links; partakers are allowed to participate remotely if they would otherwise fail to appear and cause the court a costly delay. While this may combat some of the unease, the enjoyment of analysis, taking decisions or leading smooth proceedings initially characterizing their role, must also take a backseat. Relying on video links without insight into how they are experienced, can simultaneously create a crevasse in who has access to justice and in what shape justice is delivered, potentially impacting public trust.

Judge Camilla, working at a southern administrative court, shared with me her concerns of video links replacing in-person hearings in their psychiatry cases. In these proceedings, the judge would decide on an initiation or continuation of compulsory care for people with severe mental health issues, for example, individuals sentenced to psychiatric care following a crime. Prior to the pandemic, administrative judges would schedule these hearings at the care facilities and meet the patient, their counsel and the chief medical doctor, in person. For Camilla, these “visits” held an immeasurable quality that could potentially contribute to “trust and cohesion in society”:

It might have a value in itself that someone came to visit these persons [...]. It became very obvious [to them] that someone is here, to test *my* case... That you saw each other, exchanged some words before maybe. I think it has a value [...]. I mean... it turns into a society where we have pretty large distances between us. And the personal meeting, it is *always* something else that I don't think is measurable. I think [meeting in person] contributes to trust and cohesion in society, you can't get away from it, *I think* [...] [concerned tone]. This is something that I think a lot about, actually... I had an older colleague that told me about a person that was hospitalized who put the court as their next of kin and said [mimics] Yeah, because they come to visit me [stops mimic]. It's a thing. And it's something that you cannot measure, but I don't think it's insignificant (Judge Camilla, Administrative Court 2).

Where judge Thomas understood the physical courthouse as an important moral symbol for society in a conventional sense, Camilla reflects on the “personal meeting” and its immeasurable qualities as sustaining societal trust (Flower 2025b, 65) by taking a more contemplative approach. By calling these visits “personal”, she implicitly indicates her position where she views online meetings as impersonal. This tension between her own conviction about the importance of in-person interaction and the widespread use of video links thus pushes Camilla to engage in sense-making.

In her sense-making, Camilla moves between the different properties; using retrospective “seeds” as a foundation for her interpretation of what the court can and should be (“I had an older colleague that told me...”), without having substantial information to fully form her opinion (“something that you cannot measure, but I don't it's insignificant”). This requires her to engage in plausibility rather than accuracy. For example, prefacing and concluding her statements with a contemplative “I think” rather than “I know” illustrates the lack of insight into how the laypeople experience online proceedings and whether in fact Camilla's *sense* of the situation corresponds with their reality. In trying to articulate what is lost in moving the hearing from the care facility to a video link (“it's a thing”, “it is *always* something else”), it is possible to catch a glimpse of the struggles Camilla seem be experiencing in reconstructing her professional identity (“[t]his is something that I think about a lot, actually”). According to Camilla, and her sense-making “providing enough certainty” (Isenberg 1986, 242-243), these developments could have impacts also on a societal level by expanding the social distances in Sweden.

Camilla's unease can be further explained by the conduct of other judges, where colleagues both at her workplace and other administrative courts have decided to continually hold these proceedings remotely. As judge Peter illuminated, “in principle, there is nothing that prevents me from deciding that we will go” to the care unit “but we've probably yielded to this in some way”; making online participation the new norm.

Previously, all judges engaged in assessments of each case and its suitability for remote participation and while some still do, there is a distinct variation in how this is organized in the different administrative courts in Sweden today. Judge Louise expresses her concerns about making such a framework decision on managing all cases in the same way, especially with new judges as it can infringe on their independence to decide how to conduct their proceedings. Comparatively, the district court receives their requests for video links from the individual parties, and it is up to the presiding judge to decide its suitability. Where some administer these requests themselves, others, as judge Hans described, have delegated such decisions to their clerk or the court administrators. Nevertheless, this shift in practice, following the introduction of video links on a wider scale during the pandemic, illustrates how sense-making practices are inherently social and can impact on the organization of work and, as such, how the judicial profession is experienced by the professionals themselves.

5. Concluding remarks

Although the findings emerging from the ongoing project are limited, similarities with previous research (e.g. Eagly 2015, Rowden and Wallace 2018, 510-515, Flower 2025b) already emerge. The theoretical and the geographical aspects included here further our understanding of the ongoing reinterpretation of judicial work in the digital age. In the beginning I asked the question, *How do Swedish judges understand their role and the function of the court in times of remote participation?* These remarks offer some preliminary results consisting of three sense-making strategies from which the judges interpret the changing judicial landscape in Sweden: the conventional, the compromising and the contemplative perspective.

Within the conventional perspective, sense-making began in reiterations of the importance of in person interaction and of witnessing law in action, locally. For these judges, like Thomas, judicial identity was tightly linked to the traditional democratic function of the court. Additionally, having a local courthouse and seeing law enacted by people were deemed to function as a moral reminder for wider society (cf. Rowden 2018). That said, approaching technological advances from this perspective seemed to complicate adaptation by placing the perceived democratic function of the court, as locally rooted, centre-stage. Within this sense-making strategy, the association between centralization, its impact on the organization of court work and the use of video links crystallized as many judges asked for more courtrooms than those currently in use in Sweden.

From the compromising perspective, judges were engaged in a balancing act between the facilitating and inhibiting aspects brought on by video link usage. Their sense-making, as seen with judges Malin, Rebecca and Kristina, centred on problem solving. The resources within the courts, often linked to recruitment, are already strained and video links can offer some relief particularly for the smaller units in the more rural parts of Sweden. These judges are all familiar with the pitfalls and the technological issues characterizing remote participation, often removing the enjoyment of judging, yet see no other option than to use video links to sustain their practice. Interestingly, the introduction of video links seemed to work as a lifeline while illustrating that court proceedings could in fact be carried out remotely, thus threatening the existence of these smaller, rural courthouses.

Within the contemplative perspective we find judges, like Eva and Camilla, who try to make sense of their situation by engaging in plausibility rather than accuracy. In Weick, this property of sense-making is talked of as a road to success (Wieck 1995, 56-57); here, it rather indicates unease as dabbling in plausibility challenged the perceptions of the judges' professional identity. Judges who took the contemplative perspective seemed to experience the most tension between this mode of interaction and their professional role, although not entirely rejecting the use of video links as with the conventional sense-making strategy.

Drawing on the participating judges' reflections, the role of video links in Swedish courts come across as ambiguous. While most of the participants utilize an overarching economic narrative by emphasizing time and cost saving measures, few fully promote the use of video links and rather see them as necessary to manage their dockets. Additionally, the frequency in remote participation varies, yet their inclusion into court tends to make decisions previously reached independently by each judge, socially dependent and bound to the culture of each court. Interestingly, the inclusion of video links into the judges' everyday activities seem to bear on their professional identities and when they are unable to fully construct themselves, it also impacts their efforts in making sense of the court in the digital age. As judge Camilla put it: "I have a hard time imagining that we, as judges, would start sitting at home... then I will change my job." Finally, the impact of remote participation discussed in this article is twofold. It can be seen to affect the profession internally, where judges struggle to make sense of their professional role and that of the court, and externally, with globalisation and centralization complicating the recruitment of judges on a broader scale.

At the time of writing, reports on monetary incentives to recruit judges to smaller courts are published in Swedish news media (Sjöblom 2026) and more itinerant judging hubs are initiated (Domstolsverket 2026d). In other words, centralization in combination with an increase of video link usage in Swedish courts seem to impact both the distribution of judges and the role of the judge as a democratic representative while exposing other structural constraints surrounding the Swedish legal system. Seemingly, the Swedish courts have entered a phase of networked justice where centralization make the legal system dependent on the use of video links. Against this backdrop, future research on legal professionals should involve the lay perspective to fully comprehend the impact of multimodal interaction on justice processes and democratic institutions as well as begin to explore the potential status loss of the profession due to digitalization.

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