

The Paradox of Press Freedom in Consolidating Electoral Democracy: A Normative–Sociological Study of Indonesia

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the paradoxical relationship between press freedom and the consolidation of electoral democracy in Indonesia, particularly during the 2024 Simultaneous Regional Elections, and to evaluate the extent to which the press functions as a mechanism of transparency and democratic accountability. Employing a normative–sociological approach, the research examines constitutional provisions, statutory regulations, scholarly literature, and empirical developments in media practices during electoral processes. The study reveals that although Law No. 40 of 1999 formally guarantees press freedom and prohibits censorship, the practical implementation of media independence remains constrained by political patronage, ownership concentration, commercialization of news production, and regulatory overlap with the Electronic Information and Transactions Law. The expansion of digital communication platforms has further intensified misinformation, partisan narratives, and algorithm-driven political polarization, thereby weakening the deliberative quality of democratic discourse. The novelty of this research lies in its interdisciplinary integration of constitutional law, media sociology, and political communication theory to conceptualize press freedom not merely as an individual constitutional right, but as a structural and communicative mechanism shaping substantive electoral democracy. Unlike previous studies that separately examine media regulation or democratic participation, this study develops a comprehensive analytical framework connecting constitutional guarantees, political economy of media, and digital governance within Indonesia's electoral system. The research contributes theoretically to the development of democratic constitutionalism and media governance studies in Southeast Asia, while practically offering policy recommendations concerning regulatory harmonization, media ownership transparency, strengthening journalistic ethics, and enhancing public media literacy as essential foundations for sustainable democratic governance in Indonesia.

Keywords: Electoral Democracy; Indonesia; Press Freedom; Regional Elections

1. INTRODUCTION

The political reform that emerged in Indonesia in 1998 constituted a turning point in the nation's constitutional and political order. The fall of the New Order regime transformed Indonesia from an authoritarian system into a constitutional democracy grounded in popular sovereignty and the rule of law. Constitutional amendments between 1999 and 2002 significantly reshaped Indonesia's institutional framework by strengthening democratic checks and balances, introducing regional autonomy, and institutionalizing direct elections as an expression of citizen participation. Within this democratic transformation, press freedom has been widely regarded as a crucial element of constitutional governance because an independent press functions as a mechanism of transparency, accountability, and public oversight. Comparative studies on democratic transitions consistently demonstrate that the consolidation of democracy depends not only on electoral procedures but also on the capacity of the media

to operate as a watchdog institution capable of informing citizens and scrutinizing political power.¹

Despite these institutional reforms, the development of democracy in Indonesia continues to reveal a structural paradox. While democratic procedures such as elections have become routine, the quality of democratic deliberation remains contested. The concentration of media ownership, increasing commercialization of news production, and the entanglement between media institutions and political elites have gradually narrowed the space for an independent public sphere. Observations from Indonesia's 2024 Simultaneous Local Elections illustrate how economic concentration in the media industry can influence editorial choices and shape political narratives presented to the public. These developments raise a critical question regarding whether press freedom, despite its constitutional recognition, has effectively functioned as an instrument for safeguarding transparency and accountability within electoral democracy.^{2,3,4}

The urgency of examining this issue becomes even more apparent when considering the broader challenges faced by contemporary democratic systems. In theory, the constitutional guarantee of press freedom under Law No. 40 of 1999 establishes a normative framework that protects the independence of journalistic institutions. However, the empirical reality demonstrates that legal guarantees alone do not automatically ensure substantive press freedom. Political financing, market pressures, and weak enforcement of journalistic ethics frequently influence the production and distribution of information. In such circumstances, the press may operate within a hybrid condition: formally independent under the law but structurally dependent on political and economic interests. This situation potentially undermines the deliberative quality of electoral democracy by limiting citizens' access to balanced and reliable information.⁵

To address this problem, the present study adopts a normative–sociological approach that examines both the legal framework governing press freedom and the sociological dynamics shaping media practices during electoral competition. The normative dimension focuses on constitutional principles, statutory regulations, and democratic theory that define the role of press freedom within a constitutional democracy. The sociological dimension, meanwhile, analyzes the empirical interaction between media institutions, political actors, and economic structures during Indonesia's 2024 local elections. By combining these perspectives, the study

¹ Wahanisa, R. Benny Riyanto, Syahwal, Eko Mukminto, and Rofi Nnawulezi. "From Justice to Politics: The Constitutional Court's Role in Structured and Systematic Election Violations," *Lex Scientia Law Review* 9, no. 1 (May 29, 2025): 1253–84, <https://doi.org/10.15294/lslr.v9i1.21103>.

² Domingues, José Maurício, "Oligarchy, Democracy, and Plebeianism: For a Political Conceptualization," *Constellations* 32, no. 2 (June 1, 2025): 245–54, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8675.70004>.

³ Arifin, Muchamad Zaenal, Wahyu Budi Nugroho, Ana María Naranjo Cortés, and Pricilia Purnama, "The Ratification of Omnibus Law: A Sign of Democratic Deconsolidation in Indonesia," *JSW (Jurnal Sosiologi Walisongo)* 6, no. 1 (2022): 13–28, <https://doi.org/10.21580/jsw.2022.6.1.9666>.

⁴ Syafriadi, and Selvi Harvia Santri, "Press Freedom and Its Relevance to the Theory of People's Sovereignty In the Indonesian Legal Regime," *Prophetic Law Review* 7, no. 1 (2025): 47–69, <https://doi.org/10.20885/PLR.vol7.iss1.art3>.

⁵ Syafriadi Syafriadi, "Press Responsibility and the Threat of Criminalization: A Study on the Role of Media in Digital Disputes," *Journal of Law and Regulation Governance* 3, no. 10 (2025): 501–16, <https://doi.org/10.57185/jlarg.v3i10.141>.

seeks to explain how press freedom operates not only as a legal norm but also as a social institution embedded within political and economic realities.⁶

Recent scholarly discussions have increasingly explored the relationship between media institutions and democratic governance. Waisbord highlights how the transformation of contemporary media ecosystems has altered the role of journalism in democratic societies, particularly in the context of digital communication and political polarization. His analysis demonstrates that the expansion of digital media platforms has reshaped the dynamics of public discourse and electoral communication. Although this study provides an important theoretical explanation of how media environments influence democratic participation, it largely focuses on global trends and pays limited attention to the interaction between legal frameworks and specific national political contexts.⁷

A related perspective is offered by Nielsen, who examines how economic pressures within the media industry influence journalistic practices in modern democracies. Nielsen argues that increasing commercialization and competition for audience attention often reshape editorial priorities, particularly during electoral periods when political content becomes highly marketable. While this analysis successfully explains the influence of market forces on media behavior, it primarily reflects the experience of established Western democracies and does not sufficiently address structural vulnerabilities in emerging democratic systems such as Indonesia.⁸

Carpentier, on the other hand, emphasizes the importance of media participation and pluralism in sustaining democratic legitimacy. His framework highlights that participatory communication is essential for fostering meaningful public engagement in political processes. Nevertheless, the study tends to focus on communicative structures and does not specifically examine how constitutional guarantees of press freedom operate within the context of electoral competition and political accountability.⁹

Building upon these studies, the normative foundation of press freedom can be more comprehensively understood through the philosophical framework of Jürgen Habermas's concept of the public sphere, which positions the media as an institutionalized arena for rational discourse and communicative action.¹⁰ This perspective underscores that the autonomy of the media from both state and market interference is a prerequisite for deliberative democracy. However, the Indonesian experience reveals a more complex reality. The commodification of

⁶ Al'anam, Muklis and Radian Salman, "The Relevance of Jurgen Habermas's Theory of Communicative Action as the Philosophical Foundation of Human Rights Enforcement in Indonesia," *Mimbar Hukum* 36, no. 1 SE-Articles (June 9, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.22146/mh.v36i1.11513>.

⁷ Lim, Merlyna, "Everything Everywhere All At Once: Social Media, Marketing/Algorithmic Culture, and Activism in Southeast Asia," *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* 24, no. 2 (2024): 181–90, <https://doi.org/10.1353/gia.2023.a913644>.

⁸ Restendy, Mochammad Sinung, Noorhaidi Hasan, and Rama Kertamukti, "The Relationship Between Democracy, Media Independence and Citizen Journalism with the Press in the Jokowi Era," *Mediakita* 9, no. 2 SE-Articles (October 10, 2025): 311–30, <https://doi.org/10.30762/mediakita.v9i2.2919>.

⁹ Juned, Sulaiman, "The Double-Edged Sword: Social Media's Impact on Press Freedom and Democratic Information Flows in Diverse Asian Contexts," *Asian Journal of Media and Culture* 1, no. 2 (2025): 157–75, <https://doi.org/10.63919/ajmc.v1i2.28>.

¹⁰ Al'anam, Muklis and Salman, "The Relevance of Jurgen Habermas's Theory of Communicative Action as the Philosophical Foundation of Human Rights Enforcement in Indonesia."

information and the growing influence of political-economic interests have gradually transformed the media from a forum of public reasoning into an instrument shaped by power relations. In this context, press institutions often operate within a hybrid condition, formally independent in legal terms, yet substantively dependent on political and economic structures. This structural contradiction can also be interpreted through broader democratic theory.¹¹

The principles of popular sovereignty and separation of powers, as articulated by Rousseau and Montesquieu, implicitly position the press as a “fourth pillar” of democracy that safeguards the circulation of information free from coercion. Yet, empirical conditions in Indonesia suggest the emergence of what has been described as “democracy without the public,” where democratic procedures persist while the capacity for critical public deliberation is weakened.¹² The concentration of media ownership and the entanglement between media institutions and political elites further intensify this condition, limiting the ability of the press to function as an independent watchdog. From a sociological perspective, press freedom is closely linked to the broader logic of democratic participation. Meaningful participation requires not only access to electoral processes but also the availability of balanced and credible information that enables citizens to make informed political choices.¹³ In this regard, the press performs a dual role: facilitating public engagement and mediating the flow of information within the political system. When this function is distorted by economic concentration or political intervention, the integrity of electoral democracy is inevitably affected.

These challenges have become more pronounced in the digital era. The algorithmic distribution of information, combined with the commercialization of media content, has accelerated the spread of disinformation and weakened journalistic standards. During the 2024 Simultaneous Local Elections, digital platforms played a significant role in shaping political narratives, often amplifying partisan content and reducing the space for balanced deliberation. This development reinforces the argument that contemporary media systems must balance pluralism with responsibility to sustain democratic communication. Against this backdrop, this study seeks to examine the paradoxical relationship between press freedom and electoral democracy in Indonesia. By integrating normative legal analysis with sociological observation, the research aims to explore how press freedom, as a constitutional guarantee, operates within the realities of political competition and media practice. The central questions addressed are: (a) how press freedom is implemented within Indonesia’s electoral democracy, and (b) to what extent the media functions as a guardian of transparency and accountability during the 2024 Simultaneous Local Elections. The novelty of this study lies in its attempt to bridge constitutional theory and media sociology, positioning press freedom not only as a legal norm but also as a structural condition that determines the quality of substantive democracy.

¹¹ Ruswandi, Awang, “The Failure of Local Press Freedom in the Era of Decentralization in Indonesia,” *Media Asia*, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01296612.2025.2481551>.

¹² Sugeng Bayu Wahyono, “Indonesian Democracy: Democracy without the Public,” *SEAJ-ALGOV South East Asia* 1, no. 2 (2024): 15–30, <https://doi.org/10.22146/seajalgov.v1i2.16573>.

¹³ Achmad Zuhdi, Enno Sellya Agustina, and Ari Ade Kamula, “Strengthening Democracy through Meaningful Participation in the Legislative Process in Indonesia,” *DIXI Revista* 27, no. 2 (2024): 1–22, <https://doi.org/10.16925/2357-5891.2025.02.07>.

2. METHOD

This research employs a normative juridical method combined with a sociological approach to examine the relationship between legal norms governing press freedom and the socio-political realities of electoral democracy in Indonesia, particularly within the context of the 2024 Simultaneous Regional Elections (Pilkada Serentak). The normative juridical dimension focuses on analyzing legal principles, doctrines, and statutory frameworks regulating press freedom and electoral processes, including the 1945 Constitution, Law No. 40 of 1999 on the Press, Law No. 7 of 2017 on General Elections, and Law No. 10 of 2016 on Regional Elections. This approach evaluates the coherence between these legal instruments and the constitutional principles of democracy, popular sovereignty, and the public's right to information. Complementing this perspective, the sociological approach examines how these legal norms operate in practice within local socio-political contexts by observing the interaction between local governments, media institutions, journalists, and civil society actors during electoral processes. Through this interdisciplinary perspective, the study seeks to understand how legal guarantees of press freedom function within the practical realities of political competition and media practice.

The research is descriptive-analytical in nature and relies on both secondary and limited primary data. Secondary data consist of primary legal materials such as constitutional provisions and statutory regulations, as well as secondary sources, including academic books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and institutional reports discussing media governance and democratic participation. These materials were obtained through a systematic literature review of verified academic databases, including Scopus-indexed and SINTA-accredited journals. Limited primary data were gathered through non-participatory observation of journalistic activities and interactions between media practitioners and political actors during the 2024 Pilkada Serentak. Data collection was conducted through documentation and literature study, while the analytical process employed a descriptive-qualitative method with a deductive approach. Legal analysis was used to assess the consistency of press regulations with democratic principles, while sociological analysis examined their implementation within media practices and electoral dynamics. Through this integrated analytical framework, the study seeks to explain how press freedom operates not only as a constitutional guarantee but also as a functional mechanism influencing transparency and accountability in Indonesia's electoral democracy.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Press freedom implemented in Indonesia's Electoral Democracy System

This study integrates normative juridical and sociological approaches to analyze the relationship between press freedom and the consolidation of electoral democracy in Indonesia, as well as its implications for strengthening local democratic governance within the context of the 2024 Simultaneous Regional Elections (Pilkada Serentak). Based on an extensive review of literature, data from the Indonesian Press Council (Dewan Pers), and secondary sources from national research institutions and academic publications, findings reveal that the degree of press freedom in Indonesia has fluctuated in response to regime changes and national political

configurations. The reform era (1998–present) has provided the broadest space for media freedom; however, this expanded liberty does not fully correlate with improvements in the quality of electoral democracy.

The literature identifies three major phases of press freedom in Indonesia: the Guided Democracy era (1959–1966), marked by ideological censorship and media suppression; the New Order era (1966–1998), characterized by political centralization and stringent media control; and the Reform Era (1998–present), which ushered in greater freedom through the enactment of Law No. 40 of 1999 on the Press. Amrihani and Ritonga argue that while the 1999 Press Law was a milestone in media liberalization, structural pressures persist through the Electronic Information and Transactions Law (ITE Law) No. 19 of 2016 and Law No. 1 of 2024, which create normative overlaps between press freedom and the criminalization of online expression.¹⁴

Table 1. Political Transitions and Governance Characteristics in Indonesia

Political Era	President	Regime Characteristics
Guided Democracy (Old Order)	Soekarno (1959–1966)	Ideological authoritarianism and media censorship
Pancasila Democracy (New Order)	Soeharto (1966–1998)	Centralized regime, strict censorship, political control via SIUPP licenses
Reform Era	B.J. Habibie – Joko Widodo (1998–2024)	Information openness, enactment of 1999 Press Law, yet vulnerable to digital criminalization

Source: Researcher’s synthesis (2025) based on multiple academic sources.

Table 1 illustrates how shifts in Indonesia’s political eras have shaped governance patterns and media regulation. During the Guided Democracy period, state ideology dominated political life, resulting in authoritarian governance and strict media censorship. Under the New Order regime, political power became highly centralized, with press control institutionalized through licensing mechanisms and systematic censorship. In the Reform Era, governance moved toward greater openness, marked by the enactment of the 1999 Press Law; however, this period also reveals new vulnerabilities, particularly the exposure of media actors to digital criminalization despite a formally democratic framework.

Gismar finds that post-1998 democratic decentralization has produced significant variations in local democratic performance. Provinces with more open media governance tend to score higher on Indonesia’s Democracy Index (IDI) compared to those under strong local political control.¹⁵ A comparative analysis shows that patterns of media restriction during the New Order have transformed into forms of economic and political control in the Reform Era. Privatae, Silalahi, and Prasetyo demonstrate normative conflicts between the Press Law and

¹⁴ Amrihani, Haresti Asyry and Rajab Ritonga, “Freedom of the Press Regulations in Indonesia and Sweden: Limited but Free,” *Jurnal Komunikasi Ikatan Sarjana Komunikasi Indonesia* 6, no. 2 (December 3, 2021): 353–61, <https://doi.org/10.25008/jkiskiki.v6i2.609>.

¹⁵ Gismar, Abdul Malik, “Is Indonesia Losing The Soul of Its Democracy? A Look at 11 Year Trend of Indonesian Democracy,” *Journal of Social Political Sciences* 2, no. 1 (February 7, 2021): 54–69, <https://doi.org/10.52166/jspss.v2i1.43>.

the ITE Law, where electronic criminal provisions are frequently used to suppress independent journalists.¹⁶ Iannone similarly highlights democratic backsliding across Southeast Asia due to disinformation and political manipulation of the media, including in Indonesia during the 2019–2024 elections.¹⁷

Table 2. Evolution of Press Freedom Across Political Regimes

Aspect	Guided Democracy	New Order	Reform Era
Characteristics	Ideologically constrained	Authoritarian control	Relatively free
Regulation	No press law	SIUPP and censorship	Law No. 40/1999
Censorship	Frequent	Frequent	Abolished
Media Role	Ideological propaganda	Development propaganda	Government watchdog
Challenges	Ideological conflict	Intimidation	Digital criminalization & media oligopoly

Source: Researcher’s compilation (2025) from historical data.

Table 2 illustrates the transformation of press freedom across Indonesia’s political regimes. Under Guided Democracy, the press was ideologically constrained and functioned as a vehicle for political messaging without a clear legal framework. During the New Order, authoritarian control was institutionalized through licensing and censorship, limiting the media to development-oriented propaganda. The Reform Era introduced a more open regulatory environment with Law No. 40/1999 and the formal abolition of censorship. This shift repositioned the media as a watchdog over government power. However, contemporary challenges persist, particularly digital criminalization and media oligopoly. These dynamics indicate that press freedom in the Reform Era remains conditional rather than absolute.

Quantitative analysis based on the 2024 Press Freedom Index (IKP) by the Indonesian Press Council reveals a moderate positive correlation between press freedom and local democracy scores. Provinces with IKP values above 78 generally record Democracy Index scores above 80, though the relationship is not strictly linear.¹⁸ Gennaro supports this trend, noting that regions such as Jakarta and Bali with strong public information systems exhibit more stable democratic performance.¹⁹

¹⁶Jonianto Silalahi, Teguh Prasetyo, Budiarsih, and Tomy Michael, “The Urgency Of Press Freedom Related To Conflict Of Norms Viewed From The Perspective Of Dignified Justice,” *Leges Private* 1, no. 3 (2024): 1–18, <https://doi.org/10.62872/5c0wvz63>.

¹⁷Aniello Iannone, “Democracy Crisis in South-East Asia: Media Control, Censorship, and Disinformation during the 2019 Presidential and General Elections in Indonesia, Thailand and 2019 Local Election in the Philippines,” *Jurnal Ilmu Sosial Dan Ilmu Politik* 26, no. 1 (2022): 81–97, <https://doi.org/10.22146/jsp.71417>.

¹⁸Dewan Pers, “Indeks Kemerdekaan Pers (IKP) Nasional Tahun 2024” (Jakarta, 2024), <https://www.dewanpers.or.id/berita/detail/2559/indeks-kemerdekaan-pers-nasional-kembali-turun>.

¹⁹Gennaro, Luca Di, “Is There a Quantitative Relationship between Democracy and Official Statistics?,” *Statistical Journal of the IAOS* 40, no. 3 (2024): 511–19, <https://doi.org/10.3233/SJI-240012>.

Table 3. Top Five Provinces by Press Freedom and Democracy Scores

Provinsi	Press Freedom Score 2024	Democracy Score 2023
Kalimantan Selatan	80.91	80.44
Kalimantan Timur	79.96	82.28
Kalimantan Tengah	79.58	77.57
Bali	79.42	85.13
DI Yogyakarta	77.71	83.88

Source: Indonesian Press Council (2024); processed by researcher (2025).

Table 3 highlights the top five provinces with the highest press freedom and democracy scores. Bali and DI Yogyakarta demonstrate strong democratic performance alongside relatively high press freedom, reflecting mature civic participation and institutional openness. Kalimantan Selatan, Timur, and Tengah also record high press freedom scores, indicating a supportive media environment at the regional level. The data suggest a positive correlation between press freedom and democratic quality, although variations remain across provinces. These findings underline the importance of regional governance in sustaining democratic practices and media independence in Indonesia.

A simple correlation analysis shows a coefficient of $r = 0.67$, indicating a moderate positive relationship between press freedom and local democratic quality. Bali and Yogyakarta stand out as regions exemplifying strong transparency practices and high citizen participation in local elections. Aurelia corroborates these findings, asserting that freedom-related dimensions significantly influence competitiveness and regional democratic stability in Indonesia.²⁰

Spatial analysis identifies regional disparities in the implementation of press freedom between western and eastern Indonesia. Jaya et al. report that Indonesia's Digital Society Index rose from 37.80 (2022) to 43.34 (2024), though digital inclusion remains concentrated in Java, perpetuating information inequality in underdeveloped regions.²¹

An analysis of Constitutional Court Decisions No. 60/PUU-XXII/2024 and No. 70/PUU-XXII/2024 indicates that legal developments in the Pilkada Serentak framework have influenced public perceptions of democracy and freedom of expression.²² These legal shifts risk constraining public criticism if not balanced with robust legal protections for journalists and media institutions.

Press freedom in Indonesia should also be understood within a broader theoretical framework of democratic communication. In democratic theory, the press functions not only as a channel of information but also as an institutional mechanism that facilitates public deliberation and

²⁰ Aurelia, Florence, Audra Tardas R., M. Daffa Rif'at, and M. Razaq Maliki, "Efek Berganda Demokrasi Pada Daya Saing Jawa Barat The Multiplier Effect of Democracy Effects on The West Java Competitiveness Index," *Blantika* 3, no. 6 (2025): 912–26, <https://doi.org/10.57096/blantika.v3i6.368>.

²¹ Jaya, I. Gede Nyoman Mindra, Said Mirza Pahlevi, Argasi Susenna, Lidya Agustina, Dita Kusumasari, Yan Andriariza Ambhita Sukma, Dewi Hernikawati, Anggi Afifah Rahmi, Anindya Apriliyanti Pravitasari, and Farah Kristiani, "Framework for Monitoring the Spatiotemporal Distribution and Clustering of the Digital Society Indeks of Indonesia," *Sustainability* 16, no. 24 (2024): 1–22, <https://doi.org/10.3390/su162411258>.

²² Sulistyowati Sulistyowati, Dewi Nadya Maharani, Gusti Bintang Maharaja, and Safrida Safrida, "Peran Penting Putusan MK Nomor 60/PUU-XXII/2024 Dan Putusan MK Nomor 70/PUU-XXII/2024 Dalam Keberlangsungan Demokrasi Indonesia," *Deposisi* 3, no. 1 (2025): 134–49, <https://doi.org/10.59581/deposisi.v3i1.4771>.

political accountability.²³ A democratic electoral system requires citizens to access reliable and pluralistic information in order to make rational political choices. In this context, the press acts as a mediator between the state and society, translating complex political processes into public discourse that can be evaluated by voters. When this mediating role operates effectively, elections become more transparent and accountable. However, when media institutions are influenced by economic concentration or political patronage, the deliberative quality of electoral democracy may be weakened.

From a normative legal perspective, Indonesia's constitutional framework formally recognizes the importance of press freedom in democratic governance. Article 28F of the 1945 Constitution guarantees citizens the right to obtain and disseminate information, while Law No. 40 of 1999 on the Press establishes the independence of the press and prohibits censorship. Nevertheless, the implementation of these protections is often complicated by overlapping regulatory frameworks, particularly the Electronic Information and Transactions Law (ITE Law), which introduces criminal provisions that may be broadly interpreted in cases involving digital media content.

These observations suggest that press freedom in Indonesia should not be understood solely as a legal entitlement but also as a social institution embedded within political and economic structures. Strengthening press freedom, therefore requires regulatory harmonization, transparent media ownership, and improved public media literacy to ensure that journalism can function effectively as an instrument of democratic accountability.

Another critical dimension in understanding the implementation of press freedom in Indonesia's electoral democracy concerns the regulatory tension between the Press Law and the Electronic Information and Transactions Law (ITE Law). Although Law No. 40 of 1999 clearly guarantees the independence of the press and prohibits censorship or interference in journalistic activities, the development of digital communication has introduced new legal complexities. The ITE Law contains provisions related to defamation, hate speech, and the dissemination of electronic information that may be broadly interpreted, potentially affecting journalistic activities conducted through online platforms.²⁴ As digital media increasingly become the primary channel for political communication, journalists frequently operate within a legal environment where the boundaries between protected press activities and general electronic expression are not always clearly defined.

From a constitutional perspective, this regulatory overlap raises questions regarding legal certainty and the protection of freedom of expression in democratic societies. Journalists working in digital media environments may face the risk of legal complaints under electronic communication regulations even when their reporting is based on legitimate journalistic investigation. Such situations can produce what scholars describe as a "chilling effect," in which the possibility of legal sanctions discourages journalists from publishing critical or

²³ Syafriadi, and Selvi Harvia Santri, "Press Freedom and Its Relevance to the Theory of People's Sovereignty In the Indonesian Legal Regime."

²⁴ Amrihani, Haresti Asysy and Ritonga, "Freedom of the Press Regulations in Indonesia and Sweden: Limited but Free."

investigative reports.²⁵ During electoral periods, when public scrutiny of political actors intensifies, the presence of such legal uncertainty may reduce the ability of the press to investigate campaign financing, political patronage, or administrative irregularities.

These challenges become particularly relevant in the context of regional elections, where the circulation of political information is often highly contested. Electoral campaigns frequently involve competing narratives regarding governance performance, corruption allegations, and policy proposals. In such circumstances, journalists play an essential role in verifying political claims and providing citizens with accurate and balanced information. When regulatory ambiguity limits the ability of journalists to perform investigative reporting, the press's role as a democratic watchdog becomes weakened. This condition ultimately affects the quality of electoral democracy, as voters may receive incomplete or distorted information when making political decisions.

Therefore, ensuring effective press freedom in Indonesia requires not only the existence of legal guarantees but also a coherent regulatory framework that protects journalistic activities across both traditional and digital media platforms. Harmonizing the Press Law with digital communication regulations would provide greater legal certainty for journalists and strengthen the institutional role of the press in monitoring electoral governance. In this sense, press freedom should be viewed not merely as a constitutional right but as a functional pillar of democratic accountability that enables citizens to participate meaningfully in electoral processes.

In addition to regulatory challenges, the effectiveness of press freedom in electoral democracy is closely related to the institutional capacity of media organizations to perform their watchdog function. Within democratic theory, the press is commonly described as the “fourth pillar” of democracy because it provides an independent mechanism for monitoring governmental authority and political competition. Through investigative reporting, fact-checking, and public scrutiny of political actors, the press helps ensure that electoral processes operate transparently and in accordance with democratic principles.²⁶ In electoral contexts, this watchdog role becomes particularly significant because elections determine the distribution of political power and shape the legitimacy of public institutions.

In Indonesia's decentralized political system, the watchdog function of the press extends beyond national politics and becomes increasingly relevant at the regional level. Local elections involve complex interactions among political parties, local elites, and administrative institutions responsible for electoral governance. In many cases, regional political dynamics receive limited attention from national media organizations, making local journalists an essential source of information for citizens. By reporting on candidate programs, campaign

²⁵ Chariansyah, Hery, “Juridical Implications of Constitutional Court Decision Number 105/PUU-XXII/2024 Regarding Freedom of Expression in the Digital Space,” *SIGn Jurnal Hukum* 7, no. 1 (2025): 562–79, <https://doi.org/10.37276/sjh.v7i1.498>.

²⁶ Yoedtadi, Moehammad Gafar, Ahmad Djunaidi, Yugih Setyanto, Lusia Savitri Setyo Utami, and Diah Ayu Candraningrum, “Strengthening Institutional Integrity for SDG: The Influence of Media Ownership on Election Reporting in Indonesia's 2024 Presidential Election,” *Journal of Lifestyle & SDG'S Review* 5, no. 3 (2025): 1–31, <https://doi.org/10.47172/2965-730X.SDGsReview.v5.n03.pe04525>.

financing, and electoral administration, local media contribute to strengthening democratic oversight and encouraging citizen participation in regional governance.

However, the capacity of the press to perform this monitoring role is often influenced by structural factors within the media industry. Media organizations must operate within economic environments that require financial sustainability, and this reality sometimes creates tensions between journalistic independence and commercial interests. Advertising revenues, political sponsorship, and ownership structures may shape editorial decisions in ways that affect the neutrality of political coverage. When media organizations depend heavily on political or corporate funding, journalists may face implicit pressure to avoid reporting that could jeopardize these financial relationships. Such conditions can limit the ability of the press to critically evaluate political actors during electoral campaigns.

The problem becomes more complex when media ownership overlaps with political interests. In Indonesia, several prominent political figures are directly or indirectly associated with major media conglomerates. This ownership structure creates potential conflicts of interest, particularly during election periods when political actors compete for public support. When media owners are involved in political competition, editorial agendas may reflect the strategic priorities of these actors rather than the broader informational needs of the public. As a result, the neutrality and credibility of political reporting may be questioned by audiences.

Despite these challenges, the Indonesian press has demonstrated significant resilience in maintaining its democratic role since the beginning of the Reform Era. Numerous investigative reports produced by journalists have exposed corruption, electoral malpractice, and abuses of power within both national and regional political institutions. These journalistic efforts contribute to strengthening public accountability and reinforcing democratic norms within Indonesia's political system. In many cases, media coverage of corruption scandals and electoral irregularities has prompted legal investigations and institutional reforms, illustrating the continuing relevance of press freedom as a mechanism of democratic oversight.

Therefore, the implementation of press freedom in Indonesia's electoral democracy should be understood as an evolving process shaped by legal frameworks, institutional capacities, and socio-economic conditions within the media sector. While constitutional guarantees provide the normative foundation for press independence, the practical realization of this independence depends on broader structural factors, including transparent media ownership, strong professional ethics, and supportive democratic institutions. These factors collectively determine whether the press can effectively function as a guardian of transparency and accountability within Indonesia's electoral system.

3.2 Media as a Guardian of Transparency and Accountability in the 2024 Election

This study reaffirms that press freedom is a fundamental instrument in consolidating electoral democracy and strengthening local democratic governance in Indonesia. Based on normative and sociological analysis, the findings reveal that the dynamics of press freedom across three major political periods, Guided Democracy, New Order, and Reform Era, illustrate a significant shift in power structures affecting media independence. The enactment of Law No. 40 of 1999 on the Press marked a turning point in Indonesia's democratic evolution, yet it left

an enduring paradox between formal freedom and informal political control. Empirical data from the Indonesian Press Council in 2024, showing a decline in the press freedom index from 71.57 to 69.39, confirms that media freedom depends not solely on legal norms but also on the social, economic, and political conditions that sustain media autonomy.

The relationship between press freedom and electoral democracy can be understood through Habermas's public sphere theory, which emphasizes the necessity of a free and rational space for civic discourse. Within the context of the 2024 Simultaneous Regional Elections, the press's function as a public watchdog has not been optimally realized due to elite media ownership structures that influence editorial policies. Yoedtadi et al. support this finding, revealing that several media outlets demonstrated partisan tendencies during campaign coverage, while others maintained relatively balanced reporting.²⁷ These results demonstrate that the structure of media ownership directly affects the neutrality and credibility of political information disseminated to the public.

The phenomenon of media concentration has become a defining characteristic of Indonesia's post-reform media landscape. After the liberalization of the press following the collapse of the New Order regime, the number of media outlets expanded rapidly. However, this expansion was accompanied by the consolidation of ownership within a relatively small number of corporate groups. Large media conglomerates now control television networks, newspapers, and digital platforms simultaneously, enabling them to influence national and regional political discourse. While media conglomeration may improve financial sustainability in the competitive media industry, it also raises concerns regarding editorial independence and pluralism in political reporting.

A comparative analysis of prior studies demonstrates that similar patterns of political influence over media institutions are evident across Southeast Asia. Countries such as Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines have experienced varying degrees of democratic regression, characterized by the proliferation of disinformation, increasing political polarization, and the manipulation of media narratives during electoral periods. Furthermore, Bate and Bate emphasize the critical, yet constrained, role of local media in promoting electoral transparency in South Sulawesi. Their findings indicate that political pressure and limited levels of public media literacy significantly weakened journalists' capacity to function as independent monitors of electoral processes.²⁸ These findings suggest that the effectiveness of press freedom is closely linked to broader structural conditions, including the independence of local political institutions and the strength of civil society.

The results also demonstrate that local democratic advancement does not always correspond directly with press freedom scores. According to data from the Indonesian Press Council (2024), Bali recorded a press freedom score of 79.42 with a democracy index of 85.13, whereas Central Kalimantan, despite having a comparable press freedom score, achieved a lower democracy index of 77.57. This divergence indicates that press freedom alone cannot guarantee

²⁷ Yoedtadi et al.

²⁸ Bate, Andi Muhammad Farid Fausan, and Andi Nurul Istiqamah Bate, "Press Supervision of Local Election (Pilkada) Transparency in South Sulawesi," *Tamalanrea* 1, no. 3 (2024): 26–38, <https://doi.org/10.69816/jgd.v1i3.42420>.

democratic consolidation. Institutional capacity, governance transparency, and civic participation also play crucial roles in shaping the quality of democracy at the local level.²⁹

The interpretation of these findings highlights the influence of political economy in shaping editorial policies. Journalists working within politically affiliated media organizations often face implicit pressure to align their reporting with the interests of media owners or political sponsors. Such pressures can undermine the independence of journalistic work and weaken the role of the press as a democratic watchdog.³⁰ During the 2024 regional elections, these dynamics became visible through selective news framing and the strategic placement of political narratives that favored particular candidates or policy agendas.

In addition to traditional media dynamics, the growing influence of digital communication platforms has significantly transformed the media environment during electoral campaigns. Social media platforms enable political actors to communicate directly with voters, bypassing conventional journalistic gatekeeping.³¹ While this development broadens opportunities for citizen participation in political discourse, it also introduces new risks associated with misinformation and digital propaganda. The rapid circulation of unverified political content through online platforms has complicated the task of professional journalists who seek to maintain standards of factual accuracy and ethical reporting.³²

Studies examining digital political communication in Indonesia show that electoral campaigns increasingly rely on emotional narratives and visual branding strategies designed to influence voter perception.³³ Fitriyanti et al. report that mayoral candidates in Bekasi effectively utilized social media platforms to mobilize young voters through emotionally appealing campaign messages.³⁴ While such strategies can increase political participation among younger demographics, they also open opportunities for manipulation of public opinion when campaign content lacks transparency or factual verification.

Similarly, Satria and Qodir demonstrate that major online news portals often frame political narratives in ways that subtly influence public perception of electoral candidates.³⁵ This framing effect illustrates the continuing relevance of professional journalism in maintaining balanced political communication. Without strong editorial standards, digital information flows may reinforce polarization and weaken the deliberative quality of democratic discourse.

²⁹ Kalemang, Joseph Victor, "Potential for the 2024 Election and Consolidation of Indonesian Democracy," *Journal of Asian Multicultural Research for Social Sciences Study* 5, no. 1 (2024): 17–23, <https://doi.org/10.47616/jamrsss.v5i1.409>.

³⁰ Danso, Samuel, "Media and Politics: Investigating Government Interests, Ownership Influence and Media Independence in Combating Corruption in Ghana," *Cogent Social Sciences* 11, no. 1 (2025): 1–18, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2025.2483391>.

³¹ Fitriyanti, Novia, Ranti Puspitasari, Thalia Jasmine, and Algooth Putranto, "Strategi Komunikasi Politik Digital Tri Andhianto Dan Abdul Haris Bobihoe Dalam Pilkada Bekasi 2024," *JIMIK (Jurnal Indonesia Manajemen Informatika Dan Komunikasi)* 6, no. 1 (2025): 1–13, <https://journal.stmiki.ac.id/index.php/jimik/article/view/1294>.

³² Weng, Dennis Lu Chung, and Kira Alberts, "Democracy in the Digital Age: Investigating Fake News, Political Polarization, and Media's Role in Taiwan and South Africa," *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 61, no. 1 Special Section: Democracy and its Challenges: A Cross-cultural Comparison (2026): 75–99, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00219096251380770>.

³³ Fitriyanti, Puspitasari, Ranti, Jasmine, and Putranto, "Strategi Komunikasi Politik Digital Tri Andhianto dan Abdul Haris Bobihoe Dalam Pilkada Bekasi 2024."

³⁴ Fitriyanti, Puspitasari, Ranti, Jasmine, and Putranto.

³⁵ Satria, Teguh, and Zuly Qodir., "Narrative Policy Framework: Media's Role in 2024 Local Leaders Election Policy," *Mediator* 17, no. 12 (2024): 397–411, <https://doi.org/10.29313/mediator.v17i2.4409>.

Indonesia’s contemporary electoral environment therefore reflects a hybrid media system in which traditional journalism and digital communication coexist and interact. On one hand, digital platforms expand the scope of political participation by allowing citizens to express opinions and access diverse sources of information. On the other hand, the absence of effective regulation in digital communication spaces facilitates the spread of misinformation and partisan narratives that can distort electoral competition.

The dual challenges of media oligopoly and digital propaganda highlight the importance of strengthening institutional mechanisms that safeguard press independence. Effective press freedom requires not only legal guarantees but also institutional arrangements that protect journalists from economic and political pressures. Media transparency, ethical journalism, and public accountability mechanisms are therefore essential components of democratic governance.

Table 4. Conceptual Synthesis of the Relationship Between Press Freedom and Electoral Democracy in Indonesia

Dimension	Indicator	Key Findings	Democratic Implications
Legal and Regulatory	Press Law (1999) and ITE Law	Normative inconsistencies enable repressive interpretations	Need for legislative harmonization of media laws
Political Economy of Media	Media ownership concentration	Political intervention via ownership structures	Strengthening editorial independence and ownership transparency
Socio-Cultural	Public literacy and digital participation	Low literacy undermines effective social control	Enhancement of civic media education
Local Democracy	Election transparency and accountability	Moderate correlation between press freedom and IDI	Strengthening local institutions and regional press councils
Digital Technology	Online propaganda and disinformation	Politicization of social media fosters polarization	Regulation of digital campaign ethics and content verification

Source: Researcher’s synthesis (2025) based on literature and empirical data.

The conceptual synthesis presented in Table 4 illustrates the multidimensional relationship between press freedom and electoral democracy in Indonesia. From a regulatory perspective, inconsistencies between the Press Law and the ITE Law create space for restrictive interpretations that may constrain journalistic independence. From the standpoint of political economy, concentrated media ownership structures allow political actors to influence editorial decisions and shape public narratives during election campaigns. Socio-cultural factors also play a crucial role; limited public media literacy reduces the capacity of citizens to critically evaluate political information and weakens the press’s role as a mechanism of social control.

At the local level, press freedom demonstrates a moderate correlation with electoral transparency and accountability. However, this relationship is mediated by institutional quality and governance practices in different provinces. Meanwhile, the rapid expansion of digital communication technologies introduces additional challenges, particularly the proliferation of disinformation and the politicization of social media platforms during electoral campaigns.

These dynamics highlight the need for a comprehensive approach to media governance that combines legal reform, institutional strengthening, and public education.

Ultimately, the findings indicate that press freedom in Indonesia has not yet reached an ideal stage as an independent pillar of democratic governance. A healthy electoral democracy requires media institutions that are free not only from state censorship but also from economic and political pressures originating within the media industry itself. Strengthening regulatory harmonization, promoting transparency in media ownership, and enhancing public media literacy are therefore essential steps toward ensuring that the press can effectively perform its democratic role in safeguarding transparency, accountability, and public participation within Indonesia's electoral system.

Another perspective that further explains the relationship between press freedom and electoral democracy in Indonesia concerns the institutional resilience of democratic communication systems. Democratic consolidation requires not only the existence of free elections but also the presence of information structures that enable citizens to make informed political decisions. Within this context, the press serves as a central institution that connects political actors, state institutions, and the public sphere. Through investigative reporting, fact verification, and critical commentary, journalists help ensure that electoral competition remains transparent and accountable. When such informational mechanisms operate effectively, voters are better equipped to evaluate candidates, assess policy proposals, and monitor the conduct of political institutions.

The Indonesian experience demonstrates that the quality of electoral democracy is strongly influenced by the capacity of media institutions to maintain independence while navigating complex political and economic environments. Media organizations must balance professional journalistic standards with financial sustainability in increasingly competitive media markets. In many cases, the economic pressures faced by news organizations influence editorial decisions regarding political coverage.³⁶ Advertising revenues, political sponsorship, and business affiliations can shape the priorities of media institutions and affect the framing of electoral narratives. As a result, maintaining editorial independence remains one of the most significant challenges facing the Indonesian press during election periods.

At the same time, the rapid transformation of the digital communication landscape has created new opportunities for democratic participation while also introducing additional challenges for media governance. Social media platforms enable citizens to access a wide range of political information and to actively participate in public debates. Political candidates and campaign teams increasingly rely on digital platforms to communicate directly with voters, disseminate campaign messages, and mobilize political support. This transformation has expanded the reach of political communication and reduced the dominance of traditional mass media in shaping public opinion.

³⁶ Giomelakis, Dimitrios, Olga Papadopoulou, Symeon Papadopoulos, and Andreas Veglis, "Verification of News Video Content: Findings from a Study of Journalism Students," *Journalism Practice* 17, no. 5 (2023): 1068–97, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2021.1965905>.

However, the decentralization of information production through digital platforms also creates vulnerabilities within democratic information systems. The rapid spread of misinformation, political propaganda, and emotionally charged narratives can distort public understanding of political issues. During electoral campaigns, misleading information may circulate widely before professional journalists have the opportunity to verify its accuracy. In such circumstances, credible media institutions play an essential role in counteracting misinformation by providing verified reporting and contextual analysis. Fact-checking initiatives, investigative journalism, and public clarification of misleading narratives are therefore, critical components of maintaining informational integrity during elections.

Another issue closely related to press freedom is the level of public trust in media institutions. Public confidence in journalism significantly influences the effectiveness of the press in promoting democratic accountability. When citizens trust media organizations, they are more likely to rely on journalistic reporting as a source of political information.³⁷ Conversely, declining public trust in media institutions can weaken the influence of professional journalism and allow unverified sources of information to dominate political discourse. Strengthening journalistic credibility through ethical reporting, transparency in editorial processes, and accountability mechanisms is therefore essential for sustaining democratic communication systems.

In Indonesia, the challenge of maintaining public trust in media institutions is closely connected to perceptions of political bias and media ownership concentration. When audiences perceive that media outlets are closely aligned with particular political interests, they may question the neutrality of news coverage. Addressing these concerns requires institutional reforms that promote transparency in media ownership and strengthen professional standards within the journalism profession. Independent regulatory bodies, such as the Indonesian Press Council, play an important role in safeguarding journalistic ethics and mediating disputes between media organizations and the public.

Furthermore, strengthening the role of the press in electoral democracy requires broader collaboration among democratic institutions. Electoral management bodies, civil society organizations, academic institutions, and media organizations must work together to promote transparency and accountability in political processes. Collaborative monitoring initiatives during election periods can improve the quality of information available to the public and help identify irregularities in electoral administration. Such institutional cooperation enhances the capacity of journalists to investigate political developments and strengthens the broader democratic oversight system.

The long-term sustainability of press freedom in Indonesia therefore, depends on a combination of legal protection, institutional independence, and societal support for democratic values. Legal frameworks must ensure that journalists can perform their professional duties without fear of intimidation or criminalization. At the same time, media organizations must maintain strong ethical standards and transparent editorial practices that reinforce public trust in

³⁷ Chang, Alex Chuan hsien, and Yen Chen Tang, "The Political Foundation of Mainstream Media Trust in East and Southeast Asia: A Cross-National Analysis," *Asian Politics and Policy* 15, no. 4 (2023): 585–604, <https://doi.org/10.1111/aspp.12715>.

journalism. When these elements operate together, the press can effectively fulfill its role as a guardian of democratic accountability and contribute to the consolidation of electoral democracy in Indonesia.

4. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that press freedom in Indonesia remains characterized by a structural paradox within the consolidation of electoral democracy, particularly during the 2024 Simultaneous Regional Elections. Although Law No. 40 of 1999 formally guarantees press independence and prohibits censorship, the empirical reality reveals that media practices continue to be shaped by political patronage, ownership concentration, commercialization, and regulatory overlap between the Press Law and the Electronic Information and Transactions Law. These structural conditions weaken the press's capacity to function optimally as an independent democratic watchdog capable of ensuring transparency, accountability, and balanced political deliberation during electoral processes. Furthermore, the rapid expansion of digital communication platforms has intensified the circulation of misinformation, partisan narratives, and algorithm-driven political polarization, thereby complicating the role of professional journalism in safeguarding democratic communication. The novelty of this research lies in its interdisciplinary integration of normative juridical analysis and sociological perspectives to conceptualize press freedom not merely as a constitutional right, but as a structural and communicative mechanism that directly influences the quality of substantive electoral democracy. Unlike previous studies focusing separately on media law or democratic participation, this study develops a comprehensive analytical framework connecting constitutional guarantees, political economy of media, and digital communication governance. The research contributes theoretically to the discourse on democratic constitutionalism and media sociology in Southeast Asia, while practically offering policy recommendations concerning regulatory harmonization, media ownership transparency, strengthening journalistic ethics, and public media literacy as essential foundations for sustainable democratic governance in Indonesia.

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