

Press Freedom Paradox in Indonesia's Electoral Democracy and Local Governance

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Abstract

This study examines the implementation of press freedom within Indonesia's electoral democracy and evaluates its role in promoting transparency and accountability during the 2024 Simultaneous Regional Elections. The issue is significant because democratic quality depends not only on electoral procedures but also on the availability of independent and credible public information. This research employs a mixed doctrinal–empirical legal approach by integrating constitutional and statutory analysis with qualitative sociological observation of media practices, political intervention, ownership structures, economic dependency, and digital information dynamics during the electoral process. The findings reveal a persistent paradox of press freedom in Indonesia. Although constitutional provisions and Law No. 40 of 1999 formally guarantee media independence, journalistic practices remain constrained by political patronage, media ownership concentration, regulatory fragmentation, economic pressures, and digital disinformation. These conditions weaken informational integrity, encourage selective news framing, and limit democratic deliberation. The novelty of this study lies in the development of the concept of hybrid media democracy, which explains press freedom as simultaneously functioning as a constitutionally protected democratic institution and a socio-political system shaped by political and economic interests. The study contributes to the literature by integrating constitutional law, democratic governance theory, and media sociology into a unified analytical framework that explains the gap between formal press freedom and substantive democratic outcomes. Strengthening democracy therefore requires legal protection, institutional autonomy, transparent media governance, and enhanced digital media literacy.

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

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

³ Muchamad Zaenal Arifin, 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. However, this perspective primarily emphasizes global media transformations and pays limited attention to how legal frameworks interact with 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 effectively explains the influence of market forces on media behavior, it largely reflects the experience of established Western democracies and does not adequately capture the structural vulnerabilities present 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, this perspective focuses predominantly on communicative structures and does not specifically address how constitutional guarantees of press freedom operate within the context of electoral competition and political accountability.⁹

Despite these valuable contributions, existing studies exhibit several important limitations. First, most analyses remain fragmented, focusing either on media systems, market dynamics, or participatory communication without integrating legal frameworks governing press freedom. Second, empirical insights are largely derived from Western democratic contexts, leaving the structural conditions of emerging democracies underexplored. Third, there is limited attention to how press freedom functions within electoral processes, particularly at the local level where political and economic pressures tend to be more direct and pervasive.

⁶ Muklis Al'anam, 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 Merlyna Lim, "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 Mochammad Sinung Restendy, 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 Sulaiman Juned, "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>.

Accordingly, there remains a significant research gap in understanding how the normative guarantees of press freedom interact with the sociological realities of media practice within Indonesia's electoral democracy. In particular, few studies have systematically examined the intersection between constitutional protections, political-economic constraints, and media behavior during local electoral processes such as the 2024 simultaneous regional elections.

Building upon these considerations, the normative foundation of press freedom can be more comprehensively understood through Jürgen Habermas's concept of the public sphere, which positions the media as an institutionalized arena for rational discourse and communicative action.¹⁰ This framework underscores that media autonomy from both state and market interference is a prerequisite for deliberative democracy. However, the Indonesian experience reveals a more complex reality, in which media institutions operate within hybrid conditions, formally independent in legal terms, yet substantively dependent on political and economic structures. This condition can also be interpreted through broader democratic theory. 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 responsible for safeguarding the free circulation of information.¹¹ Yet empirical developments in Indonesia suggest the emergence of a democratic condition in which procedural mechanisms persist while the quality of public deliberation declines. The concentration of media ownership and the entanglement between media institutions and political elites further constrain the capacity 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 mechanisms but also the availability of credible and balanced information. In this regard, the press performs a dual function: facilitating public engagement and mediating the flow of political information. When this function is distorted by economic concentration or political intervention, the integrity of electoral democracy is inevitably affected.¹² These challenges have become increasingly 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 narrowing the space for balanced deliberation.¹³

Against this backdrop, this study seeks to critically examine the paradox of press freedom in Indonesia by integrating normative legal analysis with sociological observation. It specifically investigates how constitutional guarantees of press freedom are translated into media practices

¹⁰ Muklis Al'anam 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>.

¹¹ Awang Ruswandi, "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 Ari Ade Kamula Achmad Zuhdi, Enno Sellya Agustina, "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>.

during electoral competition and how these dynamics affect the quality of electoral democracy. 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.

This study positions itself at the intersection of constitutional law and media sociology. It not only applies deliberative democratic theory but also critically evaluates its limitations in the context of emerging democracies, where media systems operate under structural dependencies. In doing so, the study contributes to the development of a more contextual and integrative understanding of press freedom as both a legal norm and a sociological condition shaping the quality of substantive democracy.

2. METHOD

This study adopts a mixed doctrinal–empirical legal research design, integrating normative legal analysis with sociological inquiry to examine the relationship between legal norms governing press freedom and the socio-political realities of electoral democracy in Indonesia, particularly during the 2024 Simultaneous Regional Elections (Pilkada Serentak). The normative component focuses on analyzing constitutional provisions 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 analysis evaluates the extent to which these legal instruments align with democratic principles such as transparency, accountability, and the public's right to information. The empirical (sociological) component functions as a complementary analytical layer, examining how these legal norms operate in practice within media institutions and electoral dynamics. This component employs a qualitative approach to capture interactions between media actors, political stakeholders, and regulatory structures during electoral processes. The research relies on both secondary and limited primary data. Secondary data include primary legal materials (constitutions, statutes, and regulations) and secondary sources such as peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, and institutional reports on media governance and electoral democracy. These materials were collected through a systematic literature review of reputable academic databases, including Scopus-indexed and SINTA-accredited journals.

Primary data were obtained through non-participatory observation of selected national and regional online news media during the 2024 simultaneous local elections, covering the period from January to November 2024. The unit of analysis includes news content, media framing, and interactions between media actors and political stakeholders, particularly during key electoral phases such as candidate nomination, campaign, and voting. To ensure data credibility, triangulation techniques were employed by cross-checking observational findings with secondary sources, including media reports, academic analyses, and institutional publications. The analytical process combines doctrinal legal analysis with qualitative content analysis. The doctrinal analysis evaluates the coherence between legal norms and democratic principles, while the qualitative analysis identifies patterns of political intervention, economic influence, and media bias in electoral coverage. Through this integrated framework, the study explains how press freedom functions not only as a constitutional guarantee but also as a socio-

political mechanism shaping 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 examines the implementation of press freedom within Indonesia's electoral democracy by integrating doctrinal legal analysis with sociological observation. The findings demonstrate that although Indonesia has established a robust constitutional and statutory framework guaranteeing press freedom, its practical operation remains shaped by political configurations, economic structures, and regulatory ambiguities. This condition produces a structural tension between formal legal guarantees and empirical realities, which becomes central to understanding the paradox of press freedom in democratic consolidation.¹⁴

Historically, press freedom in Indonesia has evolved across three major political phases: the Guided Democracy era (1959–1966), characterized by ideological control and state dominance over media narratives; the New Order era (1966–1998), marked by centralized authority and institutionalized censorship; and the Reform Era (1998–present), which introduced significant liberalization through the enactment of Law No. 40 of 1999 on the Press.¹⁵ This historical trajectory does not reflect a linear progression toward full freedom, but rather a transformation in the mechanisms through which control over information is exercised.

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.

As shown in Table 1, each political phase produced distinct governance patterns that directly shaped media regulation and journalistic practices. Under Guided Democracy and the New Order, restrictions were explicit, operating through ideological censorship and institutional control. In contrast, the Reform Era formally guarantees press freedom and eliminates overt censorship. However, this shift does not signify the disappearance of control; rather, it indicates its transformation into more complex and less visible forms embedded in regulatory overlap

¹⁴ Abdul Malik Gismar, "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/jsps.v2i1.43>.

¹⁵ Haresti Asysy Amrihani 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/jkiski.v6i2.609>.

and political-economic structures.¹⁶ This transformation suggests that the expansion of formal press freedom may coexist with new modes of constraint, thereby reinforcing the paradox that legal liberalization does not automatically produce substantive media independence.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 further illustrates that the evolution of press freedom in Indonesia reflects a shift from direct political control to conditional autonomy. While the Reform Era repositions the media as a watchdog institution, its effectiveness is constrained by structural challenges such as media ownership concentration, economic dependency, and regulatory ambiguity in digital communication. These conditions indicate that press freedom operates within a hybrid institutional setting, formally independent yet substantively influenced by external pressures. This pattern confirms that press freedom does not evolve toward absolute independence, but rather toward a negotiated space shaped by competing political and economic interests.¹⁸

Empirical observations reveal a moderate associative relationship between press freedom and the quality of local democracy. Regions with higher press freedom scores tend to exhibit better democratic performance, particularly in transparency and civic participation.¹⁹ However, this relationship is not linear, indicating that press freedom alone is insufficient to ensure democratic consolidation. Its impact depends on the institutional context in which media operate.²⁰

As demonstrated in Table 3, regions such as Bali and DI Yogyakarta exhibit relatively high levels of both press freedom and democratic quality, suggesting that an open media environment can support effective democratic participation. However, similar levels of press freedom in other regions do not consistently produce equivalent democratic outcomes. This

¹⁶ Jonianto Silalahi, Teguh Prasetyo, and Tomy Michael Budiarsih, "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>.

¹⁷ Aniello 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>.

¹⁸ Aniello Iannone.

¹⁹ Dewan Pers, "Indeks Kemerdekaan Pers (IKP) Nasional Tahun 2024" (Jakarta, 2024), <https://www.dewanpers.or.id/berita/detail/2559/indeks-kemerdekaan-pers-nasional-kembali-turun>.

²⁰ Luca Di Gennaro, "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>.

variation indicates that press freedom contributes to democratic quality only when supported by institutional independence, governance transparency, and active civic engagement. Thus, the data reinforce the central argument of this study: formal press freedom is a necessary but insufficient condition for substantive democracy.²¹

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).

From a causal perspective, press freedom affects electoral democracy through its role in shaping the informational environment available to citizens. In democratic systems, the quality of elections depends on the availability of accurate, balanced, and accessible information. When media independence is compromised, whether by political patronage, ownership concentration, or economic pressures, the flow of information becomes selective and potentially distorted. This distortion weakens the deliberative capacity of citizens, limiting their ability to make informed political decisions and ultimately reducing the quality of democratic outcomes.²² This dynamic is particularly evident during the 2024 Simultaneous Local Elections, where digital media platforms played a central role in constructing political narratives. While digitalization expands access to information, it also intensifies the spread of disinformation and partisan content. At the same time, unequal digital infrastructure across regions contributes to disparities in information access, further complicating the relationship between press freedom and democratic participation.²³

These findings can be understood through the theoretical framework of deliberative democracy, particularly Habermas's concept of the public sphere. In this framework, democratic legitimacy depends on open, inclusive, and rational communication among citizens. However, the Indonesian experience demonstrates a divergence from this ideal. Media institutions often operate within hybrid conditions, formally independent in legal terms, yet substantively constrained by political and economic interests. As a result, the public sphere becomes fragmented, and the deliberative quality of democracy is weakened.²⁴ From a normative legal perspective, Indonesia's constitutional framework provides strong guarantees for press freedom. Article 28F of the 1945 Constitution ensures the right to obtain and disseminate information, while Law No. 40 of 1999 establishes the independence of the press

²¹ Florence Aurelia, 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>.

²² I. Gede Nyoman Mindra Jaya, 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 Index of Indonesia," *Sustainability* 16, no. 24 (2024): 1–22, <https://doi.org/10.3390/su162411258>.

²³ Jaya et al.

²⁴ Syafriadi and S.H 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>.

and prohibits censorship. Nevertheless, the coexistence of this legal framework with other regulatory instruments, particularly the Electronic Information and Transactions (ITE) Law, introduces legal ambiguity. This overlap creates potential risks for journalists, especially in digital contexts, where journalistic activities may be interpreted under broader provisions related to defamation or electronic information. Such conditions may generate a “chilling effect,” discouraging critical reporting during electoral periods when public scrutiny is essential.²⁵ Beyond regulatory challenges, the effectiveness of press freedom is closely linked to the institutional capacity of media organizations. Economic pressures, including reliance on advertising revenue and political sponsorship, can influence editorial decisions and compromise journalistic independence. The concentration of media ownership, particularly when connected to political elites, further intensifies this problem by creating potential conflicts of interest in electoral coverage. Under such conditions, the press may struggle to maintain its role as an independent watchdog capable of ensuring transparency and accountability.²⁶

Despite these constraints, the Indonesian press has demonstrated resilience in supporting democratic oversight. Investigative journalism has played a significant role in exposing corruption, electoral irregularities, and abuses of power, contributing to institutional accountability and reform. However, these contributions remain uneven and are often contingent upon broader structural conditions within the media ecosystem.²⁷ Taken together, these findings reveal a fundamental paradox in Indonesia’s electoral democracy. While press freedom is formally guaranteed and institutionally recognized, its practical implementation is shaped by structural dependencies that limit its effectiveness. Consequently, the expansion of press freedom does not automatically lead to improved democratic quality. Instead, its impact depends on the extent to which media institutions can operate independently from political and economic pressures.

This paradox underscores that press freedom should not be understood solely as a legal entitlement, but as a socio-political condition embedded within broader institutional dynamics. Strengthening electoral democracy therefore requires not only legal protections, but also regulatory coherence, transparent media ownership, and stronger safeguards for journalistic independence. These findings provide the analytical foundation for the following section, which examines how these structural conditions affect the role of the press in ensuring transparency and accountability in electoral processes.

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

Building on the paradox identified in the previous section, this study argues that the role of the media in Indonesia’s electoral democracy must be understood within a structural context in

²⁵ Hery Chariansyah, “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 Haresti Asyry Amrihani 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/jkiski.v6i2.609>, “Freedom of the Press Regulations in Indonesia and Sweden: Limited but Free.”

²⁷ 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>.

which legal norms interact with political and economic forces. This interaction produces what can be described as a *hybrid media democracy*, where the press functions both as a democratic institution and as an actor influenced by power relations.

In the 2024 Simultaneous Regional Elections, the media's role as a guardian of transparency and accountability appears conditional. Although legal protections exist, media performance is influenced by ownership structures, economic pressures, and political affiliations.²⁸ From the perspective of democratic communication theory, the press plays a central role in providing accurate and balanced information to support informed political participation. However, this role is weakened when media institutions are embedded in concentrated ownership structures. Some media outlets demonstrated partisan tendencies during election coverage, while others maintained neutrality, indicating variation influenced by structural factors.²⁹

Media ownership concentration is a key issue. Although the number of media outlets has increased since reform, ownership has become concentrated among a small number of groups. From a political economy perspective, this reduces pluralism and increases the risk of biased information.³⁰ This condition affects the media's watchdog role. While the press is expected to monitor political power, economic and political pressures may limit critical reporting. As a result, transparency becomes selective rather than comprehensive. The rise of digital media further complicates this situation. While digital platforms expand access to information, they also facilitate the spread of disinformation and partisan narratives, weakening the quality of public discourse.³¹

Taken together, these conditions show that Indonesia's media system operates within a hybrid democratic structure, where formal freedom coexists with structural constraints. This explains why press freedom does not always produce strong democratic outcomes. Therefore, strengthening the role of the media requires not only legal guarantees, but also structural reforms, including reducing ownership concentration, improving regulatory coherence, and enhancing public media literacy. Without these conditions, press freedom risks remaining a formal principle without significant impact on democratic governance. 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 democratic consolidation.

²⁸ Moehammad Gafar Yoedtadi, Ahmad Djunaidi, Yugih Setyanto, Lusya 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>.

²⁹ Andi Muhammad Farid Fausan Bate 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>.

³⁰ Samuel Danso, "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 Dennis Lu Chung Weng, 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>.

Institutional capacity, governance transparency, and civic participation also play crucial roles in shaping the quality of democracy at the local level.³²

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.³³ 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.³⁴ 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.³⁵

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.³⁶ Fitriyanti et al. report that mayoral candidates in Bekasi effectively utilized social media platforms to mobilize young voters through emotionally appealing campaign messages. 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.³⁷ 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. Indonesia's contemporary electoral environment therefore reflects a hybrid media system in

³² Joseph Victor KalemBang, "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>.

³³ Samuel Danso, "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>.

³⁴ Novia Fitriyanti, 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>.

³⁵ Dennis Lu Chung Weng, 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>.

³⁶ Novia Fitriyanti, Thalia Puspitasari, Ranti, 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>.

³⁷ Teguh Satria, 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>.

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.³⁸ 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.

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

³⁸ Dimitrios Giomelakis, 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>.

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.³⁹ 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 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.

The findings presented throughout this discussion demonstrate that the contribution of press freedom to electoral democracy should not be interpreted as a simple causal relationship in which greater media freedom automatically produces higher democratic quality. Instead, the

³⁹ Alex Chuan Hsien Chang, 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>.

Indonesian experience indicates that press freedom operates as an enabling institutional condition whose democratic effectiveness depends upon its interaction with political institutions, legal frameworks, economic structures, and patterns of public participation.⁴⁰ This perspective explains why variations in democratic performance may continue to exist despite relatively similar levels of formal press freedom across different regions.

The empirical findings also suggest that the democratic role of the press extends beyond the conventional understanding of the media as a watchdog institution. While investigative reporting and public oversight remain fundamental functions of journalism, the evidence examined in this study indicates that the press simultaneously performs an integrative institutional role by connecting electoral governance with public accountability. Through the continuous production of verified political information, explanation of public policies, clarification of competing political narratives, and exposure of irregularities in electoral processes, the media creates an informational environment in which democratic accountability can function more effectively. Electoral transparency therefore emerges not solely from legal supervision but from the interaction between constitutional institutions and an independent information system capable of facilitating informed public scrutiny.⁴¹

Democratic legitimacy is sustained not only by procedural compliance with electoral regulations but also by citizens' confidence that electoral competition has been conducted transparently and that political information has been communicated fairly and accurately. Where information is systematically distorted by excessive political intervention, economic interests, or coordinated disinformation, public trust in democratic institutions may gradually weaken despite the formal validity of electoral outcomes.⁴² Conversely, an independent press capable of maintaining professional standards of verification and balanced reporting contributes to strengthening the legitimacy of democratic institutions because citizens are able to evaluate political actors based on credible and accountable information.⁴³ This finding reinforces the proposition that informational integrity constitutes an inseparable element of electoral integrity within contemporary democratic governance.

The consolidation of electoral democracy requires the simultaneous strengthening of constitutional protection, institutional independence, professional journalistic ethics, transparent media governance, and active civic participation in the democratic process. These elements operate in a mutually reinforcing manner, enabling the press to perform not only its traditional function of monitoring political power but also its broader constitutional role in sustaining transparency, accountability, electoral legitimacy, and public trust. Accordingly, the Indonesian experience demonstrates that the long-term resilience of electoral democracy depends upon the capacity of democratic institutions to preserve an independent, credible, and

⁴⁰ Basyouni Ibrahim Hamada and Abdel-Salam G Abdel-Salam, "Determinants of Watchdog Journalism: A Global Empirical Approach," *International Communication Gazette* 87, no. 3 (April 1, 2025): 191–216, <https://doi.org/10.1177/17480485241288401>.

⁴¹ Lindita Camaj, "The Media's Role in Fighting Corruption: Media Effects on Governmental Accountability," *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 18, no. 1 (January 1, 2013): 21–42, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161212462741>.

⁴² Christian Schnaudt, "Perceptions of Electoral Integrity and Election-Related (Non-)Compliance: Evidence from Germany," *Political Studies* 73, no. 3 (August 1, 2025): 1292–1314, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00323217241290584>.

⁴³ Camaj, "The Media's Role in Fighting Corruption: Media Effects on Governmental Accountability."

accountable public information system capable of supporting informed political participation and constitutional governance.

This broader institutional interpretation also indicates that press freedom should be evaluated through its capacity to strengthen democratic learning within society. Electoral communication is not limited to informing citizens about candidates or political parties but also contributes to developing civic awareness regarding constitutional values, public accountability, and responsible political participation. As citizens become increasingly capable of distinguishing verified information from manipulation or disinformation, the democratic process becomes more resilient to political polarization and opportunistic electoral strategies. Consequently, the effectiveness of press freedom may also be reflected in its long-term contribution to cultivating democratic citizenship, where informed public participation reinforces both institutional accountability and the constitutional legitimacy of electoral governance.⁴⁴

Beyond the Indonesian context, these findings contribute to broader scholarly debates concerning the relationship between media freedom and democratic resilience in emerging democracies. The evidence suggests that the effectiveness of press freedom should not be measured solely by the existence of constitutional guarantees or formal indicators of media independence, but also by the capacity of media institutions to resist structural pressures originating from political patronage, market concentration, and digital information manipulation. This study therefore advances the concept of hybrid media democracy by demonstrating that democratic communication systems operate within a continuum between formal freedom and structural dependency. In such conditions, the democratic value of press freedom is determined not merely by legal protection, but by the extent to which institutional arrangements enable the media to preserve informational integrity, facilitate inclusive public deliberation, and sustain electoral accountability. Consequently, the Indonesian experience offers an important comparative lesson for other developing democracies, namely that the consolidation of electoral democracy requires the simultaneous strengthening of constitutional safeguards, independent media institutions, transparent governance structures, and digitally informed citizenship capable of critically engaging with contemporary political communication.

4. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that press freedom in Indonesia's electoral democracy remains characterized by a persistent gap between constitutional guarantees and empirical implementation. Although Law No. 40 of 1999 formally protects media independence, the findings reveal that the press continues to operate within a complex structure shaped by political patronage, media ownership concentration, economic dependency, regulatory fragmentation, and digital information disorder, all of which constrain its ability to function optimally as a guardian of transparency and accountability during the 2024 Simultaneous Regional Elections. The study's principal novelty lies in the formulation of the concept of hybrid media democracy, which conceptualizes press freedom as simultaneously functioning

⁴⁴ Paul Mihailidis and Samantha Viotty, "Spreadable Spectacle in Digital Culture: Civic Expression, Fake News, and the Role of Media Literacies in 'Post-Fact' Society," *American Behavioral Scientist* 61, no. 4 (April 1, 2017): 441–54, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764217701217>.

as a constitutionally protected democratic institution and a socio-political system embedded within political-economic power relations. This concept extends existing scholarship by integrating constitutional law, democratic governance theory, and media sociology into a unified analytical framework capable of explaining why formal press freedom does not automatically generate substantive democratic outcomes. The research contributes theoretically by advancing a contextual understanding of democratic resilience in emerging democracies, emphasizing that the effectiveness of press freedom depends on the interaction between legal safeguards, institutional autonomy, informational integrity, and civic participation. Practically, the findings underscore the need for regulatory harmonization, transparent media ownership, stronger protections for independent journalism, and enhanced digital media literacy. Ultimately, the sustainability of electoral democracy depends not merely on free elections, but on the existence of an independent, credible, and accountable public information ecosystem capable of sustaining democratic legitimacy and informed political participation.

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