



The Indonesian Press: Syncretism Between Freedom and Responsibility

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Abstract

The Indonesian press has undergone significant changes since independence, with two dominant models: the liberal press and the responsible press. The liberal press emphasizes press freedom and autonomy, while the responsible press emphasizes social responsibility and government control. The reform era (1998–present) brought significant changes, with a combination of the two models becoming dominant. This article examines the implications of this combination for democracy and press freedom in Indonesia. The combination of a liberal press and a responsible press enhances press freedom, prioritizes the public interest, and emphasizes social responsibility. Examples of media outlets implementing this model include Kompas, Tempo, Detik, Metro TV, and TVRI. However, this combination also faces the challenges of globalization and technology. This article is based on literature analysis and case studies. The results show that the combination of a liberal press and a responsible press helps improve democracy and press freedom in Indonesia. This article is suitable for academics, media practitioners, and those interested in communication and politics.

INTRODUCTION

The Indonesian press plays a crucial role in shaping public opinion and democracy in Indonesia. Since independence, the Indonesian press has undergone significant changes. In the pre-independence era and during the struggle for independence, the press served as a tool for the struggle for independence. Anyone was free to establish a press company. During the Old Order (the liberal and guided democracy era, 1950-1960s), the Indonesian press became a partisan press, sharing the same goals as the political parties that funded it. Entering the New Order regime, press life was very limited and dynamic. Regulations concerning the press were in place, so news published by the media was not simply published as it had been before independence (the Old Order).

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Entering 1974, the government began to take action against the press. The press was no longer as free as before. Government influence and control over the press were very strict. Anyone who opposed the government would receive a reprimand. If the reprimand was ignored, the military would take action. (Alfamidi, 2017). The post-1998 reform era is considered the peak of the Indonesian press's glory. The press became free, fearless in reporting anything or anyone. The government could also be criticized (whether constructive or not) if its performance was deemed poor. The threat of banning or revoking the SIUPP no longer existed. With the advent of the reform era, where the press gained complete freedom with the removal of government control through the Ministry of Information, several issues then emerged related to the maturity of the press in utilizing its freedom (Alfamidi, 2017).

In this context, the Indonesian press is faced with two conflicting concepts: press freedom and social responsibility. Press freedom, or the Libertarian Press, was formulated and described by Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm. In libertarian theory, humans are no longer viewed as passively accepting the truth as determined by those in power. Instead, humans are viewed as rational beings with an innate ability to distinguish between truth and falsehood. Furthermore, the right to seek the truth can be exercised by everyone. The role of the media is to assist in this search, helping individuals seek the truth. Therefore, in a libertarian system, the media is not part of the government but is independent, autonomous, and free to express ideas, even painful ones, without fear of government interference (Achmad, 2014).

Responsible press is a theory developed in the United States in the 20th century as a form of protest against the absolute freedom of libertarian theory, which instead led to moral decline in society (Syafrina, 2022). Thus, awareness grew that liberal theory had failed to fulfill its promise of using press freedom responsibly (Hutagalung, 2013). This theory is also based on the fact that press freedom must be accompanied by social responsibility to society (Armadila, 2025). Thus, the freedom possessed by the media is limited by certain rules, for example, limited by morals and ethics. Therefore, in this theory, the principle of press freedom is still maintained but must be accompanied by responsibility so that it becomes responsible freedom (Syafrina, 2022). Therefore, the syncretism between these two concepts is key to understanding the dynamics of the Indonesian press. Therefore, this article will discuss how the Indonesian press system bridges freedom and responsibility.

METHODS

This research was conducted using the Literature Review method. A literature review examines theories, findings, and other research articles obtained from reference materials to serve as a basis for research activities. Research formulated using a literature review allows for the provision of other research obtained from reference materials to serve as a basis for research activities on changing learning paradigms in higher education (Simatupang and Yuhertiana, 2021).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Pers Libertarian

The libertarian press, or more commonly known as the liberal press, is a press theory that stems from the concepts of liberalism and freedom. (Bilardo, 2019). This theory emerged after a major shift in Western societal thought known as the Enlightenment, and it also emerged as a form of resistance to the authoritarian press theory system. This theory began to be practiced in England after 1668, then spread to the United States and throughout the world. (Syafrina, 2022). The libertarian press also holds the principle that truth is no longer considered the property of those in power, but rather the right to seek truth is a human right, and the press is considered

a partner in seeking truth. (Hadi, 2021). Freedom of the press, therefore, is the freedom to communicate and express oneself in providing information to the public through mass media, both print and electronic. This freedom indicates the absence of interference from the state or government or other elements of society, both individual and collective, in providing information to the public, and its existence is constitutionally protected by the state. (Mahdi, 2014).

The basic assumption of Libertarian Press Theory is that humans are essentially born as free beings controlled by reason, and humans have a natural right to pursue the truth and develop their potentialⁱ. It should be noted that the main purpose of this theory in the mass media is to provide information, entertain, discover the truth, monitor the government, and exercise government control. The media is prohibited from broadcasting defamation, insults, committing impolite acts, and also prohibited from opposing the government. (Syafrina, 2022). However, in press companies that adhere to libertarian press theory, most of the existing rules are only to create material profits for capital owners. This type of press tends to be less interested in matters of public interest. (Rahmi, 2019).

The forms of application of libertarian press philosophy include absolute freedom from government control. The most fundamental application of libertarian theory is press freedom from all forms of government intervention and censorship. Among the forms of freedom are: one. No need for permits or licenses: Anyone with economic capacity has the right to publish media without requiring special permits or licenses from the government. Two. No Preliminary Censorship: Publication is free from any form of censorship before publication (*pre-censorship*) (Adisti, N. A. et al., 2024). In addition, the government may not prohibit or restrict news content before it is broadcast. Three. Ban on Closing: The government does not have the right to close or muzzle the media (*bridle*). In Indonesia, this is stated in Law No. 40 of 1999. (Hutagalung, 2013).

Freedom to Criticize the Government: Criticism of the government, officials, or political parties is not punishable by law. (Adisti, N. A. et al., 2024). This is based on the function of the press, namely as a watchdog of the government (*the fourth estate*), to carry out control and criticism, and manage public opinion (*public opinion*) and perform functions, *checks, and balances*. A concrete example of this principle is the First Amendment to the Constitution. The United States explicitly prohibits Congress from making laws that restrict freedom of speech or freedom of the press (*abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press*). (Pers, 2013).

Significant weaknesses and criticisms of the libertarian press system, which prioritizes absolute press freedom without censorship or government intervention, are considered to have a number of serious negative impacts, especially when implemented irresponsibly. Among the negative aspects of the libertarian press are:

Ethical and Legal Violations That Trigger *Trial by the Press*

Unlimited freedom often causes the press to violate the principle of presumption of innocence (*presumption of innocence*) and as if it were a "court" that judges someone before there is a final legal decision. An example of a case in Indonesia, namely the case of the death of Wayan Mirna Salihin, is a real example of how the mass media is *distorted by the press*. Massive coverage. Nearly all television stations and other media outlets broadcast the trial in exaggerated and hyperbolic ways. Approximately 56 pieces of information emerged from online media outlets that accused the defendant, Jessica Kumala Wongso, of murder even before the court verdict was issued. These media outlets often jumped to conclusions and spread hoaxes, *headlines*, which ultimately led public opinion to believe Jessica was definitely guilty. This practice constitutes a serious violation of the presumption of innocence. (Adisti, N. A. et al., 2024).

Prioritizing Sensationalism and Commercial Interests

In a highly free system, the press tends to be dictated by market forces, leading to sensational, provocative, and unethical content in the pursuit of profit. There is little or no government oversight. Theoretically, this aims to enable the press to become a "free marketplace of ideas." (*free market of ideas*) and monitor power without intervention. However, in practice, the vacuum of government control is often filled by market forces and commercial interests, which ultimately dictate the direction and content of news reporting. This raises several key issues:

Prioritizing Profit Over Social Responsibility: When the press must compete fiercely in a free market, its primary focus shifts from public service to profit-seeking. Information is no longer seen as a public right, but rather as a commodity to be sold.

The Emergence of Sensationalism and Irresponsible Content Answer: To attract as many audiences as possible, the market-driven press tends to employ sensationalist strategies. A highly free press system can make content sensational, provocative, and unethical. Many media outlets present fake news, violate basic journalistic principles of truth-telling, and even include violent and pornographic content.

Failure to Build Healthy Public Spaces (*Public Sphere*)

Libertarian theory argues that a free press creates a space for public discussion and the exchange of ideas. However, commercialization undermines this goal. When information becomes a commodity, the public's right to know the truth is neglected. The news presented is not necessarily what the public needs, but rather what the media wants to "sell," both commercially and ideologically. This makes the libertarian press system no longer reflective of efforts to build a just society, a *public sphere that truly frees society from the grip of political and economic power*. The media tends to prioritize commercial interests over carrying out its social responsibilities. This failure led to the birth of the Social Responsibility Theory of the Press (*Social Responsibility Theory*) is indeed a direct reaction to the failures and negative aspects of the Libertarian Press Theory, which emphasizes absolute freedom without responsibility. (Hutagalung, 2013).

Responsible Press

The Responsible Press System emerged as a reaction to the previous system, namely the libertarian or liberal press system. It is called the social responsibility theory because its core idea is that anyone who enjoys freedom also has certain responsibilities to society. Social responsibility theory accepts the six functions of the press recommended by libertarian theory, but does not accept the methods used by mass media owners and managers in carrying out these functions. Essentially, this system supports press freedom, but does not ignore the press's primary responsibility to the public (Rahmi, 2019). The social responsibility theory, as discussed previously, arose from a sense of discomfort with the excessive freedom inherent in liberal press theory. This problem began in the 20th century, when liberal theory held sway. However, the power granted in the form of press freedom was abused and became irresponsible (Kaligis, 2018).

Unlike libertarian theory, which leaves control entirely to market mechanisms, Responsibility Theory recognizes the need for various forms of oversight to ensure the press remains accountable. Oversight is conducted through public opinion, consumer action, and media monitoring institutions (*media watch*). In addition, while rejecting censorship and banning, this theory accepts the existence of legal regulations designed to protect the public interest and the interests of journalists themselves, not to silence the press. (Hutagalung, 2013).

Responsible Press has five conditions for a press that is responsible to the community (Rahmi, 2019), namely: The media must present news that is true, comprehensive, intelligent, accurate, and based on facts, The media must act as a forum for the exchange of opinions, comments and criticism, The media must project a truly representative picture of the constituent groups in society, The media must present and explain the goals and values of society, and The media must provide full access to information that is hidden at any time.

There are several characteristics of the social responsibility press theory, which are its main principles (Kaligis, 2018), namely: The media is willing to accept and fulfill its obligations in society, Obligations are met with high standards of professionalism regarding information, truth, accuracy, objectivity, and balance, The media must be independent in terms of regulating itself within the existing legal framework and institutions, The media should avoid anything that could cause crime, damage, or public disorder or insult ethnic or religious minorities, The media should be pluralistic and reflect diversity by providing the opportunity to express various points of view and the right to respond, The public has the right to expect high standards of performance and professionalism that prioritize the common good.

Usually, the theory of social responsibility is applied in countries that adopt a democratic system, one of which is Indonesia (Kaligis, 2018).

The Socially Responsible Press Theory, while widely adopted as a middle ground between absolute freedom and authoritarian control, is not without its critics and continues to evolve. One characteristic often associated with the Socially Responsible Press Theory is that media serving the public interest should be freely available or easily accessible to all. However, this principle has drawn sharp criticism from modern media practitioners, as reflected in the perspective of Kompas.id. Kompas.id rejects the idea that responsible media should be free. The reasoning is that producing high-quality journalistic content, conducting in-depth investigations, and going directly into the field requires significant costs. A paid system allows media to finance these operations independently. Furthermore, free media tends to rely heavily on advertising. This dependence can disrupt the reader experience (for example, through advertising, pop-up) and, more importantly, potentially impact media independence. Conversely, a paid model can reduce reliance on advertising and maintain editorial independence. Kompas.id also argues that no information is truly free. In free media, readers often "pay" with their personal data collected by the platform, which can then be used for commercial gain. (Nugraha, I. R, 2022).

Furthermore, the implementation of the Responsible Press theory in its country of origin, the United States, was deemed a failure because, in practice, it actually created a media monopoly and a monopoly on public opinion. This failure prompted the emergence of a new theory as a correction, namely the Participatory Democratic Media Theory (*Democratic-Participant Media Theory*). The main principle of this theory is to emphasize that media organizations and content should not be subject to centralized control, either politically or economically. (Kurniasih, N, 2012). This is clearly different from the theory of responsibility, which still centers on the media as a large institution; the theory of responsibility places more on active participation from the community. The media should be a forum for the voices of minorities and small groups in society to be heard, not only controlled by political elites or large corporations. (Lestaluhu, S, 2015). Simply put, if the Social Responsibility Press Theory is an attempt to "fix" the mass media from within by instilling ethics and responsibility, then the Participatory Democratic Media Theory is a "rebellion" against the structure of the mass media itself, by proposing an alternative media model that is more horizontal, decentralized, and community-based.

Syncretism of the Libertarian Press and the Responsible Press

The press system in Indonesia has its own uniqueness among all press systems in the world. The uniqueness of the press in Indonesia is because the press system is influenced by the ideology and philosophy that exist in Indonesia. The press system in Indonesia is known as the Pancasila Press. (Syafarina, 2022). The Indonesian Press System, according to Dr. H. Krisna Harahap, is divided into five, namely: the colonial era (until 1945), the liberal democracy era (1945-1959), the guided democracy era (1959-1966), the new order era (1966-1998), and the reform era (1998-present) (Achmad 2021). From the division of the Indonesian Press by Dr. H. Krisna Harahap, it can be seen that the Indonesian Press also used the Liberal Press system, namely in 1945-1959, which was called the Liberal Democracy Era.

In accordance with the title of the article, namely the Indonesian Press: Syncretism Between Freedom and Responsibility, which is intended to mention the Indonesian press system is a combination of the libertarian press system and the responsible press system. Therefore, this article will focus on the Reformation Era, from 1998 to the present. It is called the Reformation Era because during this era, the Reformation movement led to the fall of President Suharto and his New Order regime, and also gave a spirit of revival to the press in Indonesia. As one journalist in Malang put it, reform and press freedom were described as a celebration. The reform era was marked by the opening of the floodgates of freedom of information (Achmad, 2021), proving that the Indonesian press system also uses the libertarian press system.

In September 1999, the BJ Habibie administration passed Law No. 40 of 1999 concerning the Press, replacing Law No. 11 of 1966, Law No. 4 of 1967, and Law No. 21 of 1982, which were recognized as outdated. This recognition of the inconsistencies in the laws of the Republic of Indonesia was a victory for the Indonesian press. Law No. 40 of 1999, among other things, guarantees press freedom and recognizes and guarantees the right to obtain information and the freedom to express thoughts and opinions according to conscience as the most fundamental human rights. Article 2 states that press freedom is a manifestation of popular sovereignty based on the principles of democracy, justice, and the rule of law. Law No. 40 of 1999 also grants journalists the freedom to choose journalist organizations and guarantees the existence of the Press Council. (Achmad, 2021).

Among the forms of application of libertarian theory in Indonesia is in the Reformation era, when everyone was allowed to create media without requiring a Press Publishing Business License (SIUPP), as in the New Order era, simply by establishing a legal entity. This is based on Law No. 40 of 1999 concerning the Press. This law expressly abolished the Press Publishing Business License (SIUPP), which during the New Order era was a tool of government control. Article 4 of the Press Law guarantees that the national press is not subject to censorship, banning, or broadcast bans. This is a fundamental characteristic of libertarian theory that rejects state intervention. In accordance with the principle of libertarian theory that publication and distribution are open to anyone without permission. (Syafriadi, S, 2023). The proof, According to a survey conducted by the Press Council (2024), the number of media in Indonesia continues to grow, and the majority of them have not been officially verified. This shows that the establishment of press media in Indonesia no longer requires special permission from the state, in line with the libertarian principles adopted in Press Law No. 40 of 1999. In fact, of the total cyber media included in the survey, only around 1,800 have been verified, out of a number reaching tens of thousands (Press Council, 2024).

Despite its freedom, press freedom in Indonesia is not absolute and limitless. There are inherent social responsibilities, making the system a free and responsible press. These include limitations by Values and Norms: Press freedom is limited by

social responsibility to respect the personal rights of others, as well as religious norms and a sense of public morality. (Pers, J. D, 2017). In addition, there are Obligations and Professionalism, based on Law No. 40 of 1999, which mandates that the press carry out its role based on professional press freedom. This professionalism is further elaborated in the Journalistic Code of Ethics (KEJ), which journalists must adhere to. (Syafriadi, S, 2023).

The freedom of the Indonesian press system is also based on the following things, namely:

Idiil: Pancasila.

Constitutional: The 1945 Constitution and MPR Decrees.

Strategic: The General Outlines of State Policy.

Legal: Basic Press Law No. 21 of 1982.

Society: Social values that apply in Indonesian society.

Ethics: The norms of a professional code of ethics.

Apart from that, the Indonesian Press also has the following obligations:

Maintain, defend, support, and implement Pancasila and the 1945 Constitution purely and consistently.

Fighting for the implementation of the Mandate of the People's Suffrage based on Pancasila Democracy.

Fighting for truth and justice based on press freedom.

Fostering unity and opposing imperialism, colonialism, neocolonialism, feudalism, liberalism, communism, and fascism/dictatorship.

To be a constructive, progressive, and revolutionary channel for public opinion (Basic Press Law No. 11 of 1982, Article 2). (Syafriana, 2022).

With these foundations and obligations, the Indonesian press can be considered a responsible press. Therefore, freedom of the Indonesian press is a responsible freedom based on the values of Pancasila. Any information conveyed by the mass media must not offend ethnicity, race, religion, or intergroup relations. Furthermore, the media is prohibited from insulting the Head of State or government officials on duty. Violations of these guidelines will result in sanctions (Syafriana, 2022).

Concrete evidence of the implementation of a responsible press in Indonesia can be seen through the established regulatory framework and its implementation at the media level, particularly in cyber media. The Press Council, together with press organizations and civil society, has developed Cyber Media Reporting Guidelines as a derivative of the Press Law and the Journalistic Code of Ethics. These guidelines specifically regulate journalistic practices in the digital realm, covering crucial aspects such as news verification and balance, handling of user-generated content (UGC), and mechanisms for rectification, correction, the right of reply, and retraction of news. These guidelines provide a crucial legal basis for ensuring that cyber media is managed professionally and accountably.

The concrete implementation of this responsibility is evident in the administrative and factual verification process conducted by the Press Council on press companies. This verification serves as a legality or license, indicating that a media outlet, as in the case study of Kabarmakassar.com, has been recognized as a professional media outlet that meets standards. Furthermore, this responsibility is directly practiced in the newsroom. For example, Kabarmakassar.com requires its journalists to conduct factual verification through interviews, even if the initial information comes from a press release, and strives to present balanced news to provide readers with diverse perspectives. This media outlet is also responsible for user-generated content by having the authority to edit or delete inappropriate

material and providing access for the public to submit corrections or the right of reply.

Furthermore, evidence of the implementation of responsible press is also reflected in efforts to improve journalist professionalism. Media outlets internally provide journalists with training and guidance to ensure they understand and comply with press laws. At the industry level, the Journalist Competency Test (UKW) serves as a benchmark for ensuring that the journalistic process is carried out by competent individuals who understand regulations, ultimately strengthening socially responsible press practices in Indonesia. (Fadli, A.M, 2017).

CONCLUSION

Indonesia is one of the countries that concretely implements the syncretistic principle of libertarian press theory and social responsibility. On the one hand, Indonesia guarantees press freedom by abolishing the Press Publishing Business License (SIUPP) as stipulated in Law No. 40 of 1999 concerning the Press, and provides freedom for media outlets to establish and operate without state intervention. This reflects the libertarian spirit, where the press serves as a guardian of freedom of expression and a check on power. However, on the other hand, Indonesia also implements the principle of a responsible press. Through mechanisms such as the right of reply, the right of correction, a journalistic code of ethics, verification by the Press Council, and legal accountability, the press is required not only to convey information freely but also to be accurate, balanced, and not detrimental to the public. The presence of institutions such as the Press Council strengthens the framework of media accountability, even in the digital era. Thus, the Indonesian press is not founded solely on the principle of absolute freedom, but is also framed by ethical, legal, and social responsibility. This pattern is clear evidence that the Indonesian press system is on a path of syncretism, combining the values of freedom in libertarian theory with the moral and social obligations of press responsibility theory. This is what gives the national press a free, yet responsible, image.

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