



## Press Law Education for Journalists in Facing the Risks of Digital Criminalization

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### Abstract

**Introduction:** In the digital era, journalists increasingly face the risk of criminalization due to journalistic work interpreted through multi-interpretative provisions of the Electronic Information and Transactions Law and the Criminal Code. This condition creates tension between press freedom as a constitutional function and law enforcement practices that ignore the Press Law as *lex specialis*.

**Purposes of The Devotion:** The purpose of this article is to provide legal education for journalists to strengthen their understanding of press law and reduce the risk of digital criminalization in journalistic practices.

**Method of The Devotion:** This community service activity employed legal education methods through lectures, discussions, and case studies involving journalists to enhance awareness of press freedom, social responsibility, and press dispute resolution mechanisms.

**Results Main Findings of the Devotion:** The results of the community service activity indicate an increase in journalists' understanding and legal awareness regarding the balance between press freedom and social responsibility in carrying out the journalistic profession. Participants gained a more comprehensive understanding of the risks of digital criminalization, particularly those arising from the application of multi-interpretable provisions in the Electronic Information and Transactions Law (UU ITE). In addition, this activity encouraged journalists to implement preventive measures through the strengthening of journalistic ethics, fact verification, and compliance with the principles of press law.

**Keywords:** Press Law; Legal Education; Journalists; Digital Criminalization.

Submitted: 2025-12-31

Revised: 2026-02-17

Accepted: 2026-03-17

Published: 2026-03-31

How To Cite: Syafriadi, Akmar Efendi, Selvi Harvia Santri, Rahima Azzahra, and Faizi Parsa. "Press Law Education for Journalists in Facing the Risks of Digital Criminalization." *AIWADTHU: Jurnal Pengabdian Hukum* 6 no. 1 (2026): 83-90. <https://doi.org/10.47268/aiwadthu.v6i1.3677>

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## INTRODUCTION

The development of digital technology has brought fundamental changes to journalistic practices in Indonesia. Press media that previously relied on conventional platforms such as print media and broadcasting have now increasingly shifted to the digital space through online websites and social media. This transformation enables the dissemination of information to occur more quickly, broadly, and interactively, while also opening greater space for public participation in the process of mass communication. Media convergence not only changes patterns of information production and distribution, but also reshapes the relationship between the media, society, and power within an increasingly complex digital democratic landscape.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> E F Adanlawo and H Rugbeer, "Media and Democracy: Is Conventional Media Performing the Role of the Fourth Estate of the Realm?," *Journal of African Films and Diaspora Studies* 4, no. 2 (2021): 23–38, <https://doi.org/10.31920/2516-2713/2021/4n2a2>.

In the context of democracy, the press holds a strategic position as the fourth pillar that performs a control function over power. From the perspective of constitutional law, the existence of the press is viewed as equal to other branches of state power (executive, legislative, and judicial) as an essential element in maintaining the balance of power and ensuring transparency of public information. Through its supervisory function, the press plays a role in encouraging the accountability of state administrators, overseeing public policies, and ensuring the fulfillment of the public's right to information.<sup>2</sup> This role positions the press not merely as a conveyor of information, but also as an instrument of social control and a means of public empowerment in democratic life.<sup>3</sup> In the digital era, the constitutional function of the press faces new challenges. On the one hand, digitalization expands the space for expression and strengthens the democratization of information. On the other hand, technological advancement also brings increasing legal risks for journalists. Digital journalistic practices often confront legal provisions that are multi-interpretable, particularly within the Law on Electronic Information and Transactions (UU ITE) and the Criminal Code (KUHP). Several articles, such as Article 27 paragraph (3) and Article 28 paragraph (2) of the UU ITE, are frequently used to ensnare journalistic works that should otherwise be protected under Law Number 40 of 1999 on the Press.

These conditions have resulted in an increase in the criminalization of journalists and media outlets. Data from the Alliance of Independent Journalists (AJI) recorded dozens of cases of attacks against journalists and media throughout 2023, indicating a deterioration of the press freedom climate in Indonesia. These attacks are not limited to physical violence but also include digital intimidation, criminal reporting, and gender-based violence.<sup>4</sup> This situation becomes increasingly alarming when journalists carry out their supervisory role on strategic issues such as corruption, public accountability, environmental matters, and political interests ahead of national democratic agendas. Digital criminalization of journalists has the potential to create a chilling effect that weakens the role of the press as a watchdog over power.<sup>5</sup> In fact, Indonesia's press law system has established a specific mechanism for resolving journalistic disputes through the Press Law. The principle of *lex specialis* should dictate that press-related disputes are resolved through the Press Council, rather than through general criminal law approaches. However, in practice, this principle is often overlooked, resulting in journalists facing criminal proceedings directly, which in turn leads to psychological pressure, restrictions on freedom of expression, and legal uncertainty in the exercise of their profession. Within this context, journalists, as the primary actors in journalistic activities, face a dual challenge. On one hand, they are expected to exercise press freedom professionally and responsibly. On the other hand, limited understanding of press law and digital regulations places journalists in a vulnerable position, subject to potential criminalization. This situation underscores an urgent need to strengthen journalists' legal literacy and awareness, particularly regarding the boundaries of press freedom, social responsibility, and mechanisms for legal protection in the practice of digital journalism.

Based on these issues, community service activities become highly relevant as a practical intervention to address the needs of journalists in the field. Through legal education on

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<sup>2</sup> Adanlawo and Rugbeer.

<sup>3</sup> Syafridi, *Demokrasi Dan Kebebasan Pers*, ed. Syafridi Syafridi, pertama (Jakarta: Bina Karya, 2023).

<sup>4</sup> Aliansi Jurnalistik Indonesia, "89 Kasus Serangan Terhadap Pers Indonesia Pada 2023, Tertinggi Dalam Satu Dekade," Aliansi Jurnalistik Indonesia, 2024.

<sup>5</sup> M E Simandjuntak et al., "A Snapshot of Violence and Criminalization Against Journalists in Indonesia: Enhancing the Safety of Journalists," *Indonesian Journal of Criminal Law Studies* 9, no. 1 (2024): 1-32, <https://doi.org/10.15294/ijcls.v9i1.48789>.

press regulations, journalists are expected to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the constitutional position of the press, the application of the Press Law as *lex specialis*, and preventive strategies in facing the risks of digital criminalization. This community service initiative is not only aimed at enhancing knowledge but also at strengthening journalists' professional capacity, enabling them to perform their social control functions responsibly, ethically, and with legal protection amid the dynamics of digital democracy.

## METHOD OF THE DEVOTION

This community service activity was conducted as a form of legal education for journalists to address the increasing risks of digital criminalization in the era of media convergence. Journalists, as the frontline conveyors of public information, are often in a vulnerable position when their journalistic products are considered to violate general criminal law provisions, particularly under the Electronic Information and Transactions Law (ITE Law), without taking into account the specific mechanisms regulated in Law No. 40 of 1999 on the Press. Therefore, a systematic and practical legal education program is necessary to help journalists understand the boundaries of press freedom as well as their professional responsibilities in a constitutional context. The stages of this community service activity were carried out through several steps. First, an initial coordination was conducted with journalist communities and organizations as program partners to identify the legal needs and problems frequently encountered by journalists in daily journalistic practice, particularly those related to digital media reporting. This coordination also aimed to determine the schedule, location, and number of participants involved in the press law education activities. Second, the devotion team prepared press law education materials that were structured to be practical and contextual. The materials covered the principles of press freedom within Indonesia's constitutional system, the constitutional function of the press as the fourth pillar of democracy, the position of the Press Law as *lex specialis*, and the potential criminalization of journalists through ambiguous provisions in the ITE Law. The materials were presented in the form of presentations and discussion resources, supplemented with case examples of journalist criminalization that have occurred in Indonesia. Third, the community service activities were implemented through lectures, interactive discussions, and case studies. Lectures were used to convey the legal framework of press regulations, while discussions and case studies were employed to explore participants' empirical experiences as journalists in facing legal pressures, including summons, criminal reports, or digital threats. This approach aimed to ensure that participants not only understand legal norms theoretically but also can apply them responsibly in journalistic practice. Fourth, the participants of this community service were journalists from various media, including print, online, and broadcast, who were actively involved in news production and reporting on public issues. During the activities, participants were encouraged to present real challenges they faced so that they could be discussed collectively and appropriate legal solutions could be sought in line with the principles of press freedom and social responsibility. Through these stages, this community service is expected to enhance journalists' legal understanding and awareness in performing their profession, as well as to strengthen the position of the press as a free, critical, and responsible democratic institution amid the challenges of digital criminalization.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### A. Educating Journalists on Social Responsibility within the Constitutional Function of the Press

This community service activity was carried out in collaboration with the All Indonesia Media Network (JMSI) of Pelalawan Regency as a strategic partner, and was held at the Bappeda Building Hall of Pelalawan Regency Government, Pangkalan Kerinci, on July 21, 2025. Participants consisted of journalists from print and online media who are actively covering government, legal, social, and political issues at the regional level. The activity was designed as a press law education initiative to strengthen journalists' understanding of the constitutional position of the press as well as the social responsibility inherent in journalistic practice in the digital era.

The history of press development in Indonesia shows that press freedom did not emerge instantly but through a long journey marked by restrictions and repression, from the colonial period to the New Order era. The Reformasi (Reformation) period became a turning point that opened broader space for press freedom, which was later reinforced through constitutional guarantees under Article 28F of the 1945 Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia.<sup>6</sup> In this context, the press is positioned as the fourth pillar of democracy, serving to provide information, conduct social control, and oversee the functioning of state power.

Through this legal education activity, journalists were provided with an understanding that constitutionally guaranteed press freedom cannot be separated from the principle of social responsibility. The press is not only expected to be free but also responsible in delivering accurate, balanced, and fact-based information. The materials presented emphasized the social responsibility theory of the press, which frames press freedom as a liberty that must be exercised ethically for the public interest and the sustainability of democracy. The discussions revealed that some participants still perceived press freedom merely as the right to report without intervention. Through forums and case studies, participants began to understand that journalists' social responsibility actually serves as the primary foundation that strengthens the legitimacy of the press within the constitutional system. Journalists who adhere to codes of ethics and professional principles are in a stronger position when facing legal or political pressures.

**Figure 1. Press Law Education Activity with JMSI of Pelalawan Regency**  
*(photo of the material presentation activity)*



<sup>6</sup> Syafriadi, *Hukum Pers Dalam Ketatanegaraan Indonesia* (Yogyakarta: Suluh Media, 2018).



**Picture: Syafriadi Gives Counselling to Journalists**

This activity also emphasized that journalists' social responsibility functions as a bridge between the constitutional right to freedom of expression and the objectives of substantive democracy. Without social responsibility, press freedom risks losing direction and may undermine public trust in the media. Conversely, by strengthening ethics and professionalism, the press can effectively and sustainably perform its oversight functions.

#### **B. The Impact of Digital Criminalization and the Urgency of Legal Education for Journalists**

One of the main issues discussed in this community service activity was the phenomenon of digital criminalization against journalists, particularly through the application of ambiguous provisions in the Electronic Information and Transactions Law (ITE Law). In practice, journalists are often subjected to criminal reports for journalistic work that is conducted within a professional framework and protected under Law Number 40 of 1999 on the Press.<sup>7</sup> The application of various laws, such as the Criminal Code (KUHP), the ITE Law, and the Personal Data Protection Law, has been used to criminalize journalistic activities, thereby posing a significant threat to press freedom.<sup>8</sup>

Through case presentations and interactive discussions, it was revealed that the threat of digital criminalization has created fear and excessive caution among regional journalists. Some participants acknowledged a tendency toward self-censorship, particularly when reporting on sensitive issues such as corruption, conflicts of interest, and abuse of power by public officials. This situation has the potential to weaken the press's role as a social watchdog and hinder the public's right to access accurate information.

The legal education provided in this activity emphasized the importance of understanding the *lex specialis* principle, whereby press disputes should be resolved through specific mechanisms under the Press Law rather than through general criminal law approaches. Journalists were also equipped with knowledge about legal boundaries, risk mitigation strategies, and the importance of documenting journalistic work as a form of professional protection.

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<sup>7</sup> 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>.

<sup>8</sup> Simandjuntak et al., "A Snapshot of Violence and Criminalization Against Journalists in Indonesia: Enhancing the Safety of Journalists."

Figure 2. Journalist Discussion and Q&A on the Risks of Digital Criminalization



The Indonesian Cyber Media Network (JMSI) of Pelalawan Regency attended counseling



Photo with resource person Syafriadi and Chairman of JMSI Riau Province Dheni Kurnia with counseling participants.

The results of the activity indicate that legal education can enhance journalists' awareness of their legal position and encourage more cautious yet still critical journalistic practices. On the other hand, the activity also revealed an urgent need for regulatory harmonization between the Press Law and the ITE Law to prevent excessive structural fear among media practitioners. Overall, this community service underscores that digital criminalization affects not only individual journalists but also the quality of democracy and the media ecosystem at large. Therefore, strengthening journalists' capacity through press law

education is a strategic measure to maintain a balance between press freedom and social responsibility, while also safeguarding the public sphere from silencing practices that contradict constitutional principles.

## CONCLUSION

The social responsibility of the press constitutes a fundamental pillar of the constitutional function of the press, as guaranteed under Article 28F of the 1945 Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia, which affirms every citizen's right to access information and freedom of expression. Law Nomor 40 of 1999 on the Press further reinforces the obligation of the press to provide accurate, balanced, and responsible information for the public interest. However, in the context of digital technology development, the criminalization of journalists through the application of ambiguous provisions in the Electronic Information and Transactions Law (ITE Law) has become a real threat to press freedom. The lack of harmonization between the Press Law and the ITE Law generates legal uncertainty that can produce a chilling effect, thereby hindering journalists from performing their social control functions. Therefore, harmonization between the Press Law and the ITE Law is an urgent necessity to ensure the protection of press freedom while guaranteeing that journalists can carry out their social and oversight roles without fear of unjustified criminalization. This effort is essential for maintaining the quality of a healthy democracy and ensuring the public's right to accurate, clear, and accountable information.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author expresses gratitude to the Rector of Universitas Islam Riau, Assoc. Prof. Dr. Admiral S.H., M.H., and to the Director of the Directorate of Research and Community Service (DPPM) at Universitas Islam Riau, Prof. Dr. Arbi Haza Nasution, B.IT., M.IT., for their support in the implementation of this community service activity. Sincere thanks are also extended to the All Indonesia Media Network (JMSI) of Pelalawan Regency for their partnership in carrying out this community service program. Appreciation is further conveyed to the Government of Pelalawan Regency, particularly Bappeda Pelalawan Regency, for providing facilities and support throughout the activity held in Pangkalan Kerinci. The author also acknowledges the journalists from print and online media who actively participated in discussions and shared their professional experiences, enriching both the substance and outcomes of the program. Gratitude is extended to all parties who contributed to the preparation and execution of this activity, ensuring its successful implementation.

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