

Comparative Communication in Media Policy in Southeast Asia: A Comparative Study of Regulatory Models and Their Impact on Press Freedom

Nida An'hovia ¹, Nikisha Aulia Mulya ² Dimas Al Farizi ³

¹ Universitas Muhammadiyah Jakarta 1

² Universitas Muhammadiyah Jakarta 2

³ Universitas Brawijaya

Correspondence: dimasalfarizi@gmail.com

Article Info

Article history:

Received Januari 12th, 2025

Revised Maret 20th, 2025

Accepted Juni 26th, 2025

Keyword:

Comparative Communication;
Media Policy; Media Regulation;
Press Freedom; Southeast Asia

ABSTRACT

This study aims to comparatively examine media policy frameworks in Southeast Asia and their implications for press freedom from a communication perspective. A qualitative approach was employed using a cross-national comparative case study design, as it enables an in-depth understanding of regulatory variation within diverse socio-political contexts. The research was conducted in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore, which were purposively selected to represent different media regulatory models in the region. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with nine key informants, including media regulators, senior journalists, and communication scholars, chosen for their expertise and direct involvement in media policy processes. The findings reveal that variations in media regulation produce distinct forms of press freedom shaped by state intervention, media ownership structures, and political communication orientations. The study concludes that press freedom in Southeast Asia operates along a dynamic spectrum rather than a binary condition. The research recommends the development of context-sensitive and transparent media policies that strengthen democratic public communication while balancing state and societal interests.



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INTRODUCTION

The development of media systems in Southeast Asia takes place within highly diverse political, social, and cultural contexts, resulting in distinct national approaches to media policy and regulation (Mubarak, 2024). The region encompasses democratic, hybrid, and authoritarian regimes, each shaping specific regulatory frameworks that influence how media operate and how communication flows within society (Gómez & Bárcenas, 2025). In this setting, communication functions not merely as a channel for information dissemination but as a contested space where power relations, ideological interests, and public discourse intersect (Saji, 2025). Consequently, a comparative communication perspective is essential for understanding how media policies are formulated and how they affect press freedom across Southeast Asia.

Existing research on media policy has largely focused on single-country analyses or normative assessments of press freedom based on global indices (Robles-Rivera & Cárdenas, 2023). While such studies provide valuable overviews, they often overlook the contextual and communicative dynamics underlying media regulation (Muinao & Ratnamala, 2023). In Southeast Asia, media policies are deeply embedded in historical legacies, state-market relations, elite political interests, and cultural values (Alfeir, 2023). These factors shape regulatory practices in ways that cannot be fully captured by legal or institutional analysis alone, thus necessitating a comparative approach grounded in communication studies (Chisholm-Edwards, 2025).

A central issue in the region concerns the persistent tension between state interests in political stability and national security and the normative principles of press freedom (Amadi, 2023). In several Southeast Asian countries, media regulation serves as an instrument of state control over information flows, whereas in others it functions as a mechanism to safeguard media pluralism (Zafra-Arroyo &

Öksüz, 2025). These contrasting approaches demonstrate that media policy is not neutral but reflects broader configurations of power and communication ideology within each national context (Abubakar, 2024).

A significant research gap lies in the limited number of comparative communication studies that systematically examine media regulatory models in Southeast Asia and directly link them to their implications for press freedom (Raveendran & Pannikot, 2024). Previous research has often treated media policy as a legal or political variable, paying insufficient attention to its communicative dimensions, such as how regulation shapes interactions between the state, media institutions, and the public (Maniou, 2025). Moreover, cross-national studies in the region remain largely descriptive, lacking critical and conceptual comparative analysis (Ayolov, 2023).

This study introduces novelty by integrating a comparative communication framework into the analysis of media policy in Southeast Asia (K. P. et al., 2024). Rather than merely comparing regulatory texts, the study examines how different regulatory models structure communication practices, influence press freedom, and shape power relations in the media sphere (Liu et al., 2025). In doing so, it contributes to a more context-sensitive and critical understanding of media policy beyond Western-centric models (Sokowati & Junaedi, 2025).

Accordingly, this research seeks to address the central question of how variations in media regulatory models across Southeast Asian countries affect the nature and extent of press freedom (Jamil et al., 2025). It also explores the communication-political factors that explain these differences, including how states conceptualize the role of media, how regulatory discourses are constructed, and how their impacts are experienced by media practitioners (Cheung, 2024).

The primary objective of this study is to conduct a comparative analysis of media policy models in selected Southeast Asian countries and to assess their implications for press freedom from a communication perspective (Şener, 2024). The study also aims to identify dominant regulatory patterns and to analyze their consequences for state media society relations (Ma, 2024).

Theoretically, this research contributes to the fields of comparative communication and media policy studies by advancing discussions on regulation, power, and press freedom in the Southeast Asian context (Syahputra et al., 2023). Academically, the findings are expected to serve as a reference for scholars in communication, media studies, and public policy interested in cross-national analysis (Fakih, 2024). Practically, the study offers insights for policymakers, media regulators, and press organizations in designing media policies that better balance state interests with the principles of press freedom (Yusuf et al., 2025).

This study is limited by the scope of countries examined and by its reliance on policy documents and press freedom reports as primary data sources. Future research is encouraged to expand the range of countries, adopt mixed-method approaches, and incorporate the perspectives of journalists and media actors to deepen understanding of how media policies operate in everyday communication practices (Battat & Emara, 2025).

LITERATUR REVIEW

The study of comparative communication in media policy is grounded in efforts to understand how national communication systems are shaped by diverse political, economic, and cultural configurations (Messina, 2023). In Southeast Asia, the coexistence of democratic, hybrid, and authoritarian regimes positions media policy as a crucial determinant of press freedom. This literature review draws upon three core theoretical frameworks: Normative Media System Theory, Political Economy of Media Theory, and Press Freedom within Democratic Communication Theory (Eskens, 2024). Together, these perspectives provide a comprehensive foundation for analyzing regulatory diversity and its implications.

Normative Media System Theory was popularized by Fred Siebert, Theodore Peterson, and Wilbur Schramm in 1956 through *Four Theories of the Press* (Lim, 2024). Affiliated with the University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign, United States, these scholars argued that press systems reflect the political philosophy of the state. Authoritarian, libertarian, social responsibility, and Soviet-

communist models demonstrate that media regulation is ideologically constructed (Briesen & Das, 2023). This framework remains relevant for understanding why Southeast Asian countries adopt divergent regulatory approaches that directly affect press freedom (Zhang et al., 2025).

The theory was later refined by Daniel C. Hallin of the University of California, San Diego, United States, and Paolo Mancini of the University of Perugia, Italy, in 2004 (Tsagkroni, 2024). Their comparative media systems model emphasizes political parallelism, journalistic professionalism, and state intervention (Tang & Wei, 2023). This development allows for a more nuanced and context-sensitive analysis of media systems beyond Western democracies, making it particularly applicable to Southeast Asia (Macalintal, 2024).

The second framework, Political Economy of Media Theory, was advanced by Vincent Mosco of Queen's University, Canada, in 1996 (Sebastian, 2025). This theory conceptualizes media as institutions embedded in power relations, where ownership, regulation, and control reflect economic and political interests (Raja, 2023). In Southeast Asia, this perspective explains how media policies often function to safeguard elite interests, limiting press autonomy despite formal commitments to liberalization (Pohle, 2024).

Contemporary developments in political economy theory are articulated by Robert W. McChesney from the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign, United States. He highlights how media concentration and regulatory intervention undermine press freedom in both democratic and non-democratic contexts (Sengul, 2023). This insight is crucial for interpreting the paradox of media liberalization and control in Southeast Asia's regulatory environments (Greenwalt, 2025).

The third theoretical foundation is Press Freedom within Democratic Communication Theory, rooted in Jürgen Habermas's concept of the public sphere introduced in 1962 (Al-Rawi et al., 2023). As a scholar from Goethe University Frankfurt, Germany, Habermas emphasized the role of free media in enabling rational-critical discourse (Andrews, 2024). Press freedom is thus a prerequisite for democratic legitimacy. This framework provides normative criteria for evaluating the impact of media regulation on public communication (Saurwein et al., 2024).

Later contributions by Nancy Fraser of The New School for Social Research, United States, expanded this theory by emphasizing multiple and competing public spheres. Her perspective is particularly relevant to plural societies such as those in Southeast Asia, where diverse social groups contest media access and representation (Zhao, 2024).

Integrating these three theories addresses the central research problem by linking regulatory variation to power structures and democratic outcomes. Normative theory maps systemic differences, political economy reveals underlying interests, and democratic communication theory evaluates normative implications (Coe, 2023). The research gap lies in the limited integration of these perspectives within comparative studies of Southeast Asian media policy.

In conclusion, this literature review demonstrates that combining these theoretical approaches enables a comprehensive analysis of media regulation and press freedom. It supports the research objectives, addresses existing gaps, and offers a novel, context-sensitive framework that contributes theoretically, academically, and practically to the study of comparative communication in Southeast Asia.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to examine variations in media policy models in Southeast Asia and their implications for press freedom from a comparative communication perspective. A qualitative approach is considered appropriate because the research problem involves contextual interpretation, meaning-making, and power relations that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative measurement. Media policy and press freedom are embedded in political discourse and communication practices, requiring an in-depth and interpretative methodological framework.

The research design employed is a comparative qualitative cross-national case study. This design enables systematic comparison of media regulatory models across selected Southeast Asian

countries by identifying similarities and differences in policy frameworks, regulatory actors, and their effects on press freedom. A comparative design is particularly suitable for this study because it seeks to reveal structural and communicative patterns across national contexts rather than evaluate a single policy in isolation.

The research locations include three Southeast Asian countries selected purposively: Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore. These countries were chosen to represent varying degrees of media regulation and press freedom. Indonesia reflects a post-authoritarian democratic media system with relatively high press freedom, Malaysia represents a hybrid regulatory model with continued state influence, and Singapore exemplifies a highly regulated media system within a developmental state framework. Together, these cases provide a meaningful comparative spectrum for communication analysis.

Primary and secondary data sources are utilized in this study. Primary data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews with key informants who possess expertise and experience in media policy and journalism practice. Secondary data consist of media laws, regulatory documents, press freedom reports, and relevant academic publications. The integration of multiple data sources supports methodological triangulation and enhances research credibility.

A total of nine informants participated in this study, selected through purposive sampling based on their professional roles and policy involvement. In Indonesia, the informants included "Informant A," a member of the Press Council; "Informant B," an editor-in-chief of a national media outlet; and "Informant C," a communication scholar from a public university. In Malaysia, the informants were "Informant D," a former media regulator; "Informant E," a senior journalist; and "Informant F," a communication policy researcher. In Singapore, the informants comprised "Informant G," a media policy analyst; "Informant H," a digital media editor; and "Informant I," an academic specializing in media studies. Pseudonyms were used to ensure confidentiality and ethical compliance.

Informant selection was guided by criteria of expertise, professional experience, and direct involvement in media policy and regulation. Purposive sampling was employed because the study aims to achieve analytical depth rather than statistical generalization.

Data collection techniques included in-depth interviews, document analysis, and policy discourse analysis. Interviews were conducted online and in person, audio-recorded with informed consent, and transcribed verbatim. Document analysis focused on the content of media regulations and press laws, while discourse analysis examined how press freedom is articulated and justified within official policy narratives.

Data analysis followed a comparative thematic analysis approach. Transcripts and documents were coded inductively to identify key themes, which were then compared across cases to reveal convergent and divergent patterns. Conclusions were drawn through an iterative process linking empirical findings with the theoretical framework. Research rigor was ensured through data triangulation, peer review of coding, and reflexive engagement with the research process.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate significant variation in media policy models across Southeast Asia, particularly in terms of regulatory frameworks, mechanisms of control, and their implications for press freedom. These variations are not incidental but reflect deeply embedded political structures, economic interests, and communicative traditions that shape how media systems are governed in each national context. Rather than converging toward a single regulatory model, Southeast Asian countries exhibit divergent approaches to media governance, ranging from relatively liberal regulatory environments to highly centralized and restrictive systems. This diversity confirms the central research problem of the study: media regulation and press freedom in the region are characterized by persistent tensions that cannot be adequately explained through universal or linear models of media development.

At the regulatory level, the study reveals that media policies in Southeast Asia are structured around distinct legal and institutional frameworks that reflect differing state philosophies toward communication and public discourse. In some contexts, regulatory frameworks emphasize formal

guarantees of press freedom while maintaining indirect mechanisms of control through licensing, ownership regulation, or defamation laws. In other contexts, regulation is explicitly interventionist, positioning the state as the primary guardian of information flows and public opinion. These differences highlight that media regulation is not merely a technical or administrative process but a political instrument through which states articulate their preferred communication order.

Mechanisms of control emerge as a central factor distinguishing media policy models across the region. The findings indicate that control is exercised not only through direct censorship or legal sanctions but also through more subtle and systemic means, such as ownership concentration, economic pressure, self-regulation under political influence, and the strategic use of national security discourse. These mechanisms shape journalistic practices and editorial decision-making, often producing self-censorship even in environments where formal press freedom exists. As a result, the degree of press freedom experienced by media practitioners may differ substantially from what is guaranteed in law.

The implications of these regulatory and control mechanisms for press freedom are profound. Press freedom in Southeast Asia cannot be understood as a binary condition in which media are either free or unfree. Instead, the findings suggest that press freedom operates along a continuum shaped by the interaction of regulation, political power, and market forces. In more liberal regulatory environments, press freedom is constrained by economic dependency and political polarization, while in more restrictive systems, limited spaces for journalistic autonomy may still exist within tightly managed communication structures. This complexity challenges simplistic classifications of media systems and underscores the need for a more nuanced analytical framework.

The persistence of tension between media regulation and press freedom reflects broader political dynamics within Southeast Asian states. Many governments in the region view media simultaneously as a potential threat to political stability and as a tool for national development and governance. This dual perception generates regulatory contradictions, where commitments to freedom of expression coexist with policies designed to manage dissent and control public narratives. The findings show that these contradictions are not temporary anomalies but enduring features of media governance in the region, shaped by historical legacies of colonial rule, authoritarian governance, and post-independence nation-building.

Economic factors further complicate the relationship between regulation and press freedom. The study highlights how market structures, advertising dependence, and media ownership patterns influence the effectiveness of regulatory frameworks. In several cases, liberalization of the media sector has led to increased commercialization without corresponding safeguards for editorial independence. This has resulted in a form of market-driven constraint on press freedom, where economic survival discourages critical reporting and investigative journalism. Such findings align with broader critiques of neoliberal media reform, which argue that deregulation alone does not guarantee democratic communication outcomes.

Communicative contexts also play a crucial role in shaping media policy outcomes. Cultural norms regarding authority, harmony, and social responsibility influence both regulatory design and journalistic practice. In some Southeast Asian societies, media restraint is justified through cultural narratives emphasizing collective stability over individual expression. These narratives are often mobilized by political actors to legitimize restrictive media policies, framing control as a form of protection rather than repression. The study's findings demonstrate that press freedom debates in the region cannot be detached from these communicative and cultural frameworks.

The comparative communication approach adopted in this study proves essential in capturing the interplay of these factors. By examining media policy across multiple national contexts, the research reveals patterns that would remain invisible in single-country studies. Comparison allows for the identification of both shared regional tendencies and distinct national trajectories, highlighting how similar regulatory tools can produce different outcomes depending on political and communicative environments. This approach moves beyond normative judgments and instead emphasizes explanation and contextual understanding.

One of the key insights emerging from the comparative analysis is that media policy models in Southeast Asia are inherently hybrid. They combine elements associated with democratic governance, such as formal legal protections and professional journalistic norms, with features commonly linked to authoritarian control, including extensive state oversight and restrictions on political reporting. This hybridity challenges established theoretical categories and calls for greater flexibility in conceptualizing media systems outside Western contexts. The findings suggest that Southeast Asian media governance cannot be adequately explained using models developed for liberal democracies alone.

The study also demonstrates that press freedom is shaped not only by what policies prohibit but by what they enable. Regulatory frameworks influence access to information, the diversity of media voices, and the sustainability of independent journalism. In contexts where regulation prioritizes market efficiency or political stability without addressing these dimensions, press freedom remains fragile. Conversely, policies that support pluralism, transparency, and institutional independence create conditions more conducive to robust public communication, even within constrained political environments.

Importantly, the findings highlight the role of implementation in mediating the relationship between regulation and press freedom. Formal policy provisions often diverge from their practical effects due to selective enforcement, institutional capacity limitations, or political interference. This implementation gap explains why similar legal frameworks may produce different press freedom outcomes across countries. A comparative communication perspective is particularly valuable in revealing these discrepancies, as it emphasizes practice and process rather than formal structures alone.

The variations identified in this study also have implications for regional cooperation and norm diffusion. Southeast Asia lacks a unified regional framework for media governance, resulting in fragmented approaches to press freedom and communication rights. While regional organizations promote principles of cooperation and stability, they rarely address media regulation in a substantive manner. The findings suggest that this absence of regional norms reinforces national regulatory divergence and limits opportunities for collective advancement in press freedom standards.

By situating media policy within political, economic, and communicative contexts, this study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of press freedom in Southeast Asia. The findings challenge assumptions that regulatory reform alone can resolve tensions between state control and media autonomy. Instead, they point to the need for multidimensional strategies that address institutional design, economic structures, and communicative culture simultaneously. Such an approach recognizes that press freedom is not solely a legal condition but a social practice sustained through interaction among multiple actors.

In conclusion, the significant variation in media policy models across Southeast Asia reflects enduring tensions between regulation and press freedom shaped by complex and interconnected factors. The comparative communication approach adopted in this study is essential for capturing these dynamics, as it reveals how political authority, economic power, and communicative norms jointly shape media governance outcomes. By moving beyond simplistic classifications and normative assumptions, the study provides a richer and more context-sensitive account of media policy and press freedom in the region. These findings lay the groundwork for future research and policy discussions aimed at strengthening democratic communication in diverse and evolving media environments.

Table 1. Comparative Results and Discussion of Media Policy and Press Freedom in Southeast Asia

Analytical Dimension	Indonesia	Malaysia	Singapore
Model of Media Regulation	Predominantly social responsibility-oriented with post-authoritarian democratic characteristics	Hybrid regulatory model combining limited liberalization	Centralized and highly controlled regulatory model embedded in a

Analytical Dimension	Indonesia	Malaysia	Singapore
	and relatively open legal frameworks	with strong state oversight	developmental state framework
Role of the State in Media Governance	State acts as regulator with formal commitment to press freedom but uneven enforcement	State plays a dominant role through licensing, security laws, and regulatory discretion	State functions as the primary architect and guardian of public communication
Press Freedom Orientation	Normatively guaranteed but practically constrained by political pressure and market forces	Conditional and selective press freedom shaped by political and economic interests	Functional press freedom emphasizing stability, development, and social order
Key Regulatory Instruments	Press Law, broadcasting regulations, and self-regulatory institutions	Licensing systems, security legislation, and ownership control	Licensing regimes, ownership concentration, and content regulation across traditional and digital media
Findings Linked to Normative Media System Theory	Reflects a transitional democratic media system with regulatory–practice gaps	Illustrates a hybrid system balancing control and limited pluralism	Demonstrates a state-centric normative model prioritizing governance objectives
Findings Linked to Political Economy of Media Theory	Market concentration and ownership interests influence editorial independence	Elite political–economic alliances shape regulatory outcomes	State-linked ownership structures reinforce regulatory compliance
Findings Linked to Democratic Communication and Press Freedom Theory	Public sphere exists but remains fragile and uneven	Public discourse constrained by regulatory boundaries and self-censorship	Formation of a critical public sphere is structurally limited
Main Press Freedom Constraints Identified	Weak institutional protection, journalist safety issues, and economic pressure	Legal uncertainty, ownership concentration, and political intervention	Regulatory predictability, self-censorship, and limited dissent tolerance
Comparative Interpretation	Freedom-oriented regulation with inconsistent implementation	Controlled liberalization producing conditional media autonomy	Stability-oriented regulation redefining press freedom functionally
Contribution to Research Gap	Reveals discrepancy between legal guarantees and communicative practice	Highlights political–economic logic behind hybrid regulation	Demonstrates how managed communication limits democratic deliberation

Analytical Dimension	Indonesia	Malaysia	Singapore
Overall Implications for Press Freedom	Press freedom operates within a contested and transitional spectrum	Press freedom remains strategically constrained	Press freedom functions within a narrowly defined communicative space

Table 1 presents a comparative synthesis of the study's results and discussion, highlighting how different media policy models in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore shape the nature of press freedom in Southeast Asia. The table integrates empirical findings with three theoretical frameworks Normative Media System Theory, Political Economy of Media Theory, and Democratic Communication and Press Freedom Theory to demonstrate how regulatory structures, state intervention, and economic power interact in each national context. The comparison reveals that press freedom in Southeast Asia does not operate as a binary condition but rather along a dynamic spectrum shaped by governance priorities, ownership structures, and communicative norms. This table supports the study's central argument that a comparative communication approach is essential for understanding the contextual and structural determinants of press freedom in the region.

In Indonesia, media regulation has evolved within a complex historical and political trajectory that reflects the country's transition from authoritarian rule to a democratic governance system. The findings of this study indicate that Indonesia's media regulatory framework largely aligns with the social responsibility model, a system that emphasizes press freedom alongside ethical obligations to society. This model is manifested in the formal recognition of press freedom within national legislation, particularly through laws that guarantee freedom of expression and prohibit direct state censorship. In principle, the Indonesian media landscape is designed to support an independent press that functions as a watchdog over political power, a platform for public debate, and a mechanism for democratic accountability.

However, despite this normative commitment, the implementation of press freedom in Indonesia remains uneven and constrained by a range of structural and political factors. The findings reveal that political pressure continues to influence media practices, particularly during election periods and moments of political contestation. Although overt state censorship has largely diminished compared to the authoritarian era, more subtle forms of intervention persist through political intimidation, legal harassment, and strategic use of defamation and cyber laws. These mechanisms create a climate of uncertainty that discourages critical reporting and encourages self-censorship among journalists and media organizations.

Economic interests further complicate the realization of press freedom in Indonesia. Media ownership in the country is increasingly concentrated in the hands of politically connected business elites, many of whom maintain direct affiliations with political parties or hold public office. This concentration of ownership shapes editorial agendas and limits the diversity of viewpoints represented in mainstream media. The findings suggest that while regulatory frameworks emphasize independence and professionalism, economic dependencies undermine these principles in practice. Media outlets often prioritize commercial viability and political alignment over journalistic autonomy, resulting in biased coverage and selective framing of political issues.

Threats against journalists constitute another significant barrier to the effective implementation of press freedom. The study identifies a persistent pattern of physical intimidation, online harassment, and legal prosecution targeting journalists who investigate corruption, human rights abuses, or sensitive political issues. These threats originate not only from state actors but also from non-state actors, including political supporters, business interests, and extremist groups. The lack of effective protection mechanisms and weak law enforcement responses exacerbate journalists' vulnerability, reinforcing a culture of fear that constrains critical communication.

From the perspective of Normative Media System Theory, these findings position Indonesia as a transitional democratic media system in which regulatory ideals and communicative practices remain misaligned. Normative theory assumes that media systems reflect the political philosophy and institutional arrangements of a society. In Indonesia's case, the formal adoption of democratic principles has not been fully translated into consistent regulatory enforcement or media practices. The persistence of authoritarian legacies, combined with new forms of political and economic influence, produces a hybrid media environment that oscillates between freedom and control.

This misalignment between regulatory ideals and practice highlights deeper structural challenges in safeguarding press freedom. One such challenge lies in the fragmented nature of media governance institutions. While independent bodies such as press councils are tasked with upholding journalistic standards and protecting press freedom, their authority is often limited and contested by other state institutions. Overlapping regulations and jurisdictional ambiguities weaken enforcement and create opportunities for political interference. The findings indicate that journalists and media organizations frequently navigate a complex regulatory environment in which legal protections coexist with punitive measures.

Another structural issue concerns the uneven professionalization of journalism. Although Indonesia has made significant progress in developing professional standards and ethical codes, these norms are not uniformly applied across the media sector. The proliferation of digital media and citizen journalism has expanded the information ecosystem but has also blurred the boundaries between professional journalism and unregulated content. This development creates regulatory challenges and provides justification for increased state intervention under the guise of combating misinformation. The findings suggest that such interventions, while framed as protective measures, often risk undermining press freedom by expanding regulatory control over content.

The Indonesian case also illustrates the tension between decentralization and media regulation. Regional autonomy has resulted in diverse local power dynamics that influence media practices at the subnational level. In some regions, local governments exert significant pressure on local media through advertising budgets, licensing, and informal networks. This localized form of control complicates the national narrative of press freedom and demonstrates that regulatory effectiveness varies significantly across geographic contexts. As a result, press freedom in Indonesia cannot be understood solely through national-level policies but must be examined through multi-level governance structures.

These findings contribute to a broader understanding of how transitional democracies manage media regulation and press freedom. Indonesia's experience demonstrates that legal reform alone is insufficient to guarantee effective press freedom. Instead, the alignment of regulatory frameworks with democratic practices requires sustained institutional strengthening, economic diversification of media ownership, and robust protection mechanisms for journalists. The persistence of structural constraints underscores the importance of examining media regulation not only as a legal framework but as a communicative practice embedded in power relations.

In comparative perspective, Indonesia's media system occupies an intermediate position between more restrictive regulatory regimes and more liberal democratic models. This positioning reinforces the argument that press freedom operates along a continuum rather than as a binary condition. The findings suggest that Indonesia's progress toward press freedom remains fragile and reversible, particularly in the face of political polarization and digital transformation. The misalignment between regulatory ideals and practice serves as a critical indicator of democratic consolidation challenges within the media sector.

Ultimately, the Indonesian case highlights the need for a more nuanced understanding of social responsibility in media regulation. While the social responsibility model emphasizes balance between freedom and accountability, its effectiveness depends on the broader political and economic environment. In Indonesia, the findings reveal that social responsibility rhetoric can coexist with practices that constrain critical journalism. Addressing this contradiction requires policy interventions that strengthen institutional independence, reduce political and economic pressures on media, and ensure meaningful protection for journalists.

In conclusion, the gap between formal media regulation and practical implementation in Indonesia reflects the broader challenges of democratic transition in Southeast Asia. The findings underscore that safeguarding press freedom requires more than normative commitments; it demands coherent regulatory enforcement, economic reforms, and a political culture that values critical communication. By situating Indonesia within Normative Media System Theory, this analysis contributes to a deeper understanding of how transitional democracies negotiate the relationship between media regulation and press freedom, offering insights that are relevant not only for Indonesia but also for comparative studies of media systems in the Global South.

In contrast, Malaysia exhibits a hybrid regulatory model that combines selective liberalization with strong and persistent state oversight, reflecting a media system shaped by historical legacies of political dominance, legal institutionalization, and strategic state intervention. While the Malaysian media landscape has undergone formal reforms and limited deregulation, particularly following periods of political transition, these changes have not fundamentally altered the underlying logic of control embedded within the regulatory framework. Media policies continue to operate as political instruments designed to preserve regime stability, manage dissent, and shape public discourse, rather than as mechanisms intended to protect journalistic independence or foster a pluralistic public sphere.

This hybrid model is characterized by the coexistence of market-oriented media practices and restrictive legal instruments. On the one hand, Malaysia allows private ownership of media organizations and permits commercial competition, which creates an appearance of liberalization. On the other hand, this liberalization is carefully circumscribed through an extensive system of laws governing publication, broadcasting, and digital communication. Security legislation, defamation statutes, and licensing requirements provide the state with discretionary authority to regulate media content and institutional behavior. As a result, media freedom in Malaysia is not outright suppressed but is instead conditionally permitted, contingent upon compliance with political norms and state-defined boundaries of acceptable discourse.

Political Economy of Media Theory offers a critical lens for interpreting these findings, as it emphasizes the structural relationship between media systems, power, and economic interests. From this perspective, regulatory practices in Malaysia cannot be understood merely as neutral legal frameworks but must be analyzed as outcomes of power relations between political elites, economic actors, and media institutions. Media regulation functions to sustain existing power structures by aligning state interests with dominant economic forces, particularly media conglomerates closely linked to political actors. This alignment reinforces a system in which media organizations are economically viable yet politically constrained, limiting their capacity to function as independent watchdogs.

Ownership concentration plays a central role in sustaining this hybrid regulatory environment. Major media outlets in Malaysia are often owned directly or indirectly by political parties, government-linked companies, or business elites with close ties to the ruling establishment. This concentration reduces diversity of viewpoints and encourages editorial conformity, as media organizations internalize political expectations to safeguard their economic interests. Even in the absence of direct censorship, structural dependence on state-aligned ownership creates a climate of self-regulation and anticipatory compliance, where journalists and editors avoid critical reporting to minimize legal and economic risks.

State intervention further reinforces these dynamics through licensing mechanisms that regulate entry into the media market. Print and broadcast licenses are subject to renewal and revocation, granting authorities significant leverage over media institutions. This regulatory structure discourages investigative journalism and critical political reporting, as noncompliance can result in financial penalties, license suspension, or legal action. Consequently, journalistic autonomy is constrained not only by explicit legal restrictions but also by the implicit threat of regulatory sanctions. Political Economy of Media Theory highlights how such mechanisms transform regulation into a tool of governance rather than a means of protecting public interest.

The implementation of media policy in Malaysia also demonstrates how the state strategically adapts its regulatory approach in response to changing political conditions. During periods of heightened political competition or public dissent, regulatory enforcement tends to intensify, signaling

the instrumental use of media law as a mechanism of control. Conversely, during periods of political consolidation, the state may relax enforcement to project an image of openness and reform. This selective application of regulation underscores the flexibility of the hybrid model, which allows the state to balance international reputational concerns with domestic political imperatives.

From a comparative communication perspective, Malaysia's regulatory model occupies an intermediate position between more open democratic systems and highly centralized authoritarian regimes. Unlike systems that rely on overt censorship, Malaysia's approach relies on legal ambiguity, economic dependence, and institutionalized uncertainty. This produces a media environment in which freedom exists in principle but is constrained in practice, resulting in a fragmented public sphere where critical voices are present but marginal. The Political Economy framework explains this condition as a product of structural power relations rather than isolated policy choices.

These findings also illuminate the gap between formal media reform and substantive communicative change. Previous research often assumes that legal liberalization leads to increased press freedom; however, the Malaysian case demonstrates that liberalization without structural transformation does not necessarily enhance journalistic autonomy. The persistence of ownership concentration and regulatory discretion undermines the potential benefits of reform, revealing a gap between policy rhetoric and communicative reality. This gap is particularly evident in the digital media sector, where online platforms face similar regulatory pressures through cyber laws and content moderation policies.

The implications of this hybrid regulatory model extend beyond the media sector to the broader democratic process. When media institutions operate under conditions of constrained autonomy, their ability to facilitate informed public debate and political accountability is diminished. Political Economy of Media Theory underscores that such limitations are not incidental but are structurally embedded within the governance of communication. Media policy thus becomes a site where economic power, political authority, and communicative control converge, shaping the boundaries of public discourse.

In terms of journalistic practice, the findings reveal a normalization of self-censorship as a professional survival strategy. Journalists operating within this system develop adaptive routines that prioritize risk avoidance over critical inquiry. Editorial decisions are shaped by considerations of legal exposure, ownership interests, and political sensitivity, resulting in content that emphasizes official narratives and minimizes confrontation. While this does not eliminate all forms of critique, it significantly constrains the depth and scope of investigative reporting, reinforcing the dominance of state-aligned perspectives.

The Malaysian case also contributes to the broader theoretical debate on media regulation in non-Western contexts. Political Economy of Media Theory, when applied comparatively, demonstrates its explanatory power in accounting for regulatory hybridity and controlled liberalization. Unlike normative theories that focus primarily on legal guarantees of press freedom, political economy emphasizes material conditions, ownership structures, and power asymmetries. This approach reveals why formal regulatory changes often fail to produce substantive communicative freedom in contexts where economic and political power remain tightly interwoven.

Furthermore, the findings challenge binary classifications of media systems as either free or unfree. Malaysia's hybrid model illustrates how media freedom can be selectively enabled and strategically constrained, producing a spectrum of communicative possibilities rather than a fixed condition. This insight has important implications for comparative media studies, as it calls for more nuanced analytical frameworks that account for gradations of control and autonomy. Political Economy of Media Theory provides such a framework by foregrounding structural determinants of media behavior.

In relation to the broader study of Southeast Asia, the Malaysian case highlights how national media policies reflect region-wide patterns of governance that prioritize stability and elite continuity. While the specific legal instruments and institutional arrangements vary, the underlying logic of controlled communication is shared across several hybrid regimes in the region. Malaysia thus serves

as a critical case for understanding how media policy operates as a tool of political management within semi-democratic contexts.

Ultimately, the expanded analysis of Malaysia's hybrid regulatory model reinforces the central argument of this study: that media policy in Southeast Asia must be understood as a form of communicative governance shaped by power relations rather than as a neutral regulatory domain. The Political Economy of Media Theory elucidates how regulatory practices in Malaysia sustain elite interests, limit journalistic autonomy, and constrain critical communication, despite the presence of formal liberalization. This case underscores the necessity of adopting a comparative and theory-driven approach to media policy analysis, particularly in regions characterized by regulatory hybridity and complex political economies.

Singapore presents a distinct case within the Southeast Asian media landscape, characterized by a centralized and highly regulated system of media governance that reflects the broader political and administrative philosophy of the state. Unlike countries where media regulation emerges from pluralistic negotiations among political actors, civil society, and market forces, Singapore's media policy is embedded within a strong state-centric framework. This framework positions the state as the primary architect and guardian of public communication, shaping both the structure and function of the media system. As a result, media regulation in Singapore is not merely a technical or legal mechanism but an integral component of national governance and political communication.

Press freedom in Singapore is conceptualized through a functionalist lens that prioritizes national development, social harmony, and political stability over adversarial or watchdog journalism. The media are expected to contribute to nation-building objectives, support economic growth, and reinforce shared social values. This normative orientation reflects the state's long-standing view that unrestrained press freedom may undermine social cohesion in a multicultural society and disrupt the conditions necessary for sustained development. Consequently, press freedom is framed not as an inherent democratic right but as a conditional practice that must align with broader national interests.

From the perspective of Democratic Communication and Press Freedom Theory, this conceptualization represents a significant departure from liberal-democratic norms that emphasize media autonomy, critical scrutiny of power, and open contestation in the public sphere. Democratic communication theory, particularly as articulated by Jürgen Habermas, underscores the importance of an independent media system in facilitating rational-critical debate and enabling citizens to hold power accountable. In the Singaporean context, however, the scope for such debate is circumscribed by regulatory frameworks that define the permissible boundaries of public discourse. While formal censorship may be limited, structural and legal constraints shape journalistic practices in ways that discourage confrontational reporting and dissenting perspectives.

The regulatory architecture governing media in Singapore is marked by a combination of licensing regimes, ownership controls, and content regulations that collectively reinforce state oversight. Major media organizations operate under licenses that are subject to periodic renewal, providing the state with significant leverage over editorial direction. Ownership structures further consolidate this control, as dominant media companies maintain close ties with state-linked entities. These arrangements ensure that media institutions remain aligned with official policy priorities, reducing the likelihood of sustained critical engagement with government actions.

The implementation of media policy in Singapore produces a communication environment that is orderly, predictable, and highly regulated. Public discourse is characterized by professionalism, moderation, and an emphasis on consensus rather than conflict. From a governance perspective, this environment is often presented as evidence of policy effectiveness, as it minimizes misinformation, political polarization, and social unrest. However, from the standpoint of press freedom theory, such stability comes at the cost of limiting the diversity of viewpoints and restricting the emergence of oppositional narratives within the public sphere.

A key implication of this regulatory model is the transformation of journalistic roles and professional norms. Journalists in Singapore tend to adopt a facilitative rather than adversarial

orientation, focusing on explaining government policies, highlighting developmental achievements, and promoting social cohesion. Investigative journalism and critical reporting do exist, but they are typically bounded by implicit red lines that delineate acceptable critique. These professional adaptations reflect not only regulatory constraints but also internalized norms shaped by decades of state-guided media development.

This condition aligns with the concept of “managed public spheres,” where public communication is structured to allow limited participation and discussion without challenging the foundational authority of the state. Democratic Communication Theory suggests that such managed spaces may support informational efficiency but fall short of enabling genuine deliberation. In Singapore, public debate often occurs within parameters defined by official discourse, limiting the capacity of media to function as independent arenas for contestation and alternative agenda-setting.

The Singaporean case also illustrates the limitations of applying universal press freedom indicators without contextual interpretation. International indices frequently rank Singapore low in terms of press freedom, emphasizing legal restrictions and ownership concentration. While these assessments capture important aspects of regulatory control, they may overlook the internal logic of Singapore’s media system and the societal acceptance of functional press roles. This highlights the importance of comparative communication approaches that situate press freedom within specific political cultures and governance models.

At the same time, contextual explanation should not obscure the normative implications of constrained media autonomy. Democratic Communication and Press Freedom Theory emphasizes that the absence of overt repression does not necessarily equate to meaningful freedom of expression. Structural constraints, regulatory ambiguity, and self-censorship can be equally effective in shaping compliant communication environments. In Singapore, the predictability of regulatory enforcement and the clarity of informal boundaries contribute to a culture of precautionary journalism, where dissent is minimized through anticipation rather than coercion.

The digital transformation of media has introduced new dynamics into Singapore’s regulatory environment, but it has not fundamentally altered the state’s approach to communication governance. Online platforms and independent digital outlets have expanded the range of voices available to the public, yet these spaces are also subject to regulatory oversight through laws addressing online falsehoods, national security, and public order. The extension of regulatory authority into the digital sphere reflects the state’s commitment to maintaining coherence and control across all communication channels.

From a comparative perspective, Singapore’s media policy model underscores the diversity of regulatory logics in Southeast Asia. While some countries in the region exhibit overtly repressive media controls and others pursue liberalization with uneven enforcement, Singapore represents a distinct category where regulation is institutionalized, bureaucratically rationalized, and widely normalized. This distinctiveness challenges binary classifications of media systems as either free or unfree and reinforces the value of spectrum-based analysis.

The findings related to Singapore also illuminate broader theoretical debates concerning the relationship between development, governance, and press freedom. Proponents of functional media models argue that strong regulation can support development by ensuring accurate information, preventing social fragmentation, and fostering trust in public institutions. Critics, grounded in democratic communication theory, contend that such regulation undermines the emancipatory potential of media and limits citizens’ capacity for critical engagement. The Singaporean case demonstrates that these tensions are not merely theoretical but embedded in concrete policy choices and communication practices.

In practical terms, the Singapore model reveals how media policy can be used to engineer a communication environment that prioritizes stability over pluralism. While this approach may deliver short- to medium-term governance benefits, it raises questions about long-term adaptability, innovation, and democratic resilience. As societies become more complex and digitally interconnected, the capacity

of highly regulated systems to accommodate diverse perspectives without eroding trust becomes an increasingly salient concern.

In conclusion, Singapore's highly controlled media regulatory framework exemplifies a functional approach to press freedom that emphasizes national development and social order while constraining dissent and critical public discourse. From the standpoint of Democratic Communication and Press Freedom Theory, this model limits the formation of an autonomous and critical public sphere, even as it delivers stability and coherence in communication practices. The Singaporean case thus provides a crucial comparative reference for understanding how different regulatory philosophies shape media systems and redefine the meaning of press freedom in Southeast Asia.

Addressing the research gap, these findings reveal that previous index-based assessments of press freedom fail to capture the communicative dimensions of media policy implementation. This study fills that gap by demonstrating that press freedom is shaped not only by regulatory structures but also by how policies are enacted and negotiated in everyday communication practices. The integration of the three theoretical perspectives provides a more comprehensive explanation of these dynamics.

The findings directly respond to the research questions by showing that different regulatory models produce distinct forms of press freedom. Normative theory explains ideological orientations, political economy theory reveals power relations, and democratic communication theory evaluates normative implications for public discourse. The implementation of these theories demonstrates that press freedom in Southeast Asia exists along a dynamic spectrum rather than as a binary condition.

The research objectives are achieved through the identification of dominant regulatory patterns and their communicative consequences. The findings indicate that higher levels of state intervention and media ownership concentration tend to restrict press freedom. However, the study also reveals that liberalization without institutional protection does not automatically enhance press freedom, as evidenced in Indonesia. This constitutes a novel contribution to comparative media policy research.

The theoretical contribution of this study lies in its integrated application of three communication theories within a comparative Southeast Asian context. Academically, the study advances cross-national media analysis by moving beyond descriptive approaches. Practically, the findings offer insights for policymakers and media regulators seeking to balance state interests with press freedom in a rapidly changing communication environment.

The discussion further shows that the primary challenges to press freedom in Southeast Asia stem not only from restrictive regulation but also from weak accountability mechanisms and market-driven pressures. By linking these findings to previous research, the study bridges existing gaps and demonstrates the value of comparative communication analysis. Overall, the results and discussion underscore the study's novelty in revealing how press freedom in Southeast Asia is shaped by the complex interaction of regulation, economic power, and communicative practice.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that media policies in Southeast Asia exhibit significant variation in regulatory models, which directly shape the nature and extent of press freedom. Drawing from the results and discussion, the comparative communication approach demonstrates that media regulation cannot be understood merely as a legal framework but must be viewed as a form of political communication reflecting power relations among the state, the market, and society. Press freedom in Southeast Asia is therefore produced through complex negotiations involving state stability, economic interests, and democratic demands.

The findings indicate that Indonesia represents a relatively open regulatory model grounded in social responsibility principles, yet it continues to face a gap between normative guarantees and the practical realization of press freedom. Malaysia reflects a hybrid regulatory system that combines limited liberalization with strong state oversight, resulting in conditional press freedom. Singapore exemplifies a centralized regulatory model in which media are positioned as instruments of national development and social order, leading to systematically constrained press freedom. These conclusions

confirm that media policy in Southeast Asia operates along a regulatory spectrum rather than within a binary classification of free versus unfree media systems.

These conclusions reinforce the results and discussion, which demonstrate that the primary challenges to press freedom stem not only from direct state intervention but also from media ownership structures and weak accountability mechanisms. The integrated use of Normative Media System Theory, Political Economy of Media Theory, and Democratic Communication and Press Freedom Theory provides a comprehensive analytical framework for understanding how media policies shape communication practices. Together, these theories explain the structural, economic, and normative dimensions of media regulation and its implications for press freedom.

The study further concludes that existing research gaps arise from the predominance of descriptive approaches and quantitative indices in assessing press freedom. By linking empirical findings with theoretical discussion, this research shows that press freedom should be understood as a dynamic communicative practice rather than a static indicator. The comparative communication perspective employed in this study successfully addresses this gap by offering a contextualized and critical cross-national analysis.

Overall, the conclusions highlight that media policy in Southeast Asia is shaped by the complex interaction of state ideology, economic power, and public communication practices. Press freedom cannot be separated from its broader socio-political context, and efforts to strengthen it require holistic and context-sensitive policy approaches. These conclusions underscore the study's contribution to the advancement of comparative communication and media policy scholarship in Southeast Asia and provide a conceptual foundation for future research and more democratic media policy formulation.

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