

Lived Experiences of Constraint: Digital Activism, State, Ambivalence, and Repression in Indonesian Digital Public Sphere

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Abstract

Digital activism has become a pivotal arena for civic engagement in Indonesia's contemporary political landscape, enabling civil society to contest power and participate in the digital public sphere. Yet escalating cyber conflicts, disinformation, and tightening state regulation of online spaces have intensified pressures on freedom of expression. This study investigates these dynamics through a critical-transformative phenomenological approach using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), drawing on in-depth interviews with digital activists who have experienced cyber harassment, legal intimidation, and platform-based repression. Findings reveal that digital activism serves as a mechanism for democratic participation and public oversight, while activists simultaneously confront an ambivalent state posture. Protective measures—such as restorative justice pathways, selected improvements in the revised Electronic Information and Transactions Law (UU ITE), and government-led digital rights literacy initiatives—signal efforts to reduce over-criminalization. However, repressive practices persist through cyber patrols, risk-based surveillance, and the continued use of elastic legal provisions and Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPP). This coexistence of protection and repression produces a lived reality in which activists feel both acknowledged and constrained, reflecting a governance model that manages digital dissent without fully safeguarding digital rights. The study advances prior scholarship by shifting attention from digital mobilization to activists' lived experiences, offering an Arendtian lens on power, participation, and the contested digital public sphere. It underscores the need for balanced regulatory frameworks that protect digital rights while ensuring public security.

Keywords: *Digital Activism, Cyber Conflict, Digital Democracy, Public Sphere, SLAPP.*

Reviewed: February, 2026

Revised: April, 2026

Accepted: 12 May 2026

PEMAKNAAN PENGALAMAN AKTIVIS DIGITAL TERHADAP AMBIVALENSI NEGARA DAN REPRESI DI RUANG PUBLIK DIGITAL INDONESIA”

Abstract

Aktivisme digital telah menjadi arena penting bagi keterlibatan warga dalam lanskap politik Indonesia kontemporer, memungkinkan masyarakat sipil mengkritik kekuasaan dan berpartisipasi dalam ruang publik digital. Namun, meningkatnya konflik siber, disinformasi, dan pengetatan regulasi negara atas ruang daring telah memperbesar tekanan terhadap kebebasan berekspresi.

Studi ini menelaah dinamika tersebut melalui pendekatan fenomenologis kritis-transformasional dengan menggunakan Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), berdasarkan wawancara mendalam dengan aktivis digital yang mengalami peretasan, intimidasi hukum, dan represi berbasis platform. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa aktivisme digital berfungsi sebagai mekanisme partisipasi demokratis dan pengawasan publik, sementara para aktivis secara bersamaan menghadapi sikap negara yang ambivalen. Langkah-langkah protektif—seperti mekanisme restorative justice, sejumlah perbaikan dalam revisi Undang-Undang Informasi dan Transaksi Elektronik (UU ITE), serta program literasi hak digital—menandakan upaya untuk mengurangi kriminalisasi berlebih. Namun, praktik represif tetap berlangsung melalui patroli siber, pengawasan berbasis risiko, serta penggunaan pasal lentur dan gugatan SLAPP (Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation). Koeksistensi antara perlindungan dan represi ini menciptakan pengalaman nyata di mana para aktivis merasa diakui sekaligus dibatasi, dan hal ini menunjukkan bahwa negara mengelola perbedaan pendapat di ruang digital tanpa sepenuhnya melindungi hak-hak digital warga. Studi ini memperluas kajian sebelumnya dengan memusatkan perhatian pada pengalaman hidup para aktivis, menawarkan lensa Arendtian mengenai relasi kuasa, partisipasi, dan kontestasi ruang publik digital. Kajian ini menegaskan perlunya regulasi yang seimbang untuk melindungi hak digital sekaligus menjaga keamanan publik.

Keywords: *Digital Activism, Cyber Conflict, Digital Democracy, Public Space, SLAPP.*

INTRODUCTION

The development of digital technology has become a major catalyst for social and political change in the contemporary era. In Indonesia, digital transformation creates significant opportunities for information transparency, public participation, and political innovation. However, the digital sphere simultaneously introduces new risks, including social polarization, the spread of disinformation, expanding surveillance practices, and the criminalization of citizen expression. As a result, the internet no longer functions merely as a communication medium, but has evolved into an arena where struggle over meaning and power unfold between the state, civil society, and other political actors—a contested space in which legitimacy, public narratives, and political authority are continuously negotiated (Lim, 2017).

This phenomenon demonstrates the paradox of the digitalization of democracy: on the one hand, it expands spaces for

participation, yet on the other, it reinforces mechanisms of control, surveillance, and repression. Social media becomes an arena not only for political campaigning and mobilization but also for intensified polarization that penetrates private spheres and shapes fragmented opinions at the family and community levels. In this context, examining digital activism and the state's ambivalent response to it is crucial for understanding the dynamics of Indonesia's digital democracy. By exploring the meanings constructed from the lived experiences of activists engaged in cyber conflicts, this study contributes theoretically to the discourse on digital democracy and governance—particularly by revealing how everyday encounters with digital repression, state ambiguity, and platform-mediated power reshapes notions of citizenship, agency, and state-society relations in the digital public sphere.

Regionally, Southeast Asia occupies a unique position on the global map of digital

activism. The region has demonstrated the most dynamic online mobilizations in the past two decades (Lim, 2019). However, global research tends to focus on the Western context, while the socio-technological character of Southeast Asia remains largely unexplored. Collaboration across civil society movements in the region has resulted in a distinctive digital political configuration, combining informal networks, community solidarity, and adaptation to often semi-authoritarian political systems (Sinpeng & Tapsell, 2021).

Several cross-national studies illustrate this pattern. In Indonesia, Joko Widodo's victory in the 2014 election demonstrated the effectiveness of digital activism in mobilizing civil society and pro-democracy actors (Sri Saraswati, 2021). In Malaysia, the Bersih movement, through its "Net Election," successfully leveraged social media to unite reformist groups in confronting a corrupt regime (Cheong, 2021). In Thailand, digital rights groups challenged restrictions on media freedom (Sombatpoonsiri, 2021), while in Vietnam, the Communist Party consolidated power through tight controls on online information (Luong, 2021).

The literature review shows that digital activism is not merely a technological phenomenon, but rather a political arena that reflects the complex relationship between power, discourse, and public space. According to Laouni (2022), technology plays a crucial role in mobilizing public opinion, disseminating ideas, and channeling social grievances into the digital public sphere. However, this growth is often accompanied by repressive state strategies, signaling

what the author interprets—drawing on Hannah Arendt's analysis in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Arendt, 1995)—as "totalitarian tendencies," namely, state efforts to monopolize information, restrict freedom of association, and legitimize human rights violations in the name of national interests.

In the Indonesian context, Paskarina's (2020) study identified six main clusters of digital activism research: (1) mobilizing political support, (2) advocacy for marginalized issues, (3) government criticism, (4) hoaxivism and counter-hoaxes, (5) hacktivism, and (6) digital identity formation. This research confirms that digital activism plays a crucial role in promoting public control over the government. However, with increasing digital surveillance, many activists have experienced repression through legal instruments such as the Electronic Information and Transactions Law (UU ITE), which has the potential to restrict freedom of expression.

Furthermore, Surbakti (2021) highlighted the emergence of a global trend of shifting from democracy to autocracy in several countries, including Indonesia. This shift is reflected in the weakening of civil rights and democratic institutions amidst the expansion of executive power. This phenomenon underscores the urgency of research that not only describes forms of digital activism but also deeply understands the subjective experiences of actors directly confronting state repression in the digital space.

This study aims to analyze the dynamics of digital activism in Indonesia by highlighting the experiences of activists

involved in cyber conflicts and facing state responses. A qualitative phenomenological approach is used to explore the meanings formed from these experiences, using an interpretive framework that emphasizes the interaction between power and public participation.

This research contributes to the study of digital political communication by offering an Arendtian critical phenomenological approach to the relationship between the state and activists in Indonesia's digital public sphere. This approach makes a theoretical contribution to the discourse on digital democracy by emphasizing the existential dimensions of citizen participation and resistance to cyberrepression, while also offering policy implications for strengthening digital rights and freedom of expression in the post-democratic era.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Philosophically, in the history of contemporary political philosophy, discussions surrounding the concept of public space based on the thoughts of Hannah Arendt (Arendt, H., 2013) are still rarely discussed. However, Arendt's thoughts offer a rich and relevant perspective in understanding public space and can be read in various ways, for example as a phenomenological work on basic human actions. Arendt criticized the market economic system that tends to erode citizen solidarity. Arendt saw from a democratic perspective, the capitalist system is considered a threat to the autonomous public space.

According to the theoretical framework of action, public space is not

the result of routine activities of production and consumption exchange with nature, called labor, nor is it the result of monologic creation activities according to the design of means and ends, called works, but is the result of communication activities to foster citizen solidarity called action. Action is not an activity carried out by slaves, nor an activity carried out by traders, artists or engineers, but rather an activity carried out by citizens when showing their political aspirations to fight against domination, repression and marginalization.

At this point, the Arendtian framework adopted in this study directly intersects with and critiques dominant theories in Communication and Social Studies (CSS). While Habermasian public sphere theory conceptualizes public communication as rational-discursive consensus building, the Arendtian lens challenges this by emphasizing plurality, performativity, and spontaneous collective appearance. Likewise, Arendt's conception of Action refines political communication mobilization models—which often frame activism as strategic or instrumental—by highlighting action as an existential enactment of agency. This framework also critiques central assumptions in Social Movement Theory, shifting the focus from organizational resources and political opportunities toward the lived experience of acting-with-others in public space.

This movement of solidarity or citizen participation is what Arendt calls "power"(Macht), which is distinct from the structural domination wielded by the regime, something otherwise known as "violence"(Gewalt). Power lies not in the ability to coerce or command others, but in

the fact that citizens come together and act together to change the situation. The locus of power lies not at the desk of a bureaucrat or the office of a businessman, but in the forums, initiatives, or movements of citizens concerned with the public interest.

This distinction becomes analytically crucial in this research, as the interpretative process must be able to differentiate narratives of citizen Action (*Macht*)—such as viral counter-narratives, decentralized digital organizing, and online solidarities—from narratives of state Violence (*Gewalt*), including cyber-attacks, surveillance, intimidation, platform shutdowns, and legal threats. The IPA process operationalizes this distinction by coding participants' narratives for experiential markers of repression (fear, coercion, silencing) and markers of collective empowerment (visibility, solidarity, agency), thereby enabling the identification of digital repression as Violence and activist mobilization as Power. Power, in Arendt's specific sense, is the generator of public space itself. Therefore, this study uses a qualitative phenomenological method as a narrative study that reveals individual experiences by describing common experiences from various life experiences related to what concepts or phenomena are experienced and how those experiences are experienced, including expressing feelings.

In this study, the author employs a critical-transformative phenomenological approach using the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) model. This approach is not limited to describing participants' lived experiences, but also critically examines how those experiences are shaped by structures of power, digital

repression, and the possibilities for social change. Within this framework, the double hermeneutic becomes essential: the researcher interprets the participants' own interpretations of the events they experienced. This process is particularly important for an Arendtian analysis, because the researcher must move beyond reporting activists' narratives to examining how their reflections on action, power, and constraint reveal deeper dynamics of domination and ambivalence in the digital public sphere. Through this interpretive-critical lens, the researcher gains the flexibility needed to articulate findings that illuminate both subjective experience and the broader political structures that shape it.

The participants were selected purposively: activists with national reputations who have participated in the democratic space, implementing checks and balances on the development of democracy in Indonesia, and have conducted digital campaigns, as well as being victims of digital authoritarianism. Although the participants are activists with the skills and networks to lobby and the strength to withstand various pressures, they also experience vulnerability and perceive an imbalance in power relations with those who feel criticized when revealing the truth.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) which rests on three pillars: (1) phenomenological philosophy; (2) Hermeneutics, the theory of interpretation or interpretation, and (3) Ideography, the science that studies humans in their uniqueness (Smith, JA, & Osborn, M., 2021).

This science follows the philosophical views of phenomenologist Martin Heidegger, who was actually a student of Husserl and Arendt's mentor. Heidegger called humans *Dasein*, meaning humans are creatures thrown into the world (Heller, L., & Hawkins, S., 2020). As humans thrown into the world, humans discover the fact that they have found themselves in a world with objects, other people, and other creatures. Therefore, how or how do humans understand their life experiences? In this effort, humans give meaning to the various events that occur in their lives. The effort to give meaning is essentially interpretation. Therefore, interpretation is our main activity in facing various life events. Science is a way to understand how humans make sense of their life experiences.

If Husserl asks us to conduct *epoche*, then Heidegger's hermeneutics actually views that each person experiences phenomena and can give their own meaning to the phenomena they experience (Huick, J., 2023). In qualitative inquiry, researchers seek to understand how participants interpret the phenomena they encounter, while simultaneously recognizing that researchers themselves also bring their own thoughts, feelings, and positionalities into the interpretive process. At this point, the researcher's interpretative horizon inevitably meets that of the participants. This recognition of a double hermeneutic—where both researcher and participants are interpreters—necessitates a critical-transformative stance: personal narratives cannot be understood solely as subjective experiences, but must be interpreted in relation to the broader political structures,

systems of repression, and power dynamics that shape how meaning is formed. By acknowledging this, the researcher is compelled not only to be reflexive and honest about their own interpretative position, but also to sharpen analysis so that the lived experiences shared by participants can be read as both personal and political. In short, every person is an interpreter of phenomena, but the task of critical-transformative phenomenology is to situate these interpretations within the structural conditions that enable or constrain them.

Meanwhile, Ideography, the final pillar, can be interpreted as the recognition that each person is unique and distinct in interpreting the various phenomena that occur in their lives. The word "idios" in Greek means personal or unique, and "graphein" means writing or drawing. Ideography is the depiction or writing of something personal and unique. IPA truly pays attention to the personal and unique in the participant's experience, and the participant's experience is written in detail, requiring researchers to analyze each subject separately without forcing the experience of one subject onto another.

Data Collection and Research Process

The primary data collection technique in this critical-transformative phenomenological study is in-depth interviewing, allowing a comprehensive exploration of participants' lived experiences as digital activists navigating digital authoritarianism and the shifting democratic climate in Indonesia. The purpose is to understand how activists experience state repression through

the enforcement of restrictive digital regulations. All interviews are recorded and fully transcribed to ensure completeness and accuracy. These transcripts are then supplemented with additional materials—such as participant observation notes, documents, and digital trace data—to deepen contextual understanding.

To ensure **commitment and rigour** in applying the phenomenological method, the analysis follows the structured stages of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA):

- a. Read and re-reading each transcript multiple times to achieve immersion.
- b. Initial noting, where descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual comments are documented.
- c. Identifying emerging themes grounded in each participant's narrative.
- d. Developing subordinate themes for each participant.
- e. Conducting cross-case analysis to identify patterns and tensions across participants.
- f. Synthesizing these into underlying themes that reflect both individual and collective meanings.

These analytic steps operate within a **double hermeneutic**, where the researcher interprets participants' interpretations of their experiences. The **critical-transformative orientation** makes this process essential: personal narratives are not only understood subjectively but also interpreted against wider political structures of repression, surveillance, and digital control. This ensures that meaning-making is situated within both lived experience and systemic power relations.

Validity and methodological rigour follow Yardley's (2017) principles. Context sensitivity is upheld by grounding the analysis in relevant literature and attending to sociocultural and ethical dimensions. Commitment and thoroughness are reflected in the detailed, iterative analysis of each transcript. Transparency and coherence are maintained by documenting analytic decisions and ensuring alignment between method, philosophy, and theory. Impact and importance are demonstrated through the study's theoretical and practical contributions to understanding democratic life and digital governance in Indonesia.

The overall theme of this research emerges from the researcher's reflection on the contemporary Indonesian context, where expressions of public dissent—especially online—are increasingly criminalized through mechanisms such as Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPP). Such practices amplify state narratives, suppress activism, and shape public opinion through viral information flows, producing a climate that reinforces digital authoritarian tendencies.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Digital Activism and Cyber Conflict

Social media has become a powerful tool in promoting digital activism in Southeast Asia (Sinpeng, A., & Tapsell, R., 2021). Digital activism refers to the use of digital technologies, such as social media, to mobilize support, disseminate information, and mobilize political or social action. In Southeast Asia, the positive impact of social media in promoting grassroots issues appears to be similar, namely increasing public political engagement.

In Indonesia, the 2014 election of Joko Widodo (Jokowi) demonstrated the power of digital mobilization: his popularity surged through social media engagement, grassroots online volunteers, and digitally coordinated civil society networks that framed him as a leader emerging from the people (Sri Saraswati, 2021). This digital momentum helped propel him to the presidency, marking him as a new kind of president whose ascent was inseparable from online civic enthusiasm. Yet this moment also marks the beginning of a paradox in Indonesia's digital political landscape. The very digital infrastructures and mobilization techniques that enabled President Jokowi's rise were later mirrored by the state in its efforts to manage and suppress dissent. Over the following years, coordinated pro-government cyber operations, narrative shaping on social media, and the expansive use of the Electronic Information and Transactions Law (UU ITE) became instruments to discipline activists, journalists, and critics. This shift illustrates how democratic digital participation can be rapidly transformed into digital repression when the state adopts and institutionalizes the tactics of digital mobilization for political control.

As internet penetration expands, and social media sites become hubs of information for the public, there is hope that "liberating technologies" will have a significant impact on both democratic and authoritarian countries in Southeast Asia (Diamond, L., & Plattner, M.F. (Eds.), 2012). Social media empowers people to speak out, increases political participation, expands space for civic activism, and

provides new avenues for independent media (Stoycheff, E., & Nisbet, E.C., 2014).

However, as social media has increasingly been utilized by repressive and manipulative governments, concerns have grown that digital platforms now fuel the dominance of anti-democratic actors rather than empowering grassroots reformist groups. Scholars have argued that social media can become a key driver of authoritarianism and repression (King, Pan, & Roberts, 2013). Bradshaw et al. (2020) document that at least one political party or government agency in seventy countries has launched coordinated disinformation operations to shape domestic public opinion—an increase of more than 150 percent compared to two years earlier (Bradshaw et al., 2019). In the Indonesian context, this "fuel" for digital authoritarianism is not only expressed through broad disinformation campaigns, but more specifically through domestically-driven propaganda networks, including buzzers, bot-driven amplification, targeted harassment of activists and journalists, and orchestrated online narratives that often trigger SLAPP-baiting. These tactics illustrate how social media becomes an arena where information manipulation and cyber intimidation normalize the repression of dissent at the national level.

The turning point when social media begins to play a major role in politics typically occurs during elections, when incumbents experience a decline in voter support or when opposition parties gain significant influence online. During these periods, online disinformation tactics, increased surveillance, and censorship efforts are used by interested parties to suppress, smear,

and defeat political opposition, as well as to gain attention in the digital public sphere. This demonstrates that social media can be a highly influential tool in the modern political context, where political contestation takes place not only in the physical world but also in the digital realm.

Disinformation, or the spread of false or misleading information, can trigger conflict in the digital realm. In the Southeast Asian context, the spread of fake news and social media manipulation have become major concerns, as they can strengthen authoritarian governments and restrict freedom of expression (AMRI, 2021). Governments that use disinformation to strengthen their power can create tensions and conflict with civil society groups and activists fighting for media freedom and democracy.

Furthermore, the use of disinformation by vested interests can exacerbate political and social tensions in these countries, triggering cyberconflict between groups with differing views and interests. Therefore, the spread of disinformation and social media manipulation can be a contributing factor to cyberconflict in Southeast Asia, given the region's political and social complexities. Therefore, efforts to combat disinformation and promote freedom of expression and access to quality information are crucial to preventing greater conflict in the digital world.

Phenomenology of State Response

The phenomenology of state responses refers to government actions, regulations, and policies implemented to address the mobilization of digital activism and its conflicts in the digital public sphere,

including responses to online campaigns, the spread of controversial information, and other issues related to digital activities. A phenomenological analysis of state responses involves a holistic understanding of the social, political, and cultural context in Indonesia, as well as the dynamics of interactions between government and civil society in managing and responding to digital phenomena. It also examines the narratives, rhetoric, and concrete steps taken by the government in addressing various issues and events developing in the digital space. This phenomenological study provides valuable insights into how government policies adapt to developments in information and communication technology, and how this affects democracy, political dynamics, human rights, and civil liberties in Indonesia. Some of the state responses in the form of policies and measures in this context include:

Revision of the ITE Law

It is crucial to avoid bias toward the new revision of the Electronic Information and Transactions Law (ITE Law), namely Law Number 1 of 2024 concerning the Second Amendment to the ITE Law, especially since this amendment was enacted in an election year. Before understanding the reforms brought about by this regulation, it is important to be objective and not start with negative assumptions or prejudices. Even if the revision of the ITE Law is controversial or raises concerns, a fair approach and careful analysis are needed to truly understand what is being changed in the law. This reduces the risk of bias and allows for a more accurate assessment of the revision's impact on issues such as

freedom of expression, online privacy, and law enforcement in Indonesia.

The ITE Law is considered to contain several articles that are considered to be loosely defined because they can be interpreted broadly and have the potential to be misused to criminalize individuals or groups expressing opinions or information. This criticism arises because several provisions in the ITE Law allow law enforcement officials or interested parties to use the law as a tool to prosecute individuals or parties deemed to be disruptive to certain interests. For example, provisions regarding defamation and hate speech can be used to prosecute individuals who express criticism or opinions.

In an Arendtian perspective, the ambiguity of such articles does not merely produce individual legal vulnerability, but also constitutes a deeper form of structural violence (Gewalt) because it undermines the conditions necessary for collective Action (Macht) to emerge. Arendt views Action as political communication that fosters solidarity among citizens; thus, when legal provisions are drafted so broadly that any public criticism may be framed as “defamation” or “hate speech,” the law effectively suppresses not only individual voices but the very possibility of citizens appearing together, speaking collectively, and building solidaristic public engagement. The broad interpretability of these articles functions as a deterrent mechanism that fragments collective expression, induces fear, and pushes public dissent back into the private realm—precisely the structural effect Arendt describes when Violence obstructs the formation of public space. In this sense, the

ITE Law’s ambiguity operates as a form of structural Gewalt that erodes the digital public sphere, not through overt force but through the internalization of fear, self-censorship, and the systematic weakening of citizens’ capacity to act together.

Although the ITE Law aims to maintain security and order in the digital space, critics of this law express concerns over its potential misuse to limit freedom of opinion and expression. Therefore, the revision of the ITE Law is often an important debate to ensure a balance between protecting human rights and fair law enforcement in the digital era.

Table 1. Number of Reported Persons under the ITE Law

Year	Reported
2013	20
2014	36
2015	30
2016	83
2017	53
2018	25
2019	24
2020	84
2021	38
2022	107
Jan-Mar 2023	49
April-June 2023	33

Source :Compiled by the Author.

The government’s views on the ITE Law and its involvement in its reformulation are not uniform and can vary, shifting across administrations and even between presidential terms, as seen

in the contrasting positions taken during the Yudhoyono era, Jokowi's first term, and Jokowi's second term. These variations indicate that the government's stance is shaped by political context, leadership style, and changing policy priorities. Within this dynamic landscape, the phenomenological data from this study reveal that activists—selected purposively for their strong legal literacy and long track record of advocating for victims of digital criminalization—interpret these shifting governmental positions not as neutral adjustments but as signals that intensify the “chilling effect” in the digital sphere. Their experiences show that the broad interpretation of key ITE provisions consistently narrows civic space, prompting activists to adopt self-censorship, strategic anonymity, and the use of multiple or institutional accounts to reduce personal risk. These adaptive behaviors, rooted in both their own vulnerability and the patterns they observe in the victims they assist, highlight how changing political stances on the ITE Law indirectly but powerfully shape citizens' communicative practices and contribute to a systematic contraction of the digital public sphere.

Table 2. ITE Law Cases 2009-2024

ITE Law Case 2009-2023		
Year	Government	Victim
2009-2014	SBY	27 Cases
2014-2019	Jokowi	233 Cases
2020-2024	Jokowi	379 Cases

Source :Compiled by the Author.

During the SBY administration (2009-2014). During this period, the number of

recorded cases related to the ITE Law was relatively small, only 27. This was because the ITE Law was still relatively new and had not been fully implemented strictly, and the level of information transparency and online activity was not as high as in subsequent periods. During the early period of the Jokowi administration (2014-2019), the number of cases increased significantly during Jokowi's administration, reaching 233 cases. This may be due to several factors, including the increased use of the internet and social media in politics and activism during and after the election, as well as a stricter government approach to monitoring internet and social media use. Furthermore, more people are aware of the law and the potential consequences of their online actions.

During President Jokowi's second term (2020-2024), the number of ITE Law cases increased sharply. Between 2020 and 2023 alone, 379 cases were recorded—significantly higher than in the previous period. This escalation cannot be attributed to a single cause; rather, it reflects a combination of expanding internet penetration, intensified government monitoring, and contextual political-social pressures. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 played a central role: strict social restrictions pushed nearly all civic, economic, and political activities into the digital sphere, concentrating public energy and contestation online. In this increasingly digitalized environment, the ITE Law was activated more aggressively as a tool of social discipline and information control. The controversy surrounding the Omnibus Law further acted as a political accelerant, triggering widespread online

criticism that was subsequently met with tighter enforcement of digital regulations. Overall, Table 2 shows a clear upward trend in ITE-related cases, peaking under Jokowi's administration, illustrating how legal instruments in the digital environment can be mobilized to manage dissent and shape the boundaries of freedom of expression and human rights.

Restorative Justice

In its development, the implementation of Restorative Justice (RJ) has not only functioned as an administrative guideline but has also generated normative implications that require critical examination. Although Perkapolri 8/2021 sets formal requirements such as a peace agreement and the victim's satisfaction statement, phenomenological data from activists indicate that in practice the RJ mechanism often operates within a tension between relational restoration and structural pressure. Many activists report being asked to apologize for legitimate public criticism—not because actual harm occurred, but as a procedural requirement for case settlement.

In Arendtian terms, this pattern suggests that RJ can function as a form of structural *Gewalt* disguised as communal *Macht*, insofar as it compels citizens to privatize their political expression and bear moral responsibility for actions that are fundamentally *public Action*. Rather than expanding the space for public deliberation, RJ in such cases transforms public political conflicts into interpersonal disputes, thereby reducing opportunities for civic solidarity and weakening citizens' capacity for collective political action. Thus, although Restorative Justice is normatively

designed to promote repair, in practice it can become an instrument that suppresses political agency and narrows the operative space of the digital public sphere.

First, the Circular Letter (SE) of the Chief of Police 8/2018. Like the SE, the main function of this regulation is as a forum for conveying general information notifications related to the implementation of certain technical matters by certain institutions or bodies to the public. Likewise, in this context, the Circular Letter of the Chief of Police 8/2018 is only a means of providing information regarding implementation guidelines for investigators to prioritize restorative justice in carrying out their duties in handling a case, especially if the case is considered not a criminal case, a criminal act or because there is insufficient evidence or facts.

Table 3. Implementation of Restorative Justice at the Investigation and Prosecution Levels for the 2018-2021 Period

Year	Incident
2018	The National Police Chief's Circular Letter 8/2018 was issued. The primary function of this circular is to provide general information to the public. It also provides guidelines for investigators to prioritize restorative justice in handling cases, especially if the case is deemed not to be a crime or there is insufficient evidence.
2019	National Police Chief Regulation 6/2019 was issued. This regulation develops and reaffirms the role of restorative justice at the investigation and inquiry levels.

2021	Police Regulation 8/2021 was also issued, strengthening the implementation of restorative justice at the investigation and inquiry levels.
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Source :Compiled by the Author.

Furthermore, if evidence is found after the investigation is stopped, the investigation process can be reopened through a case title and finally issued a Letter of Further Investigation (SPL) (Huzaini, M., Yuherawan, B., & Setya, D., 2021). Basically, this regulation does not specifically regulate what crimes can be resolved through the restorative justice mechanism, but the SE accommodates the material and formal requirements that must be met to be able to apply the restorative justice mechanism within the scope of the investigation. Several material and formal requirements are regulated in number 3 letter a for material requirements and number 3 letter b for formal requirements. Some of these material requirements include; first, the implementation will not cause rejection or unrest in the community, second, far from social conflict, third, carried out with a statement from the parties involved agreeing to waive their right to sue and fourth, there are restrictions on the right to sue. perpetrators and criminal acts in the process.

Meanwhile, the formal requirements for implementing restorative justice are: *First*, a written request for a settlement from the parties. *Second*, a statement of settlement (deed of settlement) from the parties, directly acknowledged by the investigator's superior. *Third*, additional minutes of the examination. *Fourth*, a

recommendation to hold a special case for parties who agree to the implementation of restorative justice. *Fifth*, the perpetrator will fulfill their obligations, whether by compensating for losses, taking responsibility in certain contexts, or voluntarily. And *sixth*, restorative justice is excluded in cases of criminal acts that ultimately result in victims.

Second, Perkapolri 6/2012 accommodates restorative justice provisions through Article 12. The restorative justice provisions in this policy represent a new context that was not accommodated in the previous similar policy, namely Regulation of the Chief of Police of the Republic of Indonesia Number 14 of 2012 concerning Criminal Investigation Management (Perkapolri 14/2012). Although it is a new regulation following the issuance of SE Kapolri 8/2018, the substance of the criteria for implementing restorative justice in the provisions of material and formal requirements is actually not different from those previously stated in SE Kapolri 8/2018. The difference is that the Regulation of the Chief of Police refers to the implementation of investigative functions, while the SE is more at the level of investigation. Thus, the position of the Chief of Police indirectly only confirms how restorative justice is an important consideration in resolving criminal cases within the scope of investigation.

Third, National Police Regulation 8/2021 is a regulation issued specifically to implement restorative justice. The scope of this regulation accommodates the application of restorative justice more broadly than the two previous regulations. Its application can be carried out not only at the investigation and inquiry level,

but also at the level of implementing criminal investigation functions prior to the investigation, namely by the Community Development and Samapta Polri, according to their respective authorities. Unlike the investigation and inquiry level, at this level, restorative justice can only be applied to minor criminal cases. Furthermore, the restorative justice provisions in this regulation must meet general and/or specific requirements. The specific requirements apply only within the investigation and inquiry level and do not apply to the implementation of criminal investigation functions.

Slightly different from the two previous regulations, namely Circular Letter of the Chief of Police 8/2018 and Regulation of the Chief of Police 6/2012. Regulation of the Chief of Police 8/2021 stipulates material and formal requirements as part of the general requirements that must be met both at the level of implementing the functions of criminal investigation, inquiry, and investigation. Several material requirements that must be met are regulated in Article 5, including: *First*, its implementation will not have an impact on public unrest and rejection; *Second*, its implementation will not cause social conflict; *Third*, there is no potential for national disintegration; *Fourth*, its application does not apply to cases of radicalism and separatism; *Fifth*, implementation can only be carried out for those who do not repeat the crime; and *Sixth*, restorative justice is excluded in cases of terrorism, crimes against state security, corruption, and crimes against life.

In addition to the material requirements, several formal requirements that must also be met in this case are regulated in Article 6 paragraph (1), namely; *First*, the existence of a peace agreement between the parties except in cases of narcotics crimes; and *Second*, commitment

to fulfilling the rights of victims as the responsibility of the perpetrator except in cases of narcotics crimes. Furthermore, special requirements are accommodated in Article 7, Article 8 (special requirements for information crimes and electronic transactions), Article 9 (special requirements for narcotics crimes), and Article 10 (special requirements for traffic violations). It is explained in Article 7, these special provisions only apply to handling certain crimes, such as information crimes and electronic transactions, narcotics, and traffic violations.

Restorative justice in the context of law enforcement in digital activism cases subject to the ITE Law reveals how the law's loosely defined articles enable its weaponization against public criticism. Respondents consistently described uncertainty regarding restorative justice because the ambiguity of key terms—such as defamation, insult, or disturbing public order—allows authorities to reinterpret public-interest critique as a criminal offense. This ambiguity produces confusion and fear, particularly when critics are pressured to apologize even though their statements concern public matters.

Empirical findings indicate that the application of *restorative justice* in digital activism cases under Indonesia's ITE Law exposes a deeper structural problem: the law's conceptual ambiguity enables the criminalization of public-interest criticism. Rather than functioning as a mechanism of repair, restorative justice is frequently experienced by respondents as a tool of pressure, precisely because the ITE Law's loosely defined provisions—such as defamation, insult, or disturbance of

public order—allow public critique to be reinterpreted as a criminal offense.

This uncertainty is consistently reflected in respondents' narratives, particularly when they are pressured to apologize for statements they understand as contributions to public discourse. As one respondent explained:

As one respondent noted, "...I was asked to apologize. I refused because I believed it was a public matter and I was right to discuss it." (Quote from Respondent's Interview, translated by the author)

First, this statement serves as a critical empirical entry point. It demonstrates that the respondent understood their speech as belonging to what Hannah Arendt conceptualizes as the **public space of Action**—a realm where individuals speak and act in relation to shared concerns, political judgment, and collective responsibility. However, through the operation of the ITE Law, this act of public speech is forcibly reclassified into the **private realm of Labour**, where it is treated as a personal wrongdoing requiring apology, settlement, or criminal sanction.

However, the operation of the ITE Law systematically disrupts this public character through its ambiguous legal categories. Terms such as *defamation*, *insult*, or *disturbance of public order* lack clear doctrinal boundaries distinguishing public-interest critique from private harm. This indeterminacy enables law enforcement to retroactively reinterpret an act of public speech as a **private offense**, thereby relocating it from the realm of Action to the realm of Labour.

This relocation constitutes the core mechanism through which the ITE Law

erodes the boundary between public and private. What begins as **Action**—speech aimed at public accountability—is legally reconstructed as **Labour**: an individualized act that allegedly produces personal harm and therefore demands apology, compensation, or criminal sanction. In this process, the speaker is no longer treated as a political actor participating in public life, but as a private individual responsible for managing the consequences of their speech as personal liability.

Crucially, restorative justice does not mitigate this erosion but becomes one of its instruments. Because restorative justice operates within the same ambiguous legal framework, it functions less as a voluntary process of repair than as a mechanism that pressures speakers to accept the privatization of their public speech through apology or settlement. In Arendtian terms, this represents the **domestication of Action**: public speech is compelled to retreat into the private sphere, stripped of its political meaning.

Second, respondents described their personal experiences with ITE legal processes as examples of how the law's indeterminate provisions facilitate selective enforcement. Individuals engaged in digital advocacy find themselves vulnerable, as any critical statement may be constructed as violating the law. Their disappointment reflects the perception that the ITE Law inadequately distinguishes between criticism of public officials and harmful digital behavior.

One respondent recalled, "...So, with my experience in ITE advocacy, I was invited by the Coordinating Minister for Political, Legal, and Security Affairs to discuss the Joint Decree

(SKB) of the ITE Law on restorative justice, and I became the first victim to be reported after the SKB was issued." (Excerpt from an interview with a respondent, translated by the author).

The empirical paradox—where respondents involved in drafting or discussing restorative justice policies themselves became targets of the ITE Law—reinforces this claim in Arendtian terms. Participation in public policymaking constitutes a core form of **Action** in Arendt's sense, as it involves speech oriented toward shared concerns within a plural public space. The fact that such actors remain legally vulnerable demonstrates that the ITE Law no longer treats the public realm of Action as a protected domain. Instead, its ambiguity enables the retroactive reframing of public participation as a private offense, subjecting political speech to the logic of individual liability. This shows that ambiguity operates not as an exception but as a governing logic that collapses Arendt's distinction between Action and Labour, confirming that the erosion of public-private boundaries under the ITE Law is structural rather than incidental.

Third, respondents emphasized that restorative justice remains unclear because the underlying legal categories are too broad and undefined. Without clear limits, law-enforcement agencies can continue treating public-interest speech as a potential criminal violation, reinforcing the risk of misuse of the law to silence critics.

As one respondent stated, "...Even though the Joint Decree is clear... academic activities cannot be criminalized." (Excerpt from an interview with a respondent, translated by the author).

This suggests that despite policy guidance, the flexibility of the ITE Law's interpretation still allows authorities to pursue cases that should be protected, demonstrating continued overreach.

Fourth, respondents described pressure and intimidation as integral to ITE cases—an outcome enabled by the law's broad interpretive space. Because the threshold for criminality is unclear, authorities can use the possibility of legal action as a tool of coercion, pushing individuals toward settlement even when their statements are legitimate criticism.

One respondent observed, "...It turns out that all the people reporting crimes under the ITE Law are from the task force." (Excerpt from an interview with a respondent, translated by the author).

This indicates an institutionalized pattern of weaponization, where state actors actively monitor and report online activity using ambiguous provisions that allow almost any critical statement to be constructed as a criminal act.

Overall, the interviews demonstrate that the ambiguity, elasticity, and loose definitions within the UU ITE create structural opportunities for its weaponization and misuse against digital activists. The lived experiences of respondents show that these vague provisions enable the criminalization of legitimate criticism, even as restorative justice reforms attempt to mitigate harm.

The situation where respondents invited to discuss the Joint Decree on Restorative Justice under the ITE Law also became victims demonstrates the complexity and challenges of law enforcement and the implementation

of restorative justice in Indonesia. This incident illustrates that in a complex and controversial legal context like the ITE Law, even experts or parties involved in the legal process can become victims of the very system they are attempting to discuss or improve. In conclusion, there is a need for in-depth reflection on existing legal policies and how their implementation impacts various parties, including those seeking to change or improve the system.

Cyber Patrol

Legal complaints against internet users actually increased in 2020, which is remembered as the year of the COVID-19 pandemic. Criminalizations under the ITE Law during 2020 were largely related to the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, some were prosecuted for their statements regarding the central and regional governments' handling of COVID-19, as well as for activities deemed to spread false news related to COVID-19.

Another trend is the use of regulations to restrict expression in the digital world. Articles 14-15 of Law Number 1 of 1946 concerning Chaos, as well as several articles on insults in the Criminal Code, such as Articles 270 and 310. The increase in criminal penalties against citizens during the pandemic is also evident from data from the Cyber Patrol website (Patrolisiber, 2020). Telegram Silenced: The rise in criminalization of netizens occurred after the issuance of two telegrams from the National Police Chief.

First, telegram No. ST/1100/IV/HUK.7.1.2020 dated April 4, 2020. In it, the National Police Chief instructed his staff to conduct cyber patrols to monitor

the situation of opinion news that targets COVID-19 hoaxes. It also targets hoaxes related to government policies in handling the coronavirus outbreak, as well as insults against the ruler/president and government officials.

Table 4. Telegram from the Chief of Police regarding Cyber Patrol

NO.	No. Letter	Date	Telegram Contents
1	ST/ 1100/ IV/ HUK .7.1.2020	April 4, 2020	Cyber patrol instructions to monitor opinion news related to COVID-19 and insults to the government
2	STR/ 645/ X/ PAM .3.2./ 2020	October 2, 2020	Cyber patrol and media management orders to counter narratives opposing demonstrations amid the pandemic

Source: Compiled by the Author.

Second, telegram number STR/645/X/PAM.3.2./2020, dated October 2, 2020, was issued amid public criticism and protests against the Job Creation Law, also known as the Omnibus Law. This telegram contained at least two important elements: an order to conduct cyber patrols on social media and media management to build public opinion that disagreed with

the demonstrations amid the COVID-19 pandemic. It also provided instructions to create counter-narratives to issues discrediting the government.

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These two telegrams are problematic because they pose a risk of abuse of authority by police and law enforcement for repressive action. They are also vulnerable to triggering violations of freedom of expression because they contain points related to insulting the president and government officials. In practice, as the data above shows, citizens who express opinions or criticize policies handling the pandemic are subject to punishment. Naturally, these punishments create a climate of increasing fear. A survey by the National Commission on Human Rights (Komnas HAM) in December 2020 showed that 29%

of 1,200 people were afraid to criticize the government. Meanwhile, 36.2% were afraid to express their opinions online or on social media (KOMNAS HAM, 2021).

Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participation (SLAPP)

In the context of Indonesian law, *Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation* (SLAPPs) typically occur in cases related to environmental protection and human rights. SLAPPs often occur in the context of freedom of expression and human rights advocacy related to environmental protection. A SLAPP phenomenon outside of environmental issues is the digital activism case involving human rights activists Haris Azhar and Fatia Maulidiyanti. They faced a SLAPP, a legal action aimed at stopping public participation. In this case, they were charged with allegedly defaming the Coordinating Minister for Maritime Affairs and Investment, Luhut Binsar Pandjaitan. Their legal team stated that the charges constituted an act of harassment against the judiciary and constituted a SLAPP (Anjani, AO, 2023). This case reflects the challenges faced in safeguarding freedom of expression and human rights in Indonesia, particularly when legal action is used to suppress public participation in discussions or advocacy activities in Indonesia.

Table 5. Results of Phenomenological Interviews of Digital Activism that Experienced SLAPPs Associated with Basic Human Actions According to Hannah Arendt

The Phenomenon of Digital Activism	Excerpt from Interview (author's translation)	In Relation to Arendt's Basic Human Action
Motivation: Commitment to human rights and social justice	"I want to use my voice to voice my concerns about human rights violations and	Action: Pursue authentic political goals and the world as a

	encourage positive change in society.”	shared space.
Challenge: Intimidation, censorship, threats of violence, lack of resources and support	“He experienced many cases that occurred in Indonesia and he could only tell stories.”	Labor: Transformation of nature to meet human needs.
Impact: Raising awareness about human rights, encouraging policy change, providing support to victims of human rights violations	“There are regional regulations in Banten that were changed because of my video.”	Action: Pursue authentic political goals and the world as a shared space.
Use of digital platforms: Disseminating human rights information, advocating for victims, building communities	“The YouTube account was created two years prior, and activated during the pandemic.”	Work: The creation of objects and artifacts in the human world.
Commitment to change: Working to create a more just and equal society	God willing, I will continue to fight for my commitment to the world of law and the world of human rights.	Action: Pursue authentic political goals and the world as a shared space.
Integrity: Decline payment offers for certain cases	“For those who want to pay me to be invited and discuss domestic violence cases, I have a filter.”	Action: Pursue authentic political goals and the world as a shared space.
Preparation: Do research before creating content	“Before the podcast, I read reports from nine related organizations.”	Labor: Transformation of nature to meet human needs.

Source :Processed by the author.

This table presents a phenomenological analysis of interview results with respondents regarding the use of YouTube as a tool for disseminating information related to human rights. Each row represents a narrative containing a direct quote from the respondent, followed by the respondent's feelings or responses related to the narrative. Overall, Table 5 illustrates various aspects of the experiences and attitudes of human rights activists who use digital media for advocacy. They expressed interest, satisfaction, concern, commitment, integrity, preparation, suspicion, fear, courage, dedication, and determination in using digital platforms to advocate for human rights issues. Several challenges and negative reactions from certain parties are also highlighted in this table, as are steps taken by some respondents to protect online privacy. Overall, this table provides an in-depth understanding

of human rights activists' experiences and perceptions regarding the use of digital media as an advocacy tool.

Table 6. Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participation (SLAPP) Cases 2014-2023

Area	Case
Java	36
Sumatra	30
Sulawesi	23
Kalimantan	22
Bali-Nusa Tenggara	15
my shame	5
Papua	2

Source: Compiled by the Author.

Table 6 provides an overview of the number of SLAPP cases that occurred in various regions in Indonesia from 2014 to 2023. SLAPP is a legal action aimed at pressuring or intimidating parties who participate publicly in certain issues, such as the environment, politics, or human rights. Table 5 shows that Java had the highest number of SLAPP cases, namely 36 cases, followed by Sumatra with 30 cases. In addition, Sulawesi, Kalimantan, and Bali-Nusa Tenggara also had a significant number of cases, respectively, with 23, 22, and 15 cases. Meanwhile, Maluku and Papua had a relatively lower number of SLAPP cases, namely 5 and 2 cases. This table provides an overview of the geographical distribution of SLAPP cases in Indonesia during this period. This information can be used to understand the distribution and patterns of SLAPP cases in various regions, as well as to identify areas

that may require special attention in terms of protecting public participation.

Democratization of Digital Public Space

The future of democratization of the digital public sphere depends on a balance between equitable access, freedom of expression, and protection against cyberattacks and excessive restrictions. Fair and transparent regulations, along with efforts to improve digital literacy, can help ensure the digital public sphere remains inclusive and democratic. Digital activism can play a crucial role in driving positive change, provided it is protected from the risk of SLAPPs (Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation) and other attacks. Therefore, the future prospects for democratization of the digital public sphere will depend heavily on efforts to maintain freedom and inclusivity while protecting the public from the risks that arise in the digital age.

Over the past twenty years, the widespread adoption of digital technology, particularly social media, has been exploited by many countries in authoritarian ways to implement social repression and exert control. This phenomenon, which scholars refer to as the rise of digital authoritarianism, has led to authorities restricting human rights and freedom of expression (Feldstein 2021; Scott 2021). Digital authoritarianism is generally defined as the authoritarian exploitation of digital information technology, particularly social media platforms, by governments to increase surveillance, manipulate, and restrict the freedoms and rights of their citizens.

Furthermore, this concept encompasses the government's failure

to uphold media freedom and the use of "authoritarian technology"(methods, systems, devices) to monitor investigative journalists through digital platforms. These perpetrators often include state officials or state-sponsored cyber forces (Masduki, 2022). Digital technology is actively used by the regime in a repressive manner, signaling the emergence of a digital-based autocracy in which state and non-state actors collaborate.

These regimes have replaced previous forms of authoritarianism, where state officials were the sole actors. Currently, Indonesia's democratic situation, according to measurements (Freedom House, 2023), has deteriorated to the point of being partially free. This situation has persisted since 2014. In fact, in 2006, Indonesia was categorized as free for the first time. So why has Indonesia's status declined and stagnated?

Several researchers, such as Kusman, AK, & Istiqomah, M., 2021, argue that democracy in Indonesia is decaying under

Jokowi's administration. This is evident in the weakening of democracy, civil rights, and the transparency of government institutions, as well as the strengthening of political-business alliances. They manipulate legal instruments and use new and mainstream media to manipulate public opinion to maintain economic access and power while manipulating public support. This method is referred to as the basic concept of new despotism.

New Despotism is more than just an old-fashioned military dictatorship or a pyramid of power with an iron fist. It is a type of pseudo-democratic government led by a ruler who manipulates support; it thrives on hedonism (John Keane, 2020). New despotic regimes still require democratic institutions and elections. These regimes are powerful in uniting the people against their political opponents. Combining the power of capital markets, technology, media, law enforcement, and the armed forces, such new despotic regimes can be powerful, durable, and effective.

Table 7. Indonesian Democracy Measured by Global and Domestic Institutions (2010-2023)

Year	Democracy Index (EIU)		Freedom in the World - Freedom House		Currently Indonesian Democracy Index	
	Score	Category	Score	Category	Score	Category
2010	2.5	Free	6.53	Democracy has weaknesses	63.17	Currently
2011	2.5	Free	6.53	Flawed democracy	65.48	Currently
2012	2.5	Free	6.76	Flawed democracy	62.63	Currently
2013	2.5	Free	6.82	Flawed democracy	63.72	Currently

2014	3	Some are free	6.95	Flawed democracy	73.04	Currently
2015	3	Some are free	7.03	Flawed democracy	72.82	Currently
2016	3	Some are free	6.97	Flawed democracy	70.09	Currently
2017	3	Some are free	6.39	Flawed democracy	72.11	Currently
2018	3	Some are free	6.39	Flawed democracy	72.39	Currently
2019	3	Some are free	6.48	Flawed democracy	74.92	Currently
2020	2.89	Some are free	6.61	Flawed democracy	71.29	Currently
2022	2.89	Some are free	6.61	Flawed democracy	72.49	Currently
2022	2.89	Some are free	6.71	Flawed democracy	73.94	Currently
2023	2.89	Some are free	6.71	Flawed democracy	74.21	Currently

Source :Compiled by the Author.

In line with the various international measurements mentioned above, the Indonesian government's assessment of domestic democracy through the Indonesian Democracy Index (IDI) also shows a similar trend. In a ten-year measurement (2009-2021), Indonesia's democratic quality was at a medium level (*medium performance of democracy*), with an index ranging from 62 to 67 on a scale of 0-100 (Nugraheni, A. 2023).

The findings of various democratic initiatives, both from international and domestic institutions, mentioned above are not surprising. Dozens of recent studies on democratic decline have been formulated using various terms and phrases, including: flawed democracy, democratic decline, democratic regression,

democratic deconsolidation, democratic backsliding, authoritarian change, democratic decline, democratic recession, illiberal democracy, non-democratic pluralism, democratic recession, neo-authoritarianism, authoritarian innovation, and authoritarian change (LP3ES, 2022).

Referring to a report by Amnesty International's Indonesian representative (Hamid, U. and Hermawan, A 2020), the Chief of the Indonesian National Police (Kapolri) has issued a telegram to conduct cyber patrols, monitor demonstration plans, clarify hoaxes related to the omnibus law, and counter anti-government narratives. The result of these cyber patrols was at least several arrests of seven administrators of WhatsApp groups, Facebook pages, and Instagram accounts used to mobilize

and organize protests. The police charged these activists with incitement under the Electronic Information and Transactions Law (UU ITE). Indonesian civil society is fully aware of this worrying trend, and some have called the sixth year of Jokowi's administration a year of digital repression (Koran Tempo, 2020).

In Indonesia, digital platforms have become an important tool in the political context, particularly in organizing mass rallies and monitoring elections (Jurriëns, E., & Tapsell, R., 2017). Digital platforms provide a space for freedom of opinion and expression, which are essential components of a vibrant democracy. The growing number of people running for political office should recognize the importance of participating in online campaigns and building their presence on social media.

To move beyond merely criticizing the repressive use of the UU ITE, this study proposes several restorative-justice-based mechanisms designed to make the application of SLAPP-like articles virtually impossible against non-commercial criticism of public officials and public policy. Given that digital platforms in Indonesia have historically functioned as crucial democratic infrastructures for political organizing, election monitoring, and public participation (Jurriëns & Tapsell, 2017), safeguarding these spaces from criminalization becomes essential. Therefore, this study recommends: (1) a public-interest exemption clause that prevents criminal charges for expressions made to advance democratic debate; (2) mandatory mediation prior to any police investigation, ensuring that conflicts are resolved through dialogue rather

than criminal prosecution; and (3) a proportionality and malicious-intent assessment requiring law enforcement to demonstrate concrete public harm before initiating any digital-speech case. Institutionalizing these safeguards would reduce the ability of political actors to weaponize the UU ITE while preserving the state's legitimate authority to address genuine harms in the digital sphere.

Furthermore, digital technology has profoundly reshaped multiple domains of social life, including media, governance, commerce, informal labor, urban planning, disaster response, health, education, religion, and cultural production, underscoring its role as a structuring force of contemporary society.

The Indonesian experience demonstrates that Arendt's concept of the public sphere requires refinement to account not only for authoritarian legal pressure, but also for the distinctive logic of digital visibility. In classical Arendtian theory, the public realm of *Action* presupposes a space of appearance in which speech acquires meaning through presence, plurality, recognition, and the exercise of *judgment* oriented toward shared truth, rather than through amplification or popularity.

In Indonesia's digital public sphere, however, appearance is increasingly mediated by virality. The logic of virality does not merely shape the reach of speech; it systematically displaces truth and *judgment* as criteria of public validity. Speech is rendered credible not through verification, deliberation, or reflective judgment, but through circulation, engagement metrics, and affective resonance—often intensified

by provocative, bot-driven interactions. This transformation fundamentally alters the conditions of appearance itself: public action must first become viral in order to be recognized, yet virality simultaneously heightens legal and political exposure under the ITE Law.

The weaponization of Restorative Justice intensifies this dynamic by enabling the retroactive legal reinterpretation of viral speech as a private offense, thereby converting visibility into individualized risk. As a consequence, digital public action operates within a structural double bind: speech must circulate widely to matter politically, yet circulation itself invites coercion, intimidation, and criminalization. Accordingly, this study explicitly argues that digital public spheres under authoritarian legal pressure should not be analyzed as arenas of deliberation or collective judgment, but as spaces of strategic risk management and political performance, in which visibility—governed by the logic of virality—functions as a mode of governance.

The Indonesian case thus extends Arendt by showing that in digitally mediated and legally ambiguous regimes, the public space of appearance is no longer merely fragile but algorithmically distorted. Under such conditions, *Action* is performed as strategic visibility under threat, and the collapse between *Action*, *Truth*, and *Judgment* becomes a governing condition of political life rather than an exception.

According to Aristotle, humans are essentially social and political beings whose goals are realized through the existence of a state (Shields, C., 2014). Aristotle

was an ancient Greek philosopher who influenced Hannah Arendt's thinking on politics. According to Aristotle, human life is divided into the *oikos* (family), a private sphere, and the public sphere called the *polis* (state). In the private sphere (*oikos*), power relations and stratification occur; such as in a family where children are subordinate to their parents — and other master-slave relationships.

Building on this conceptual distinction, this article makes three interrelated theoretical contributions to the development of Arendtian political theory and the study of digital authoritarianism. First, it reconceptualizes state control in Indonesia not merely as a restriction on online freedom of expression, but as a structural failure of Arendtian Action within the digital *polis*. Through an analysis of the ITE Law, the article demonstrates how political speech is reclassified as private wrongdoing subject to criminal liability, thereby displacing Action from the public realm into individual legal responsibility.

Second, based on empirical evidence from nationally and internationally visible activists, the article introduces the concept of a hierarchical collapse of the space of appearance, where visibility no longer provides political protection but instead amplifies vulnerability under selective law enforcement.

Third, the article advances Arendt's theory by showing that the erosion of Action in digital public spheres occurs not only through legal repression but also through excessive deregulation: under such conditions, Action becomes submerged in disinformation, provocation, and algorithmic logics of virality that supplant

truth and judgment. Overall, the Indonesian experience enriches Arendtian theory by demonstrating that the digital polis can be emptied through the very nature of power—both via juridical repression and through unmanaged communicative excess—each equally undermining the possibility of meaningful and responsible political Action.

This theoretical framework helps explain why, in digital environments, individual thoughts and actions increasingly resemble the private sphere (*oikos*), where activities are focused on personal interests and structured by self-interest rather than collective political engagement. Unlike the public polis, which serves as an arena for interaction between people through speech and action, private space lacks structured control, hierarchical accountability, or shared norms that enable collective judgment. Individuals enjoy personal freedom, and their activities are organized around converging interests, producing a space in which plurality exists without political significance. Table below illustrates Aristotle’s classical differentiation between private and public spaces, highlighting how these structural qualities shape the potential for political Action.

Aristotle’s Private and Public Spaces

	Private Space (<i>oikos</i>)	Public area (<i>polis</i>)
Room	Household (family)	Political Space
Basic Law	Want + need, The law of inevitability,	freedom

	The pressure of desire itself	
How to Set It Up	Coercion + violence	Discourse (<i>logos</i>); persuasion
Human relations	inequality	Equality (<i>isonomy</i>)

Source :Author’s own illustration.

Meanwhile, the public space that Arendt describes as a public political space has three distinctive forms (d’Entrèves, MP, 2003); 1) a form of social life that is artificial, not always natural and can be constructed. 2) Public life that has Spatial Quality, and 3) The difference between private and public life.

Artificial public political life does not arise naturally. However, Arendt does not view the artificial nature of public life negatively; instead, politics must evolve like human activity. Because only in this way can humans adapt to their needs and create a world free of action and discourse. Thus, politics for Arendt is not something natural and simply happens, as in the Aristotelian tradition. Politics for Arendt is more than that, and is human nature, meaning that politics is discourse, an act of free creation. Arendt emphasizes several consequences of the artificiality of public life, such as political equality. The political bond for Arendt is the solidarity of citizens because this solidarity generates political demands and "maintains a reference to the world" — not based on communal feelings or authenticity.

The second characteristic of public space is the spatial quality of public life. This stems from political activity,

which always requires space for every citizen to meet and gather to discuss problems, exchange opinions, and seek solutions to those problems. Public space is not enough for them to express their opinions anonymously. Political opinions will only be formed if they are tested and communicated, debated in public spaces and debates within a pluralistic environment and other existing entities. Therefore, political opinions do not occur in the private sphere. Arendt calls this the *in-between space* where humans unite not because of their inherent nature or identity, but because of a sense of need and ownership of the world in which they live and will pass it on as a legacy to others. Like a table where people sit around it.

The third characteristic of Arendt's public sphere is the distinction between individual interests and the public interest as global citizens. Human existence moves within itself, also moving with others, and also with those who follow it. In its existence as a global citizen, it feels like it is in the shared world but without owning it; its focus is on the common good, the public good. See Table 9 below to help understand the context of the digital public sphere adopted from Arendt's perspective.

Table 9. Digital Public Space in Adopting Arendt's View

Characteristics of Public Space According to Arendt	Relation to the Digital Context in Indonesia
Artificial Forms of Public Life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Digital platforms such as social media and websites artificially shape

	public space. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discussion and interaction spaces are built virtually to enable participation in community life.
Spatial Quality of Community Life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Although not physical in dimension, the life of a digital society has spatial qualities through online networks. • Individuals from different places can connect and participate in public life simultaneously.
The Difference Between Private and Public Life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Digital public spaces allow individuals to separate private and public life online. • The boundaries between the two lives are becoming blurred due to risks to privacy and data security.

Source :Processed by the author.

Arendt assumed that the public interest is like the role of a third party. In its role as a third party, it acts and acts not based on its own interests or the combined interests of others, but on the basis of the public interest based on various constitutional rules and procedures. On the other hand, the digital public sphere provides a platform for digital activism to develop and influence public opinion and political agendas. Digital activism in Indonesia has grown rapidly in recent years, becoming a vital tool for citizens to voice their opinions, advocate for social and political issues, and push for change.

Forms of digital political collective action have taken center stage in everyday political culture in Indonesia in recent years (Schlogl, L., 2022).

Digital activism in Indonesia has grown rapidly over the past few years and has become an important tool for citizens to voice their opinions, advocate social and political issues, and promote change. Forms of collective digital political action have emerged as a focal point in Indonesia’s everyday political culture in recent years (Schlögl, L., 2022). However, digital activism often remains confined to online spaces and does not function effectively as a mechanism for mobilizing protests in the offline world. One factor contributing to this trend in Indonesia, as in many other countries, is that digital activities are utilized not only by the majority of the population but also by the majority of political elites, as illustrated in the table below.

Table 10. Challenges of Digital Activism in Indonesia Faced by Political Elites

Factor	Reality
Domination of Political Elites	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Political elites have strong control or influence in the use of social media. • They can use these platforms to promote their own agendas or dampen the momentum of online movements.
The Power of Elite Response	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Political elites have greater resources and access to respond to or react to digital movements.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They can use their power to hinder or dampen the momentum of online movements that threaten their interests
Co-optation and Co-optation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Political elites sometimes try to absorb or misuse the messages or demands of digital movements for their own interests. • They may use the rhetoric or symbols of the movement to gain support or legitimacy, but do not actually follow through or realize the changes the movement seeks.

Source :Processed by the author.

Social media fundamentally operates within the realms of labor and work, facilitating repetitive activities, content consumption, and commodified symbolic production. Within Hannah Arendt’s framework, these activities are pre-political: they sustain social life but do not inherently generate politics. In the contemporary digital public sphere, however, the realm of action—the core of political life characterized by plurality, deliberation, and unpredictability—is instead reduced and supplanted by algorithmic curation and the dominance of elite actors. As a result, citizens’ political action no longer appears as an open, collective practice but is filtered and prioritized through a logic of algorithmic visibility that is commercial, opaque, and oriented toward engagement metrics.

This reduction of action is further exacerbated by algorithmic fragmentation,

which divides the digital space into separate information ecosystems, each governed by its own curatorial logic and regime of truth. Rather than constituting a common world, the digital public sphere fractures into narrow, insulated spaces that erode citizens' trust in the state as a shared political home (*common world*) and weaken the state as a locus of collective political life. Under these conditions, the power to determine political visibility and legitimacy shifts *de facto* to Big Tech—non-state, borderless actors with minimal democratic accountability—thereby positioning digital platforms as implicit political authorities.

On this basis, algorithmic transparency—including transparency regarding the suppression and amplification of political discourse—is necessary but insufficient to restore legitimate citizen action. The core problem is not merely a lack of information, but the structural dominance of commercial algorithms in determining political visibility. Consequently, the state cannot remain a passive regulator. The borderless nature of Big Tech undermines state sovereignty over the digital public sphere, while global experience demonstrates that control over digital technology constitutes a strategic instrument of political sovereignty and democracy, not merely an economic issue.

The most crucial policy recommendation, therefore, is to establish binding regulations and a sovereign, democratically accountable national Big Tech ecosystem, rather than limiting intervention to mandates for algorithmic transparency on global platforms. Such development does not entail replicating authoritarian control, but rather the

creation of public digital infrastructure subject to the constitution, public law, and democratic accountability, enabling citizen action to unfold on equal and responsible terms. The most realistic model is a hybrid regulatory framework: adapting the European approach—democracy, algorithmic transparency, data protection, and platform accountability—while integrating Indonesian values such as Pancasila, the 1945 Constitution, deliberation (*musyawarah*), plurality, and social justice. Only through such a structural reconfiguration can the digital public sphere be restored as an arena of plural, accountable, and meaningful political action.

CONCLUSION

This research shows that digital activism has become a crucial component of Indonesia's public sphere, enabling citizens to mobilize collective action and engage in advocacy through online platforms. Social media not only facilitates issue-based movements—such as human rights and democratic participation—but also redefines how citizens interact and construct shared meaning in the digital space. These findings confirm that the democratization process in Indonesia continues, even amidst increasing state control over the digital space.

This research reveals that cyber conflicts are often triggered by political interests that utilize disinformation and algorithmic amplification as strategic tools. Digital activism then emerges as a societal response to reclaim freedom of expression, disseminate counter-narratives, and push for social reform. However,

the use of the Electronic Information and Transactions Law (UU ITE), cyber surveillance, and SLAPP actions expose the paradox of digital governance—where regulatory frameworks intended to maintain order and security actually have the potential to limit online freedom and innovation. Restorative justice initiatives and cyber patrols demonstrate the tension between law enforcement and individual rights, while SLAPP practices highlight structural weaknesses in protecting public participation.

To resolve this paradox at its root, the most essential legal reform is the codification of a clear doctrinal boundary within the UU ITE and its implementing regulations, particularly Peraturan Kepala Kepolisian Negara Republik Indonesia, by introducing a “public interest defense” clause and an explicit legal distinction between protected criticism of public actions (action) and punishable personal insult (private insult). This reform must strictly limit criminal liability only to demonstrably false statements of fact made with malicious intent, while structurally safeguarding academic expression, policy critique, and digital activism as constitutionally protected forms of participation.

Debates surrounding the reform of Indonesia’s digital governance framework should not be reduced to technical legal adjustments, but understood as a broader project of democratic digital sovereignty. While the European regulatory model demonstrates the feasibility of algorithmic transparency, data protection, and platform accountability within democratic systems, Indonesia’s challenge lies in institutionalizing these principles

through its own constitutional values, including Pancasila, the 1945 Constitution, deliberative governance, pluralism, and social justice. Moreover, regulatory reform alone is insufficient in the absence of a democratically accountable national Big Tech ecosystem. Democratic states, including Indonesia, must develop sovereign digital platforms not merely to compete in the global digital economy, but to ensure that public discourse, citizens’ rights, and democratic values are not structurally subordinated to global non-state actors.

Theoretically, this study expands the phenomenological understanding of digital activism as a manifestation of political agency in the digital era. The study integrates Arendt’s concept of the public sphere with the Indonesian socio-political context, describing how citizens practice political participation through digital interactions. From a policy perspective, the findings emphasize the need for stronger accountability from digital platforms in moderating content, protecting users from disinformation, and guaranteeing digital rights. Legal protection of data privacy and online security must be accompanied by multi-sectoral collaboration between the government, civil society, academia, and private platforms to build an inclusive and democratic digital ecosystem.

In conclusion, this study makes both theoretical and practical contributions: enriching the phenomenological discourse on digital activism while offering concrete policy insights for managing cyberconflict and strengthening participatory democracy in the digital space. Future research is recommended to explore comparative

studies in Southeast Asia to assess how different political regimes influence the evolution of the digital public sphere.

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