Power Contestation and the Limits of Freedom of Expression in the *Mens Rea* Controversy

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ABSTRACT: *This study examines how Indonesian online media constructed the controversy surrounding the Mens Rea performance as an arena of power contestation and negotiation of freedom of expression. Employing a qualitative approach through Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis, six news articles published between 10–18 January 2026 from Kompas.com, Tempo.co, and CNN Indonesia were analyzed across textual, discursive practice, and socio-cultural dimensions. The findings reveal that the controversy was framed primarily within a legal horizon through dominant legal terminology, passive syntactic structures, and the privileging of institutional actors. At the discursive level, source selection and digital circulation reinforced the state's position as the central authority of legitimacy. Socio-culturally, this construction reflects the hegemony of legal discourse within a mediatized democracy. The study argues that the limits of freedom of expression are not solely determined by formal regulation but are discursively produced through media practices.*

ABSTRAK: Penelitian ini menganalisis bagaimana media daring mengonstruksi polemik pertunjukan *Mens Rea* sebagai arena kontestasi kuasa dan negosiasi batas kebebasan berekspresi. Menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan Analisis Wacana Kritis model Norman Fairclough, enam berita dari Kompas.com, Tempo.co, dan CNN Indonesia yang terbit pada 10–18 Januari 2026 dianalisis pada level tekstual, praktik diskursif, dan praktik sosial-budaya. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa polemik direpresentasikan dalam horizon legalitas melalui dominasi terminologi hukum, struktur sintaksis pasif, serta privileging aktor institusional. Pada level praktik diskursif, seleksi sumber dan distribusi digital memperkuat posisi negara sebagai pusat legitimasi. Secara sosial-budaya, konstruksi tersebut merefleksikan hegemoni hukum dalam demokrasi yang termediasi. Studi ini menegaskan bahwa batas kebebasan berekspresi tidak hanya ditentukan regulasi formal, tetapi juga diproduksi melalui mekanisme diskursif media.

Keywords: *Critical Discourse Analysis, Freedom of Expression, Political Satire, Legal Hegemony, Political Communication*

I. INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of stand-up comedy in Indonesia over the past decade reflects a broader transformation in the country's political communication landscape. No longer positioned merely

as a form of popular entertainment, stand-up comedy has increasingly functioned as a discursive medium through which political criticism, public dissatisfaction, and contestations of power are articulated. Humour and satire therefore operate not simply as light cultural expressions, but as communicative practices that symbolically negotiate authority, challenge political elites, and reflect the tensions of contemporary democracy (Ibrahim et al., 2025). Within democratic systems, such expressions are normatively protected under the principle of freedom of expression and are widely regarded as essential to the existence of a deliberative public sphere (Cacciatore et al., 2016).

Political satire occupies a strategic position within contemporary media culture because it enables criticism to be delivered through indirect yet socially resonant forms. Irony, parody, and exaggeration allow sensitive political issues to be communicated in ways that remain publicly accessible while simultaneously exposing contradictions within structures of power (Ibrahim et al., 2025). Previous studies suggest that satire contributes to symbolic forms of democratic control by encouraging public reflection on political practices and elite behaviour (Astuti & Wulandari, 2025; Shuyen et al., 2024). Its communicative flexibility further enables audiences, particularly younger and digitally connected citizens, to engage with political discourse outside formal institutional channels (Shuyen et al., 2024).

Despite its democratic potential, however, satirical expression does not always receive recognition as a legitimate form of political criticism. Public controversies frequently emerge when humour intersects with issues of religion, morality, nationalism, or legal authority. In such contexts, satire may shift from being interpreted as social criticism to being framed as symbolic insult, provocation, or deviant expression. Astuti and Wulandari (2025) demonstrate that the circulation of satire within digital media environments simultaneously expands audience reach while increasing the risk of decontextualization and interpretative polarisation. This ambivalence confirms that the meaning of satire is never fixed or inherently democratic, but is continuously negotiated through broader struggles over legitimacy, authority, and public morality.

These tensions became particularly visible following the performance of *Mens Rea* by Pandji Pragiwaksono, which generated significant public debate and institutional responses in Indonesia. Various online media outlets reported allegations of incitement and blasphemy, accompanied by legal complaints submitted to law enforcement authorities as well as ethical objections raised by political actors and segments of civil society. The controversy illustrates how artistic criticism can become entangled within juridical discourse, where legal interpretation increasingly determines the boundaries of acceptable public expression. Consequently, the issue extends beyond comedy itself and becomes part of a wider contestation over who possesses the authority to define the limits of legitimate criticism in democratic society.

Within this process, media institutions do not function as neutral transmitters of information. Media actively participate in shaping public understanding through processes of selection, emphasis, exclusion, and interpretation. Framing theory explains that news discourse organises reality into particular interpretative categories that influence how audiences perceive events and controversies (McQuail, 2010; Cacciatore et al., 2016). Lexical choices, narrative structures, headline construction, and the privileging of institutional voices all contribute to the production

of dominant meanings. Through such discursive practices, media may legitimise certain perspectives while marginalising others, thereby influencing whether satire is interpreted as democratic critique or as unlawful expression.

Critical discourse scholarship further emphasises that language operates as a social practice inseparable from relations of power and ideology (Fairclough, 1995, 2013). From this perspective, media discourse becomes a site where symbolic struggles over legitimacy are reproduced and naturalised. The dominance of legal terminology and institutional narratives within controversial reporting may normalise the assumption that public criticism must ultimately be subjected to juridical evaluation. Such processes risk narrowing democratic debate by repositioning artistic and political criticism within frameworks of legality, security, and procedural order rather than civic deliberation and freedom of expression (Fairclough, 1995, 2013).

Existing scholarship has examined media framing in controversial issues and explored satire as a form of symbolic resistance against power structures. Studies within political communication have shown that humour functions not only as entertainment, but also as a mechanism of symbolic control capable of exposing contradictions within elite practices and public policy (Astuti & Wulandari, 2025; Ibrahim et al., 2025; Shuyen et al., 2024). Other research has emphasised the importance of freedom of expression as a democratic foundation while simultaneously warning against the expansive use of criminal legal instruments to regulate public expression (Amiruddin et al., 2024). Nevertheless, relatively limited attention has been devoted to examining how online media specifically mediate conflicts between artistic criticism and state authority within Indonesian democratic discourse.

Against this background, this study aims to analyse how Indonesian online media construct the *Mens Rea* controversy as an arena of power contestation and negotiation over the limits of freedom of expression. Specifically, the study addresses three research questions: (1) how textual representations within news coverage frame the controversy; (2) how media discursive practices mediate tensions between artistic criticism and state authority; and (3) how broader socio-cultural practices reflect ongoing negotiations surrounding the boundaries of freedom of expression in Indonesian democracy. By integrating perspectives from political communication, framing theory, and Critical Discourse Analysis, this research contributes to the advancement of media and democracy studies by demonstrating how online media function not merely as channels of information, but as active sites for the production, circulation, and legitimisation of power within the contemporary public sphere (Cacciatore et al., 2016; Fairclough, 1995, 2013; McQuail, 2010).

II. METHOD

Research Approach

This study employed a qualitative approach using Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework to examine how Indonesian online media constructed the *Mens Rea* controversy as an arena of power contestation and negotiation over the limits of freedom of expression. The approach was selected because it enables the analysis of language as a social practice embedded within relations of power and ideology (Fairclough, 1995). Within this

perspective, discourse is not understood as a neutral reflection of reality, but rather as a process that actively shapes and reproduces social structures through the naturalisation of particular meanings (Fairclough, 2013). Fairclough's three-dimensional model was therefore utilised to connect textual analysis with media production practices and broader socio-cultural contexts.

Data Collection and Corpus Selection

The unit of analysis consisted of six online news articles selected purposively from Kompas.com, Tempo.co, and CNN Indonesia. These media outlets were chosen due to their status as prominent national mainstream media organisations, their extensive audience reach, and their intensive coverage of the controversy under investigation. Data collection was conducted through documentation techniques by downloading and archiving news articles using the keywords "Mens Rea" and "Pandji Pragiwaksono".

The inclusion criteria comprised: (1) news reports directly discussing the *Mens Rea* controversy; (2) articles containing statements from institutional actors, including law enforcement officials or political figures; and (3) reports published during the initial emergence of the controversy. All articles included in the corpus were published between 10 and 18 January 2026, representing the early phase of the controversy's intensification within the public sphere. Based on these criteria, six news texts were selected as the analytical corpus. Details of the media outlets and news headlines analysed in this study are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Media Outlets and News Headlines on the *Mens Rea* Controversy

Media Outlet	News Headline
Kompas.com	"When Pandji Pragiwaksono's Mens Rea Sparked Controversy, Leading to Police Reports and Legal Notices"
	"Pandji Pragiwaksono Reported to Police over Mens Rea, Indro Warkop: This Is a Regression in Thinking"
Tempo.co	"Police Statement Regarding the Legality of Evidence in Pandji's Case"
	"PDIP: Pandji's Mens Rea Material Should Be Interpreted as Criticism"
CNN Indonesia	"Metro Police Promise Professional Handling of Reports Concerning Pandji's Mens Rea"
	"Former Spokesperson of Dharma Pongrekun Sends Legal Notice to Pandji over Material in Mens Rea"

Data Analysis

The six news texts were analysed using Fairclough's three-dimensional CDA framework. At the textual dimension (micro level), the analysis focused on lexical choices, syntactic structures, metaphors, and representations of social actors within the news discourse. The discursive practice dimension (meso level) examined processes of text production, distribution, and consumption, including the privileging of institutional sources in issue construction (McQuail, 2010). Meanwhile, the socio-cultural practice dimension (macro level) situated the findings within broader relations of power and the ongoing negotiation of freedom of expression in Indonesian democracy. Through this analytical framework, the study sought to identify how media language

contributes to the production and reproduction of legitimacy within the controversy under examination.

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

RESULT

Legal Framing in Textual Representation

Analysis of the six news articles demonstrates a strong tendency to position the *Mens Rea* controversy within a framework of legality from the earliest stage of discourse construction. Legal expressions such as “police report”, “alleged incitement”, “blasphemy”, “legality of evidence”, and “legal notice” consistently appeared as dominant signifiers of the event. Repetition of these terms in both headlines and article content directed public attention towards the possibility of legal violation rather than towards the substance of criticism articulated in the performance itself. Consequently, comedy was represented primarily as an object of juridical evaluation, while its communicative and political dimensions became subordinated to legal discourse.

Syntactic structures within the news texts further reinforced this orientation. Passive constructions such as “reported to the police” positioned the comedian as the recipient of legal action rather than as an active political critic. Causal formulations such as “ended in a police report” additionally implied that legal intervention constituted a logical and reasonable consequence of the performance. Through such grammatical choices, legal responses appeared not as political decisions open to contestation, but as procedural actions framed as natural and institutionally justified.

Representation of social actors also reflected patterns of institutional legitimization (Van Leeuwen, 2007). Police authorities, political elites, and official spokespersons consistently occupied central positions as primary definers of the controversy, whereas the comedian more frequently appeared as the subject of complaints, investigations, or formal warnings. Attributional phrases emphasising institutional authority strengthened the perception that the state possessed legitimate power to define the acceptable boundaries of public expression. Institutional perspectives therefore, became dominant within the interpretative structure of the news discourse.

Dominance of legal terminology simultaneously produced a discursive shift in which satire was relocated from the sphere of political communication into the sphere of formal legal regulation. Within such framing, the controversy was interpreted mainly through categories of compliance, violation, and procedural legitimacy. Recontextualization of this kind narrowed opportunities for alternative interpretations that positioned the performance as democratic criticism or artistic expression.

Characteristics of online media further intensified the legal framing process. Headlines functioned as the principal entry point for audiences consuming rapid and fragmented digital information. Several headlines strategically foregrounded legal elements at the beginning of the text, thereby establishing juridical interpretation before audiences engaged with the complete

article. Such patterns strengthened the association between comedy and legal transgression while simultaneously limiting reflection on the broader political or artistic substance of the performance.

Emotional dimensions within the reporting additionally contributed to the construction of the controversy. Expressions conveying discomfort, outrage, or moral decline introduced affective resonances capable of intensifying interpretative polarisation among audiences. Emotional language reinforced distinctions between acceptable and unacceptable public expression, shifting audience responses towards moral judgement and social order rather than democratic deliberation.

Mediation of Conflict and Institutional Authority

Legal framing identified at the textual level was closely connected to broader discursive practices operating within media institutions. At the level of discursive practice, the *Mens Rea* controversy was mediated through source selection and editorial structures that consistently prioritised institutional actors. Kompas.com, Tempo.co, and CNN Indonesia predominantly relied on statements from police authorities, political elites, and public officials as the principal sources defining the controversy. Initial interpretations of the conflict were therefore shaped more strongly by formal authority than by artistic actors or civil society perspectives.

Dominance of official sources reflected broader gatekeeping mechanisms within journalistic practice. Institutional actors were consistently positioned as more credible and authoritative, enabling their interpretations to become the primary framework through which the controversy was understood. Debates concerning satire and criticism gradually shifted into discussions centred on administration, legal procedure, and institutional order.

Interactions between media logic and political logic further reinforced such tendencies. Official statements emphasising professionalism, legal procedure, and institutional responsibility aligned closely with the rapid and statement-driven structure of online news production. Mediation of the controversy therefore operated through communicative patterns that normalised the state as the central authority responsible for maintaining public order and managing conflict.

Digital distribution processes strengthened this pattern even further. Repeated circulation of legal terminology across headlines, news fragments, and social media dissemination gradually consolidated legal interpretations as dominant public perceptions. Continuous repetition narrowed interpretative possibilities and reinforced associations between satirical expression and potential legal violation.

Limited diversity of sources within the reporting also contributed to the narrowing of perspectives available to audiences. Non-institutional voices, including artistic communities and broader civil society groups, occupied comparatively marginal positions within the coverage. Such imbalance demonstrates that media institutions functioned not merely as reporters of events, but also as active organizers of symbolic contestation by privileging particular actors and interpretations over others (Figenschou, 2014).

Practices of mediation identified in the reporting contributed to the consolidation of institutional authority in determining the boundaries of acceptable public expression. Conflict mediation therefore extended beyond information delivery and became part of a broader process through which state-centred interpretations of controversy and criticism were legitimised in the public sphere.

Legal Hegemony in Mediated Democracy

Patterns identified at both textual and discursive levels indicate that the *Mens Rea* controversy was predominantly mediated within a framework of legality. Persistent dominance of legal terminology and privileging of institutional actors suggest that the controversy was positioned less as a democratic debate concerning criticism and more as an administrative issue requiring procedural management. Such patterns reflect broader dynamics surrounding the negotiation of freedom of expression within Indonesia's mediated democratic environment.

Representation of legal intervention against artistic expression as rational, professional, and socially necessary contributed to the naturalisation of institutional control. Repetitive institutional framing enabled legal responses to appear as neutral mechanisms for maintaining public order. Under these conditions, satire and political criticism became increasingly interpreted as potential violations rather than as legitimate components of democratic deliberation.

Relations between media institutions and political structures further reinforced this configuration of power. State actors consistently appeared as rational authorities responsible for preserving stability, whereas the comedian was positioned as a figure requiring accountability and control. Distribution of symbolic authority within the reporting demonstrates that the boundaries of freedom of expression were not negotiated equally, but were shaped through communication structures privileging institutional power.

Collective sensitivities relating to religion, morality, and political identity also intensified the controversy. Categories associated with blasphemy and incitement introduced legal-moral dimensions that historically carry significant sensitivity within Indonesian public discourse. Within such contexts, criticism directed at political actors or public institutions could easily be reframed as a threat to broader social cohesion, thereby legitimising legal intervention in the name of stability and order.

Expansion of digital media ecosystems accelerated the reproduction of these meanings. Online circulation enabled particular framings to be repeated rapidly across multiple platforms, gradually consolidating legal interpretations as dominant public understandings of the controversy. Alternative readings positioning the performance as artistic autonomy or democratic criticism consequently became less visible within public discourse.

Media coverage additionally demonstrated a tendency to priorities institutional stability and procedural management in responding to public tension (Pantti et al., 2012). Public attention was directed towards the effectiveness and professionalism of legal handling rather than towards the substantive political criticism embedded within the performance. Such shifts illustrate how mediated communication can redirect democratic discussion away from critique and towards institutional regulation.

Overall, findings reveal that the *Mens Rea* controversy was constructed as an arena of power contestation in which freedom of expression was negotiated primarily within the horizon of legality. At the textual level, language choices repositioned satire within categories of legal violation; at the level of discursive practice, privileging institutional authority narrowed available perspectives; and at the socio-cultural level, these processes reflected the broader hegemony of legal discourse within mediated democracy. Media institutions therefore functioned not merely as channels reporting conflict, but as active participants in reproducing symbolic boundaries concerning what can and cannot be expressed within Indonesia's contemporary public sphere.

Discussion

Media coverage surrounding the *Mens Rea* controversy demonstrates a dominant orientation towards legality that repositioned satire from political criticism into a juridical issue. Repetition of terms associated with police reports, legal procedures, and allegations of violation illustrates how discourse actively organises public interpretation rather than neutrally reflecting reality. Such patterns reinforce Fairclough's argument that discourse functions as a social practice closely connected to power and ideological reproduction (Fairclough, 1995, 2013). Media language therefore contributed to the normalisation of legal interpretations while simultaneously narrowing opportunities for alternative readings centred on democratic criticism and artistic autonomy.

Framing patterns identified in the analysed corpus further confirm the strategic role of media discourse in directing public attention towards particular dimensions of controversy. Emphasis on legality, institutional procedure, and official responses encouraged audiences to interpret the issue through categories of compliance and violation rather than through political critique or freedom of expression. Such findings align with framing theory, which explains that media shape audience understanding by privileging specific interpretative schemes (Cacciatore et al., 2016). Similar tendencies have also been identified in studies of media framing within crisis and public controversy reporting, where institutional narratives frequently dominate over structural or critical perspectives (Nasution et al., 2025; Oktavian et al., 2026). In the *Mens Rea* controversy, legal framing consequently became the dominant horizon through which the performance was publicly understood.

Ambivalent positioning of satire within democratic communication also emerges strongly from the analysis. Previous scholarship has shown that political humour operates as a mechanism of symbolic resistance capable of criticising elite authority while broadening public participation in political discourse (Astuti & Wulandari, 2025; Ibrahim et al., 2025; Shuyen et al., 2024). Results of this study nevertheless indicate that satire becomes vulnerable when interpreted within legal-moral frameworks connected to religion, nationalism, or social order. Under such conditions, humorous criticism is more easily transformed into a potential threat requiring institutional management (Wodak, 2015). Tensions between democratic expression and legal containment therefore reveal how the legitimacy of satire remains highly contingent upon dominant discursive environments.

Patterns of source selection observed in the reporting additionally demonstrate the persistence of institutional gatekeeping within online journalism. Police authorities, political elites, and official spokespersons consistently occupied privileged positions as primary definers of the controversy, whereas artistic voices and civil society perspectives appeared comparatively marginal. Such tendencies support arguments advanced by Vos and Heinderyckx (2015), who emphasise that gatekeeping processes shape both informational visibility and hierarchies of credibility. Discursive privileging of institutional actors consequently limited interpretative diversity and reinforced the authority of state-centred perspectives in defining the boundaries of acceptable public expression.

Interactions between media logic and political logic further intensified this concentration of institutional authority. Speed-oriented journalism, headline-driven communication, and dependence on official statements created communicative conditions favourable to procedural narratives rather than substantive democratic debate. Such dynamics reflect broader transformations in mediated political communication, where state institutions increasingly adapt their public responses to the operational rhythms of digital journalism (Esser & Strömbäck, 2017). Research on digital communication similarly demonstrates that social media environments and online news ecosystems often amplify dominant institutional narratives through repetitive circulation and algorithmic visibility (Bouvier & Way, 2021; Lim, 2020). Within the *Mens Rea* controversy, repeated dissemination of legal terminology gradually stabilised juridical interpretations as dominant public understandings.

Expansion of digital media ecosystems also accelerated the reproduction of symbolic boundaries surrounding legitimacy and criticism. Continuous circulation of headlines emphasising police investigations, legal notices, and institutional professionalism reinforced associations between satire and potential legal transgression. Such findings correspond with broader arguments that contemporary social reality is increasingly organised through repeated mediated representations operating across interconnected communication systems (Couldry & Hepp, 2016). Digital communication environments, therefore function not only as channels for information dissemination, but also as mechanisms through which ideological meanings become intensified, normalised, and socially sedimented.

Broader socio-political implications of the analysis can be understood through the concept of hegemony (Gramsci, 1971). Representation of legal intervention as rational, professional, and socially necessary contributed to the naturalisation of institutional authority over artistic expression. Under these conditions, legal discourse appeared as common sense rather than as the product of unequal relations of power, reflecting Fairclough's conception of ideological naturalisation within discourse (Fairclough, 1995, 2013). Similar hegemonic tendencies are increasingly visible within digitally mediated democracies shaped by populist communication, identity politics, and heightened moral polarisation (Heiskanen, 2021; Yilmaz et al., 2026). Interaction between legal discourse, collective sensitivities, and institutional authority consequently reinforced conditions in which criticism could be reframed as a threat to stability and social cohesion.

Emotional dimensions embedded within the reporting further intensified interpretative polarisation surrounding the controversy. Expressions implying outrage, discomfort, or moral

decline encouraged affective responses that shifted public engagement away from deliberative reflection and towards judgment framed by legality and order. Studies of digital communication and mediated publics demonstrate that emotional resonance plays a significant role in shaping political interpretation and accelerating the circulation of controversial discourse online (Döveling et al., 2018; Bouvier & Way, 2021). Parallel dynamics can also be identified within broader global discussions concerning mediated power, technological control, and symbolic exclusion in digital societies (Chouliaraki & Georgiou, 2022). Overall, the *Mens Rea* controversy functioned not merely as a debate over comedy, but as a broader discursive struggle over legitimacy, authority, and the boundaries of freedom of expression within Indonesia's contemporary mediated democracy.

IV. CONCLUSION

Media discourse surrounding the *Mens Rea* controversy demonstrates how freedom of expression is negotiated not only through formal legal frameworks but also through discursive mechanisms operating within contemporary digital journalism. Dominance of legal terminology, privileging of institutional actors, and repetitive circulation of procedural narratives collectively repositioned satire from a form of political criticism into an object of juridical evaluation. Such constructions reveal that the boundaries of acceptable public expression are continuously shaped through communicative practices that legitimise particular interpretations while marginalising alternative democratic readings.

Processes identified across textual, discursive, and socio-cultural dimensions further indicate the persistence of legal hegemony within Indonesia's mediated democracy. Institutional authority was consistently reinforced through news framing that prioritised stability, professionalism, and procedural order over deliberative engagement with criticism and artistic autonomy. Digital circulation intensified this dynamic by accelerating the reproduction of dominant interpretations across interconnected media environments. Under these conditions, satire became increasingly vulnerable to legal-moral framing, particularly when intersecting with issues related to religion, political identity, and collective sensitivity.

Contribution of the article lies in extending Critical Discourse Analysis beyond textual representation towards a broader examination of how online media actively participate in producing symbolic boundaries of democratic legitimacy. Integration of political communication, framing theory, and discourse analysis provides a more comprehensive understanding of how media institutions mediate conflicts between artistic expression and state authority in digitally mediated publics. Positioning the *Mens Rea* controversy as a site of power contestation also highlights the importance of examining media discourse as a constitutive force in shaping contemporary democratic culture, particularly in contexts where legality increasingly functions as the dominant horizon for interpreting public criticism.

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