

# Journalist Intimidation as an Information Control Strategy: A Systematic Literature Review of Violence Against Independent Media in Indonesia

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## Abstract

Press freedom, as a pillar of democracy, continues to face serious threats through practices of intimidation against journalists, both physical and digital. This study uses the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) method to examine academic literature and reports from international institutions for the period 2021–2025 regarding the forms of threats, impacts, and strategies for protecting journalists. The study results show that intimidation occurs in the form of physical threats, symbolic terror, and digital attacks such as doxing, sexual harassment, online mobs, and hacking. These threats result in psychological trauma, self-censorship, and a decline in the quality of investigative reporting, thus eroding press freedom and, consequently, democracy. Collective coping strategies in newsrooms have proven helpful, while technological innovations based on automated detection offer preventative measures, although they still require transparency and strong regulations. In the Indonesian context, journalists face a combination of physical, digital, and symbolic threats, highlighting the high vulnerability of independent media. Thus, multidimensional protection through strong legal regulations, collective solidarity, and technological support is needed to enable the press to fulfill its function as a pillar of democracy.

*Keywords:* Intimidation of Journalists, Press Freedom, Digital Threats.

## A. INTRODUCTION

One of the fundamental pillars of democracy is press freedom, which ensures that society receives objective, fair, and critical information. The press functions not only as a watchdog over those in power but also as a public arena through which citizens can express their aspirations and concerns (Nasution & Dianto, 2023). However, in practice, press freedom in Indonesia continues to face significant challenges. Among the most serious are threats and intimidation directed at journalists and media institutions that challenge the interests of government authorities, corporations, or certain influential groups.

Journalists may experience intimidation in various forms, including both physical and verbal threats. A notable example is the case involving Tempo, where the editorial office received packages containing severed pig heads and rats, acts of terror intended to silence the media and suppress the disclosure of truth (Puspasari Setyaningrum, 2025). However, in practice, press freedom in Indonesia continues to face significant challenges. Among the most serious are threats and intimidation directed at journalists and media institutions that challenge the interests of government authorities, corporations, or certain influential groups.

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New media enable broad public participation, particularly through social media platforms where political discourse develops rapidly. explain that conversations on Twitter are not merely spaces for political discussion but also arenas shaped by gender-based interactions, power dynamics, and identity construction. Within this context, women are often subjected to harassment, symbolic violence, and marginalization in online discussions. This condition indicates that new media simultaneously function as democratic spaces and arenas of contestation, where digital intimidation such as online mob attacks, hate speech, and gender-based harassment is employed to restrict the political participation of certain groups. The conceptual framework of media communication proposed by Sudarmanti provides a strong theoretical foundation for understanding digital harassment targeting both audiences and journalists on social media platforms.

Political communication theory is particularly relevant for examining journalist intimidation, as it offers a critical foundation for understanding how power operates through information control. According to (Hutapea, 2020). political communication encompasses not only the exchange of messages between political actors and the public but also includes propaganda practices, psychological warfare (psy-war), and opinion-shaping mechanisms frequently employed by those in power to maintain legitimacy. Repressive political communication strategies may involve threats, symbolic terror, and digital attacks aimed at controlling public narratives and suppressing criticism of governments or dominant groups. Consequently, a political communication approach enables a deeper analysis of the underlying motivations behind journalist harassment as a systematic effort to regulate information flows within society.

Therefore, it is essential to investigate various forms of intimidation directed at journalists as manifestations of pressure against critical media, including both physical and digital threats. This study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of how such pressures operate, how they affect press freedom, and how protective mechanisms for journalists can be strengthened within Indonesia's democratic context. To achieve a more thorough understanding of this issue, a systematic analysis is required to examine the forms of intimidation faced by journalists, the most prevalent patterns of such practices, and their broader implications for press freedom in Indonesia and globally. A Systematic Literature Review (SLR) is employed as the methodological approach of this study.

The formulation of the research problem in this study is grounded in the increasing prevalence of intimidation against journalists, manifested in both physical and digital forms. This study seeks to address several key questions: what forms of intimidation experienced by journalists are documented in academic literature and reports issued by international organizations; what patterns and trends emerge in

relation to pressure exerted against critical media; and how such intimidation affects press freedom and the quality of democracy. In addition, this research aims to identify protection strategies that have been recommended in the literature to address and mitigate these threats.

The primary objective of this study is to identify and classify various forms of intimidation faced by journalists through a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach. Furthermore, the study seeks to analyze prevailing patterns and trends in threats against the press, as well as to examine their implications for press freedom and democratic life. This research also aims to formulate protection strategies grounded in empirical findings from previous studies and reports issued by international institutions, thereby providing a comprehensive overview of the current state of press freedom.

The significance of this study can be viewed from three perspectives. First, from a theoretical standpoint, this research contributes to the enrichment of literature on political communication, press freedom, and journalists' digital security by offering a systematic and structured analysis through an SLR approach. Second, from a practical perspective, the findings may serve as a valuable reference for journalists, media organizations, and press freedom advocacy institutions in designing more effective protection strategies, as well as for policymakers in developing regulations related to journalist safety. Third, from a societal perspective, this study contributes to strengthening the public's right to access independent, critical, and high-quality information, thereby supporting the sustainability of democratic life in Indonesia.

## **B. METHOD**

This study employs a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach as the primary method for examining the phenomenon of intimidation against journalists, including both physical and digital threats. This approach was selected due to its capacity to provide a structured, transparent, and comprehensive synthesis of existing literature, thereby enhancing the academic rigor and reliability of the research findings (Rhadella et al., 2024).

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The research process followed a structured procedure based on the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework

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To ensure the relevance between the research objectives and the selected literature, an initial screening was conducted during the second stage of the review process. At this stage, studies that were not directly related to journalist intimidation were excluded, such as general media studies that did not address issues of threats, violence, or press security. The third stage involved an eligibility assessment, during which the full texts of the selected articles were thoroughly reviewed to determine their suitability. To be included, publications had to be written in either English or Indonesian, published between 2021 and 2025, and explicitly address issues related to threats, violence, or intimidation against journalists, whether in physical or digital forms.

The fourth stage was the inclusion phase, in which articles and reports that met all predetermined criteria were finally selected. Subsequently, relevant information from the selected literature was extracted to examine the types of intimidation, the actors involved, the impacts on press freedom, and the strategies proposed to protect journalists. In the final stage, data analysis was conducted by organizing the findings into major thematic categories, such as forms of physical and digital threats, their implications for press freedom, and protective strategies implemented across different contexts. To achieve a comprehensive understanding of journalist intimidation at both national and global levels, this analysis employed a descriptive–analytical approach. Through this methodological framework, the study aims to provide an in-depth overview of the phenomenon of journalist intimidation and to offer evidence-based recommendations for strengthening the protection of critical journalism in the digital era.

### C. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Based on the Systematic Literature Review (SLR), several key findings emerged regarding the forms, patterns, and impacts of intimidation faced by journalists. These findings provide a comprehensive overview of how intimidation operates across different contexts and its implications for press freedom and democratic governance.

**Table 1. Systematic Literature Review on Journalists Facing Intimidation**

No	Author(s) & Year	Title	Method	Key Findings	Relevance
1	(Kantola & Harju, 2023)	<i>Tackling the Emotional Toll Together: How Journalists</i>	22 in-depth interviews with Finnish journalists	Journalists experience online intimidation that generates emotional stress;	Provides insight into collective coping mechanisms that

		<i>Address Harassment with Connective Practices</i>		collective practices such as peer support, editorial backing, and community solidarity effectively reduce psychological impacts.	strengthen journalist resilience and inform protection strategies.
2	(Ressa, 2022)	<i>The Chilling: Global Study on Online Violence Against Women Journalists</i>	Global survey and interviews	Women journalists experience severe digital violence, including doxing, threats of physical harm, and online sexual harassment.	Offers global empirical evidence of gender-based digital threats against journalists.
3	(Bélair-Gagnon et al., 2024)	<i>Attacks on Journalism as an Occupational Hazard</i>	Conceptual analysis	Attacks against journalists are increasingly framed as occupational risks, yet they pose serious threats to democratic values and press freedom.	Strengthens the theoretical foundation regarding the impact of intimidation on journalistic professionalism and democracy.
4	(Menke & Seeger, 2024)	<i>Different Media, Different Audiences, Different Harassment</i>	Comparative analysis	Patterns of harassment vary depending on media platforms and audience characteristics.	Highlights the need for platform-specific approaches to understanding and addressing harassment.
5	(Alliance & Journalists, 2024)	<i>Journalism Under Attack: Digital Harassment and Its Psychological Impact</i>	Empirical case-based study	Identifies online harassment, mob attacks, and psychological pressure as major threats affecting journalists' mental health and professional autonomy.	Reinforces the argument that digital intimidation significantly undermines press freedom.
6	(Maryati et al., 2020)	<i>Annual Report on Press Freedom in Indonesia</i>	Monitoring and documentation of cases	Documents intimidation against journalists in Indonesia, including physical violence, digital threats, and symbolic acts such as the delivery of severed animal heads to media offices.	Provides local empirical evidence and contextualizes global findings within the Indonesian media landscape.

7	(Alliance & Journalists, 2024)	<i>Proactive Blocking through the Automated Identification of Likely Harassers</i>	Qualitative study	Reveals that activists and journalists face coordinated online harassment including doxing, mass reporting, and threats against family members; machine learning-based detection achieved up to 96.8% accuracy in identifying potential harassers.	Offers innovative technological solutions for protecting freedom of expression and enhancing digital safety.
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The findings of the literature review indicate that intimidation against journalists constitutes a global phenomenon that has become increasingly complex in the digital era. Patterns of threat are no longer limited to physical violence but have increasingly shifted toward digital forms, which vary according to platform characteristics and audience dynamics.

First, digital intimidation has proven to be highly effective in silencing critical voices. Forms of harassment such as doxing, online sexual abuse, and coordinated digital attacks not only cause personal harm but also undermine the democratic function of the press. This finding aligns with (Bélair-Gagnon et al., 2024) who emphasize that harassment against journalists should not be perceived merely as an occupational risk, but rather as a fundamental threat to democratic systems themselves.

Second, the psychological and professional consequences of intimidation are substantial. Journalists who experience harassment often face emotional distress, a diminished sense of personal safety, and withdrawal from sensitive reporting. These conditions contribute to self-censorship, which ultimately weakens investigative journalism and restricts freedom of expression.

Third, collective coping strategies within newsrooms emerge as an important form of resilience. The study by (Kantola & Harju, 2023) demonstrates that social support and internal solidarity can help journalists endure external pressure. Such strategies tend to be reactive, limited in scope, and insufficient when confronting systematic and large-scale digital attacks.

Fourth, technological developments such as automated detection models present promising opportunities for preventive intervention. As highlighted by (Alliance & Journalists, 2024) these tools can support early identification of harassment patterns. Nevertheless, their implementation must be accompanied by principles of transparency, accountability, and victim-centered design to ensure that technological solutions do not inadvertently intensify journalists' vulnerability.

Finally, within the Indonesian context, cases of intimidation such as those experienced by Tempo (Maryati et al., 2020) these tools can support early identification of harassment patterns. Nevertheless, their implementation must be accompanied by principles of transparency, accountability, and victim-centered

design to ensure that technological solutions do not inadvertently intensify journalists' vulnerability. Within the Indonesian context, cases of intimidation such as those experienced by Tempo.

Thus, these findings affirm that intimidation against journalists should not be understood as isolated incidents, but rather as part of a systematic strategy aimed at controlling the flow of information. Protective efforts must therefore adopt a multidimensional approach that integrates collective support within newsrooms, strong legal and regulatory frameworks, and technological innovations for prevention in the digital sphere.

The findings derived from the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) indicate that intimidation against journalists manifests in diverse forms, encompassing both physical and digital threats. Physical intimidation may include direct threats, acts of violence, and symbolic terror, such as the widely reported case involving Tempo, which received severed pig heads and rats as a form of intimidation. Meanwhile, digital intimidation encompasses doxing, cyberattacks, online mob harassment, gender-based digital violence, and threats disseminated through social media platforms. The variation in these forms of intimidation is also influenced by differences in platforms and audience characteristics targeted by journalists.

The impacts of such intimidation are profound, particularly in relation to journalists' psychological well-being and professional performance. Numerous studies indicate that harassment leads to emotional trauma, heightened fear, and psychological distress, which in turn encourage self-censorship, reduce the quality of investigative reporting, and in some cases force journalists to withdraw from digital spaces altogether. These conditions demonstrate that intimidation not only harms individual journalists but also poses a broader threat to press freedom and democratic integrity.

The findings emphasize that intimidation against journalists should not be perceived merely as an occupational risk, but rather as a structural threat to democracy. Systematic attacks aimed at silencing critical media undermine the watchdog function of the press and restrict public access to independent and credible information.

At the same time, the literature identifies various coping strategies adopted by journalists to withstand such pressures, particularly through collective support from colleagues, editors, and professional communities. Although these strategies have been shown to reduce emotional burdens, they remain largely reactive in nature. In parallel, technological innovations such as automated detection systems based on machine learning have emerged as promising preventive tools capable of identifying potential perpetrators of online harassment. These approaches offer new opportunities for strengthening journalist protection in digital environments.

Within the Indonesian context, annual press freedom reports reveal that intimidation experienced by journalists is multidimensional, combining physical violence, digital threats, and symbolic terror. This reality underscores the heightened vulnerability of independent media in Indonesia and highlights the urgent need for

comprehensive protection strategies that account for the complex interplay of physical, digital, and symbolic forms of intimidation.

#### **D. CONCLUSION**

This study demonstrates that intimidation against journalists constitutes both a global and local phenomenon that has become increasingly complex in the digital era. Forms of intimidation emerge across two primary domains: physical threats, including direct violence and symbolic acts of terror such as the Tempo case, and digital intimidation, encompassing doxing, cyberattacks, online sexual harassment, coordinated mob attacks, and threats disseminated through social media platforms. The variation in these threat patterns is strongly influenced by the type of platform used and the characteristics of the audiences involved.

The impact of such intimidation is profound, particularly with regard to journalists' psychological well-being and professional performance. Harassment and threats generate emotional trauma, fear, and insecurity, which often lead to self-censorship and a decline in the quality of investigative reporting. These consequences undermine the press's role as a watchdog of power and restrict the public's right to access independent, critical, and high-quality information. Accordingly, intimidation against journalists should not be regarded merely as an occupational risk, but rather as a systematic strategy that weakens press freedom and democratic governance.

Collective coping strategies, including support from colleagues, editors, and professional communities, play an important role in mitigating emotional distress, although such measures remain largely reactive in nature. At the same time, technological innovations such as automated detection systems that identify harassment perpetrators through machine learning offer promising preventive approaches. Nevertheless, the implementation of these technologies must be guided by principles of transparency, accountability, and victim-centered protection to avoid reinforcing existing vulnerabilities.

In the Indonesian context, journalists face a convergence of physical, digital, and symbolic threats, reflecting the heightened vulnerability of independent media to political and social pressures. Efforts to protect journalists must adopt a multidimensional approach that integrates strong legal frameworks, collective solidarity, and technological innovation. Such efforts are essential not only to safeguard journalists as individuals but also to preserve the press as a fundamental pillar of democracy.

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