# DEFINING LEGAL BOUNDARIES OF 'HARM' IN DIGITAL EXPRESSION IN INDONESIA AND THAILAND

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#### **Abstract**

The enforcement of digital conduct provisions is currently gaining more relevance. Indonesia and Thailand, as two countries with diverse socio-cultural and religious backgrounds, continue to struggle with ensuring that online conduct was within safe boundaries. However, ongoing efforts to regulate this situation raised numerous questions regarding the balance between freedom of expression and societal sensitivities, particularly in relation to how 'harm' was defined by individuals and the legal system. A normative legal study was conducted to analyze the relevant primary law sources from both countries and examined how 'harm' is defined by the Indonesian and Thailand legal system. The results showed that there was a significant disconnect between Indonesia and Thailand's diverse societies and how the legal system tried to balance competing interests. Legal provisions and enforcement also showed a strong focus on sociocultural preservation that may inadvertently limit digital discourse.

**Keywords**: digital governance, freedom of expression, digital expression, harm, human rights, online conduct.

#### Abstrak

Penegakan ketentuan perilaku digital saat ini semakin relevan. Indonesia dan Thailand, sebagai dua negara dengan latar belakang sosio-budaya dan agama yang beragam, terus berjuang untuk memastikan bahwa perilaku online tetap dalam batas yang aman. Namun, upaya regulasi yang sedang berlangsung menimbulkan berbagai pertanyaan mengenai keseimbangan antara kebebasan berekspresi dan kepekaan masyarakat, terutama terkait dengan cara 'kerusakan' didefinisikan oleh individu dan sistem hukum. Studi hukum normatif dilakukan untuk menganalisis sumber hukum primer yang relevan dari kedua negara dan mengkaji bagaimana 'kerusakan' didefinisikan oleh sistem hukum Indonesia dan Thailand. Hasilnya menunjukkan adanya ketidakcocokan yang signifikan antara masyarakat yang beragam di Indonesia dan Thailand dengan upaya sistem hukum untuk menyeimbangkan kepentingan yang bertentangan. Ketentuan hukum dan penegakannya juga menunjukkan fokus yang kuat pada pelestarian sosial-budaya yang secara tidak sengaja dapat membatasi diskursus digital.

**Kata Kunci:** tata kelola digital; kebebasan berekspresi; ekspresi digital; *harm*; hak asasi manusia; perilaku daring.

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#### Introduction

The rapid proliferation of digital platforms is transforming the dynamics of communication and expression, raising intricate and urgent legal questions about the concept of harm in digital contexts. In jurisdictions such as Indonesia and Thailand, the regulation of digital expression has become an increasingly critical issue, intersecting with principles of free speech, public order, and individual rights. The expansive and borderless nature of digital space poses significant challenges for the legal system tasked with defining and addressing harm arising from online content. Although both countries share similar sociocultural complexities and developmental trajectories, legal frameworks exhibit significant divergences in conceptualising and responding to harm in the digital sphere.

The regulatory efforts centre on defining and evaluating harm in the context of digital expression.<sup>5</sup> The concept of harm is inherently multifaceted, including physical, emotional, social, and economic dimensions. In the present-day legal system, the concept of harm does not derive exclusively from morality, as famously iterated by Lord Devlin. The contemporary concept of harm is similar to what Joel Feinberg described, which centres around victimisation, or the invasion of other people's interests.<sup>6</sup> Rather than disputing the existence of harm, this discussion aims to provide a nuanced perspective on the punishments imposed for certain acts deemed harmful to society. These intellectual debates have significantly influenced the contemporary legal system around the world, where harm exists in different ways between the ideas presented by Hart and

Yuxuan Han, "The Impact of Digital Media on Language Styles and Communication Methods Based on Text, Image, and Video Forms," *Lecture Notes in Education Psychology and Public Media* 40, no. 1 (2024): 211–19, https://doi.org/10.54254/2753-7048/40/20240754.

The main urgency behind this topic is the fact that many digital interactions are more prone than ever to be taken out of context or the correct narratives, making them widely misunderstood and victimizing people behind them to manipulations. See Tena Prelec et al., "Is Academic Freedom at Risk from Internationalisation? Results from a 2020 Survey of UK Social Scientists," International Journal of Human Rights 26, no. 10 (2022): 1698–1722, https://doi.org/10.1080/13642987.2021.2021398.

J. Gede Pasek Eka Wisanjaya and Putri Bella Rosy Widodo, "Freedom of Expression on Social Media in Indonesia: Why Are the Limitations Imposed?," *Udayana Journal of Law and Culture* 8, no. 1 (2024): 109–28, https://doi.org/10.24843/UJLC.2024.v08.i01.p06.

Alessandro Morelli and Oreste Pollicino, "Metaphors, Judicial Frames, and Fundamental Rights in Cyberspace," *The American Journal of Comparative Law* 68, no. 3 (September 2020): 616–46, https://doi.org/10.1093/ajcl/avaa028.

Konstantinos Kalliris, "Online Harm, Free Speech, and the 'Legal but Harmful' Debate: An Interest-Based Approach," *Journal of Media Law* 16, no. 1 (2024): 1–27, https://doi.org/10.1080/17577632.2024.2425547.

Jessica Hurwood, "Application of the Hart-Devlin Debate to the Ideas and Arguments Raised in 'Legalising Assisted Dying Would Be a Failure of Collective Human Memory and Imagination," The Student Journal of Professional Practice and Academic Research 1, no. 2 (July 12, 2019): 24–38, https://doi.org/10.19164/sjppar.v1i2.872.

Feinberg. However, the core tenet remains similar, which is the rejection of pure moralism as popularized by Devlin. The digital age further complicates these dynamics, as the anonymity and virality of online platforms can lead individuals to engage in activities without fully considering the potential consequences.<sup>7</sup> Some activities, although not inherently harmful, are perceived as such and may lead to censorship or even legal repercussions, thereby significantly limiting freedom of expression.<sup>8</sup>

Determining harm requires a delicate balance between protecting individual rights and upholding societal interests, while accounting for the unique characteristics of the digital environment. This balance becomes particularly salient in a legal system influenced by diverse cultural values and political priorities, as exemplified by Indonesia and Thailand. The two Southeast Asian nations with shared historical influences and distinct socio-legal landscapes provide compelling case studies for examining the juridical construction of harm in digital expression. Furthermore, Indonesia's focus on religious and moral values, along with its constitutional guarantees of expression, leads to the development of rights and restrictions. Thailand's legal environment, shaped by lèse-majesté laws and the protection of Buddhist clergy, presents a complex dynamic in balancing competing interests and freedom of expression. These differences show the importance of contextualising harm in the normative and institutional frameworks of each jurisdiction.

In examining the juridical concept of harm in digital expression, this study investigates the broader discourse on legal pluralism and the evolving interplay between national and international legal norms. The globalised nature of digital platforms necessitates an examination of how local legal systems reconcile regulatory methods with transnational principles of freedom of expression and

Aqilah Shakirah Shepherd and Chunhua Liu, "From Screens to Statutes: Comparative Study on the Regulation of Cyberbullying through the Criminal Law of China and Cybercrime Act of Guyana," *Beijing Law Review* 15, no. 04 (2024): 2218–52, https://doi.org/10.4236/blr.2024.154124.

Andrea Palumbo, "A Medley of Public and Private Power in DSA Content Moderation for Harmful but Legal Content: An Account of Transparency, Accountability and Redress Challenges," JIPITEC - Journal of Intellectual Property, Information Technology and E-Commerce Law 15, no. 3 (2024): 246–68.

Leslie Gielow Jacobs, "Freedom of Speech and Regulation of Fake News," The American Journal of Comparative Law 70, no. Supplement\_1 (October 2022): i278–311, https://doi.org/10.1093/ajcl/avac010.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> Fakhriyyah Asmay Aidha, Muyassaroh Muyassaroh, and Lavatee Chite, "A Reflection of Kinship Between Indonesian and South Patani Malay Languages: Homophone and Homograph," *Lensa: Kajian Kebahasaan, Kesusastraan, Dan Budaya* 14, no. 2 (December 2024): 373–92, https://doi.org/10.26714/lensa.14.2.2024.373-392.

Aurel Croissant, "Comparing Governments and Political Institutions in Southeast Asia," in Comparative Politics of Southeast Asia: An Introduction to Governments and Political Regimes, ed. Aurel Croissant (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2022), 443–89, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-05114-2\_13.

privacy. Therefore, this study aimed to explain the underlying tensions and potential pathways for harmonising legal responses to harm in the digital age by examining the normative boundaries established in Indonesia and Thailand.

The rapid expansion of digital communication platforms in Southeast Asia has prompted significant scholarly attention toward understanding the implications for freedom of expression and the corresponding legal frameworks. In Indonesia, the intersection of digital expression and legal constraints has been a subject of critical examination. A study conducted by Rama showed the need for a balance between press freedom and regulatory measures in the digital age, particularly in mitigating online censorship and violence against journalists. According to the study, the Indonesian legal framework, including the 1945 Constitution and the Press Law, provided a strong foundation for press freedom. However, the implementation faces significant challenges, such as digital attacks and the monopolisation of information by major platforms. These challenges threaten the diversity and openness of public discourse.<sup>12</sup> Kurniawan expanded the discussion on the general sense of freedom of expression by focusing on the importance of cultural sensitivity in Indonesia, particularly in a certain region. 13 Although focusing on a particular area, this dynamic highlights the need for a delicate balance between socio-cultural understanding and freedom of expression, which is particularly important in the highly diverse Indonesian society.

In the context of Thailand, freedom of expression has been a topic of academic scrutiny, particularly in legal circles. A study conducted by Haberkorn showed some of the biggest concerns in Thailand's protection of the right to freedom, which are all rooted in the country's systemic issues. 14 The monarchical system in Thailand was particularly shown as a significant challenge to ensuring freedom of expression. This system naturally opens the way for dictatorship, which is inherently opposed to freedom of expression. Situmeang et al. reported that blasphemy laws were a problem in the discourse on freedom of expression in both Thailand and Indonesia, as well as in Vietnam. 15 In particular, Indonesia and Thailand were at a higher risk of infringing the right to freedom of expression, as both countries have provisions against blasphemy with vague enforcement. The lack of clarity in the normative structure and enforcement was

<sup>12</sup> Bagus Gede Ari Rama, "Press Freedom in The Digital Era in Indonesia: A Human Rights Perspective," [IHAD: Jurnal Ilmu Hukum Dan Administrasi 6, no. 4 (December 2024): 556-64.

<sup>13</sup> Reski Kurniawan, "Balancing Freedom of Expression and Cultural Sensitivity in West Java, Indonesia," Journal of Judikaltura 1, no. 2 (July 2023): 1-6, https://doi.org/10.61963/jkt.v1i2.32.

<sup>14</sup> Tyrell Haberkorn, "Dictatorship, Monarchy, and Freedom of Expression in Thailand," The of Asian 77, (2018): 935-43, https://doi.org/DOI: Journal Studies no. 10.1017/S0021911818002528.

<sup>15</sup> Ampuan Situmeang et al., "Blasphemy Laws and Their Implications for Religious Freedom and Expression: A Tri-Country Southeast Asian Perspective," Jurnal Hukum UNISSULA 40, no. 1 (June 2024): 156-70.

responsible for the threat to the constitutional rights that both countries claimed to protect.

Although the literature has developed quite significantly in this discourse, there is no specific focus on how legal enforcement should be examined. This study aims to fill the gap, with 'harm' being the main focus of scrutiny, particularly in a digital context. Therefore, this study aimed to examine the relevant legal norms in Indonesia and Thailand to determine how both countries perceive harm in the discourse of digital conduct and freedom of expression. The novelty of this study is in the narrow focus, as it draws attention to the core issue in digital governance, which is increasingly affecting the daily lives of ever-so-digitalized societies globally. The focus on Indonesia and Thailand adds a layer of complexity, mainly due to the diverse socio-cultural backgrounds of both countries.

#### Methods

A normative legal study method was employed to analyse the key normative frameworks present in the effective positive laws of both Indonesia and Thailand. Typically, a normative analysis consisted of applicable legal norms from primary legal documents relevant to the topics. This method was selected to support a deep analysis of the constructs behind legal norms that existed around the conceptualisation of 'harm'. To support the analysis, the statutory method was employed as a crucial tool to examine the relevant legal provisions and their application as primary law sources.

This study utilised several primary legal documents, including Law No. 11 of 2008 on Electronic and Information Transactions (EIT), Law No. 19 of 2016 on Amendments to Law No. 11 of 2008 on Electronic Information and Transactions, and the Joint Decree of the Minister of Communication and Information Technology. Other legal document were Attorney General, and Chief of Police No. 229, 154, KB/2/VI/2021 of 2021 on Implementation Guidelines for Certain Articles in Law No. 11 of 2008 on Electronic Information and Transactions as Amended by Law No. 19 of 2016 on Amendments to Law No. 11 of 2008 on Electronic Information and Transactions, Law No. 1 of 2024 on Second Amendment to Law No. 11 of 2008 on Electronic Information and Transactions, Thai Penal Code, Computer-Related Crime Act, Sangha Act, and the Constitution of the Kingdom of Thailand 2017. These secondary data were collected through a literature review and analysed descriptively to dissect legal topics according to the extracted narratives.

David Tan, "Metode Penelitian Hukum: Mengupas Dan Mengulas Metodologi Dalam Menyelenggarakan Penelitian Hukum," NUSANTARA: Jurnal Ilmu Pengetahuan Sosial 8, no. 5 (2021): 2463–78, https://jurnal.um-tapsel.ac.id/index.php/nusantara/article/view/5601.

#### Results and Discussion

## Socio-cultural dynamics and their legal reflections in Indonesia and Thailand

Society around the world was often filled with individuals with diverse sociocultural backgrounds. Although considered a key strength, diversity can also be a threat, primarily because it triggers friction.<sup>17</sup> Based on the interconnectedness provided by digital technologies, these frictions can occur due to the connections between individuals.<sup>18</sup> The perception of these interactions varied, leading to different reactions and consequences.<sup>19</sup> From positive to negative interactions, every form of engagement contributes to sustaining digital platforms, highlighting the significant role they play in the digital era.<sup>20</sup>

Indonesia was recognised as the most diverse country in the world, with over 600 different ethnic groups.<sup>21</sup> This provided diverse socio-cultural perceptions and values in Indonesian society. The influence of religion also affected Indonesian society,<sup>22</sup> due to its role in the country's history for over a millennium.<sup>23</sup> All of these aspects position Bhinneka Tunggal Ika as the most important binding values in Indonesia, focusing on the importance of unity in diversity, which aligns well with the third *sila* of *Pancasila*.<sup>24</sup> Based on these socio-cultural realities, maintaining societal harmony was key in preserving peace and security, as well as the growth and diversity of cultural values.

Siran Zhan, Namrita Bendapudi, and Ying Yi Hong, "Re-Examining Diversity as a Double-Edged Sword for Innovation Process," *Journal of Organizational Behavior* 36, no. 7 (2015): 1026–49, https://doi.org/10.1002/job.2027.

Min-Hsin Su, Jiyoun Suk, and Hernando Rojas, "Social Media Expression, Political Extremity, and Reduced Network Interaction: An Imagined Audience Approach," *Social Media + Society* 8, no. 1 (January 2022): 1–13, https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051211069056.

Sumer S Vaid et al., "Variation in Social Media Sensitivity across People and Contexts," *Scientific Reports* 14, no. 1 (2024): 6571–6532, https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-024-55064-y.

Hannah Metzler and David Garcia, "Social Drivers and Algorithmic Mechanisms on Digital Media," Perspectives on Psychological Science 19, no. 5 (2023): 707–883, https://doi.org/10.1177/17456916231185057.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> Evi Nurvidya Arifin et al., "Quantifying Indonesia's Ethnic Diversity: Statistics at National, Provincial, and District Levels," *Asian Population Studies* 11, no. 3 (2015): 233–56, https://doi.org/10.1080/17441730.2015.1090692.

Thita M. Mazya, Kholis Ridho, and Ali Irfani, "Religious and Cultural Diversity in Indonesia: Dynamics of Acceptance and Conflict in a Multidimensional Perspective," *International Journal of Current Science Research and Review* 7, no. 7 (July 2024): 4932–45, https://doi.org/10.47191/ijcsrr/V7-i7-32.

Denni Boy Saragih, "Religions in Indonesia: A Historical Sketch," Research in the Social Scientific Study of Religion 30 (2020): 54–66, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004416987\_005.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> Rahayu Febri Riyanti et al., "Understanding the Values of Pancasila and the Kebhinekaan Tunggal Ika Diversity in the Middle of the Diversity of Students," *Jurnal V ARIDIKA* 35, no. 2 (December 2023): 94–109, https://doi.org/10.23917/varidika.v1i2.23209.

Thailand was home to over 70 ethnic groups, each with distinct languages, customs, and traditions.<sup>25</sup> These groups shaped the social fabric through both cooperation and tension, influencing societal norms and perceptions of identity. Although the majority of the population shared a common national culture, regional differences often led to varying expectations and practices. The relationship between these groups, particularly in terms of social integration and resource distribution, reflected ongoing negotiations of power, recognition, and inclusion. These dynamics played a significant role in shaping the broader societal methods to issues, such as governance, citizenship, and cultural representation.

Socio-cultural dynamics in both Indonesia and Thailand, shaped by the diverse ethnic groups and regional variations, provided a foundation for understanding legal complexities. In each country, the interplay between different cultural identities influences not only social norms but also legal frameworks that govern issues such as individual rights, identity, and expression. The concept of 'harm', particularly in the context of digital expression, is central to legal challenges faced by societies while balancing societal cohesion with individual freedoms. There was a certain degree of inherent sensitivity in the defence of socio-cultural values. However, the diverse socio-cultural makeups of Indonesia and Thailand also facilitated greater understanding when an act deemed harmful was followed by further clarifications and discussions. <sup>28</sup>

Over the years, Indonesia has faced considerable public scrutiny regarding its enforcement of Law No. 11 of 2008 on the EIT Law.<sup>29</sup> EIT Law was often cited as a source of infringements against the right to freedom of expression. Cases that were made using EIT Law as the basis fundamentally showed that significant gaps existed between what many Indonesians truly aspired to and how

Parichat Ong-Artborirak and Katekaew Seangpraw, "Association between Self-Care Behaviors and Quality of Life among Elderly Minority Groups on the Border of Thailand," *Journal of Multidisciplinary Healthcare* 12 (2019): 1049–59, https://doi.org/10.2147/JMDH.S227617.

Harm is not always specifically explained and explicitly defined in the academic discourse regarding digital conduct governance. However, However, it is often examined through its manifestations, such as the chilling effects of surveillance, systemic inequities in digital access, and the abuse of private power by online platforms. See Danielle Keats Citron and Neil Richards, "Four Principles for Digital Expression (You Won't Believe #3!)," Washington University Law Review 95 (2018): 1353–87.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>27</sup> Ceren Karaatmaca et al., "The Role of Sensitivity Training for Managing Diversities in Sustainable Smart Societies," *European Journal of Sustainable Development* 9, no. 3 (October 1, 2020): 13–26, https://doi.org/10.14207/ejsd.2020.v9n3p13.

This is especially true for collectivist societies, where individuals are socialized to prioritize relational harmony and group cohesion over personal autonomy, making forgiveness a culturally embedded obligation tied to social norms and hierarchical roles. *See* Caroline Yih, "Forgiveness, Power, and Gender in a Chinese Context," *Transformation* online-fir (September 4, 2024): 1–13, https://doi.org/10.1177/02653788241271885.

Yagie Sagita Putra et al., "EIT Law at the Crossroads: Exploring Legal Dilemmas, Freedom of Expression, and Human Rights," *Pakistan Journal of Criminology* 16, no. 3 (June 2024): 1315–32, https://doi.org/10.62271/pjc.16.3.1315.1332.

legal frameworks affected the lives of Indonesians, particularly in the domain of freedom of expression in the digital age.<sup>30</sup> EIT's legal framework was mostly associated with silencing freedom of expression and oppressing Indonesians, damaging the perceptions regarding the Indonesian legal system. The former Governor of Jakarta faced accusations of insulting Islam, the religion of the overwhelming majority of Indonesians.<sup>31</sup> Although both sides in the country showed the extent of division in Indonesian society, international reactions remained mostly negative, questioning the country's commitment to protecting freedom of expression.<sup>32</sup>

The Indonesian government attempted to address this problem and the increasingly negative public perception by amending the law with No. 19 of 2016, which is the First Amendment to No. 11 of 2008 on Electronic Information and Transactions (EIT Law). The law specifically addressed the controversial Articles 27 and 28, clarifying key terms, such as "distributing," "transmitting," and "making accessible" concerning electronic information and documents. The penalties under Article 28 were also adjusted, with explicit targeting of the dissemination of false or misleading information and hate speech to address societal and legal concerns.<sup>33</sup> These revisions aimed to enhance clarity, ensure proportionality in enforcement, and more closely connect the law with democratic values and individual rights. The amendments also elicited unfavourable reactions from the public and showed insufficient legislative rigour in addressing systemic flaws. This was because the revisions appeared to prioritise surface-level adjustments over substantive resolutions to issues, such as overcriminalization and the potential for misuse to suppress dissenting opinions.

The Indonesian government has attempted to provide guidelines for the implementation of the EIT Law framework. This effort was carried out by introducing the Joint Decree of the Minister of Communication and Information Technology, Attorney General, and Chief of Police No. 229, 154, KB/2/VI/2021 of 2021 on Implementation Guidelines for Certain Articles in Law No. 11 of 2008 on Electronic Information and Transactions as Amended by Law No. 19 of 2016 on Amendments to Law No. 11 of 2008 on Electronic

Muhammad Ardiansyah Arifin, Owen Maskintama, and Nugroho Adhi Pratama, "Indonesia Abuse of Defamation Clause in Article 27 Section (3) of Electronic Information and Transaction Law," South East Asia Journal of Contemporary Business, Economics and Law 23, no. 1 (2020): 25–33, https://doi.org/10.1016/b0-08-043076-7/02840-0.

Ahmad Yogi Fahrudin, Ardiansyah, and Bintang Wicaksono Ajie, "Hukum Pidana Dan Konflik Agama: Menganalisis Kasus Penistaan Agama Dan Dampak Sosialnya," *HUMANIORUM* 1, no. 4 (January 2024): 116–23, https://doi.org/10.37010/hmr.v1i4.32.

Amnesty International, "Indonesia: Drop Blasphemy Case against Jakarta Governor," Amnesty International, November 2016.

Atikah Mardhiya Rohmy, Teguh Suratman, and Arini Indah Nihayaty, "UU ITE Dalam Perspektif Perkembangan Teknologi Informasi Dan Komunikasi," *Dakwatuna: Jurnal Dakwah Dan Komunikasi Islam* 7, no. 2 (August 2021): 309–39, https://doi.org/10.54471/dakwatuna.v7i2.1202.

Information and Transactions.<sup>34</sup> The joint decree extensively described how controversial articles, such as 27 and 28 from EIT Law and EIT Law's First Amendment, are to be enforced and interpreted. The joint decree raised normative concerns as it undermined the discretion and authority of the judicial branch to interpret the law accordingly.

The Indonesian Constitutional Court has made further developments in assessing this issue using the EIT framework, with recent urgency stemming from the enactment of the framework's latest amendments in Law No. 1 of 2024. The Constitutional Court's judgment in Decision No. 105/PUU-XXII/2024 clarified that the phrase "other person" in Article 27A must be read restrictively, applying only to private individuals and not to institutions. This provision directly contradicted the joint decree's expansive enforcement instructions. Although this ruling represented a positive step toward safeguarding free expression by limiting the reach of defamation-related provisions, it also showed the broader legal ambiguity that enabled perceived harm to be interpreted differently since the enactment of the first version of the EIT Law. The ruling could foster a sense of disharmony against the communal values held dear by a particular group of people in any social context, which were the building blocks of Indonesia's diverse socio-cultural backgrounds.

Thailand has a problematic discourse on freedom of expression. For example, Lèse-majesté law was criticised over the years as a significant restriction on freedom of expression, even before the proliferation of many digital platforms.<sup>36</sup> This law was embedded in Section 112 of the Thai Penal Code, which criminalized defamation, insults, or threats against the monarchy with penalties of 3 to 15 years' imprisonment. The issues brought by the Lèse-majesté law with digital transformation became even more pronounced and raised criticism from the general public. The Thai government even attempted to intensify enforcement by prosecuting digital platforms that allowed criticism, particularly after the 2014 coup.<sup>37</sup> This legal trend revealed that the Thai government did not intend to preserve the right to freedom of expression, openly disregarding public scrutiny through intensified enforcement, in order to protect certain powers within the government.

Johnson Sahat Maruli Tua Pangaribuan, "Kepastian Hukum Atas Tindak Pidana Pencemaran Nama Baik Berdasarkan Keputusan Bersama Tentang Pedoman Implementasi Atas Pasal Tertentu Dalam Undang-Undang Informasi Dan Transaksi Elektronik," *Honeste Vivere* 33, no. 1 (2023): 37–48, https://doi.org/10.55809/hv.v33i1.183.

Sri Pujianti, "MK Mempertegas Pemaknaan Unsur-Unsur Pencemaran Nama Baik Dalam UU ITE," Mahkamah Konstitusi Republik Indonesia, April 29, 2025, https://www.mkri.id/index.php?page=web.Berita&id=23133.

David Streckfuss, "Lèse-Majesté within Thailand's Regime of Intimidation," in Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Thailand, 2019, 134–44, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315151328-10.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>37</sup> Pinkaew Laungaramsri, "Mass Surveillance and the Militarization of Cyberspace in Post-Coup Thailand," *Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies* 9, no. 2 (2016): 195–214, https://doi.org/10.14764/10.ASEAS-2016.2-2.

Lèse-majesté provision in the Thai Penal Code was further reinforced by the country's 2017 Constitution, which was drafted and enacted following the 2014 military coup. The constitution included a provision stating, "The King shall be enthroned in a position of revered worship and shall not be violated. No person shall expose the King to any accusation or action." The provisions that limited the freedom of expression were also empowered by the Computer-Related Crime Act, which included Section 20(3):

"Computer data that constitutes a criminal offence under the law relating to intellectual property or any other laws under which such computer data in its character contrary to public order or good morals of the people of Thailand; and of which the officer under such law or the inquiry official under the Criminal Procedure Code has requested." 88

Further development regarding the application of this provision raised questions regarding the continuation of democratic discourse. Ruling No. 3/2567 of the Thai Constitutional Court established that merely proposing to amend the lèse-majesté law constituted an "attempt to overthrow the democratic regime with the King as head of state." The dissolution ruling, No. 10/2567, of the Thai Constitutional Court took a significant step further, actively dismantling a party based on this interpretation.<sup>39</sup> This solidified the idea that any policy aiming to reform the monarchy's role, even through the parliament, was considered an existential threat to the state. Despite citing 'constitutional democracy', the development seemed to enforce the tendency against the foundation further. A constitutional challenge was also found in Article 49 of the Thai Constitution, which prohibited citizens from using their freedoms and rights to overthrow the monarchy. Despite having many religions, the country legally supported the protection of Buddhist clergy through the Sangha Act. The Sangha Act, through Section 44 bis, stated that anyone who "defames, insults, or threatens the Patriarch" shall be subjected to punishment of imprisonment for one year, a fine of 20 thousand baht, or both. 40 This provision fundamentally favoured the religion of Buddhism over other religions in Thailand, as it provided an extra layer of protection for the religious values and practices, as well as the clergy.

The development of key legal frameworks in both countries showed a rather flawed legal reflection of the socio-cultural dynamics. There was a need to protect many socio-cultural values and religious influences that helped shape Indonesia and Thailand. However, it was risky to have legal frameworks that

Eugénie Mérieau, "A History of the Thai Lèse-Majesté Law," in *Thai Legal History: From Traditional to Modern Law*, ed. Andrew Harding and Munin Pongsapan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 77–88, https://doi.org/DOI: 10.1017/9781108914369.007.

Human Rights Watch, "Thailand: Constitutional Court Dissolves Opposition Party," Human Rights Watch, August 7, 2024, https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/08/07/thailand-constitutional-court-dissolves-opposition-party.

<sup>40</sup> Situmeang et al., "Blasphemy Laws and Their Implications for Religious Freedom and Expression: A Tri-Country Southeast Asian Perspective."

could be abused to silence critics and critical discussions that may be helpful for societal growth. The existence of these laws, with their enforcement, could restrict freedom of expression.

# Sensitivity and Legal Implications in Shaping Legal Culture Around Freedom of Expression

The apparent disconnect between the structure of Indonesian and Thai societies and legal systems showed the need to redefine the boundaries in many social conduct. This urgency was even more apparent in the discourse of digital conduct, where digital platforms connect more individuals than ever, eliminating the barrier of distance in many interactions or engagements. Harm constituted a crucial aspect of digital conduct boundaries, particularly given its potential to shape interactions and inform legal interpretations,<sup>41</sup> thereby generating farreaching ripple effects in both Indonesian and Thai societies.

Previous analysis of the legal reflections of Indonesian and Thai sociocultural diversity revealed a particular level of sensitivity among citizens. This sensitivity significantly shapes how harm is conceptualised in legal frameworks, specifically in the digital sphere. In this context, harm transcended tangible damage to include more abstract, subjective dimensions, such as offence to societal norms or disruptions to perceived harmony. Although this sensitivitydriven framing<sup>42</sup> reflected the cultural and historical values of both nations, it simultaneously complicated the establishment of clear and equitable boundaries for digital expression.

The main challenge in this discourse was in navigating this normative web, where harm must be defined in ways that respect socio-cultural diversity without eroding individual freedoms. The existing laws in Indonesia and Thailand could be framed as tools to protect cultural and national stability. However, strict scrutiny of deeper juridical justifications could reflect actual problems that require solving. Critically, both countries must contend with the inherent paradox in their legal frameworks. This paradox was that the efforts to mitigate harm and maintain societal cohesion frequently conflicted with the principles of democratic

In this context, harm is understood not only as individual injury but as a disruption to societal norms and the moral fabric, which the legal system seeks to protect. See Joshua Kleinfeld, "Reconstructivism: The Place of Criminal Law in Ethical Life," Harvard Law Review 129, no. 6 (April 2016): 1485–1565.

There are many dimensions to how harm is explained psychologically. In the context of modern psychology, the expansion regarding the concept of harm is often referred to as "concept creep", which is used to refer to the way many psychological concepts, including harm, have expanded over time to cover a broader range of experiences. See Nick Haslam, "Concept Creep: Psychology's Expanding Concepts of Harm and Pathology," Psychological Inquiry 27, no. 1 (January 2016): 1–17, https://doi.org/10.1080/1047840X.2016.1082418. While direct correlation to certain laws remains a topic to be further discussed extensively and perhaps exclusively, this relationship does provide an overview on how inflated the sense of harm can be and how it affects sensitivity, particularly in socio-cultural and freedom of expression discourses.

governance and the protection of fundamental freedoms. In the digital age, the paradox worsened, where the amplification of expression heightened the risk of perceived harm while also increasing the stakes for ensuring free and open discourse. Therefore, the analysis of the concept of 'harm' in a juridical sense should not be limited to mere definitions. The study must delineate the term's boundaries in ways that balance competing interests, such as collective stability, individual autonomy, cultural preservation, and progressive discourse.

Merriam-Webster's dictionary defines harm as physical or mental damage. The black law's Dictionary defined harm (verb) as to damage, injure, or hurt. Therefore two definitions, it was evident that the boundaries around this term could be difficult to explain or even determine. Therefore, there was difficulty in carrying out the scrutiny of harm as a juridical concept without contextualization. In this study, the diverse socio-cultural influences required complex legal frameworks to strike a balance between multiculturalism, freedom of expression, and a general sense of respect. Unfortunately, these were not reflected in both the Indonesian and Thai legal systems, as the existing legal frameworks did not address the drawback of maintaining a level-headed consideration. This study examined the implications of sensitivity and the perceived harm, as shown in **Table 1**.

**Table 1**: Sensitivity and perceived harm implied by the relevant regulations in Indonesia and Thailand

No.	Law/Provision	Sensitivity Implications	Normative Scrutiny
1	EIT Law (Indonesia): Articles 27, 28	Culturally influenced definition of harm leading to broad interpretations.	Overbroad definitions fail to target genuine harm narrowly.
2	Law No. 19 of 2016 (Indonesia): Amended Articles 27, 28	Addresses public discontent but fails to resolve systemic flaws.	Cosmetic amendments; lacks systemic reform for proportionality.
3	Joint Decree 2021 (Indonesia): Implementation Guidelines for Articles 27 and 28	This further undermines judicial independence with vague implementation.	Encroaches on judicial roles; exacerbates misuse risks.
4	Lèse-majesté Law (Thailand): Section 112	Overprotects institutional integrity at the expense of public discourse.	Fails narrow tailoring; overly harsh penalties stifle expression.
5	Computer-Related Crime Act (Thailand): Section 20(3) Sangha Act (Thailand): Section 44 bis	Broad and subjective criteria limit freedom of expression.  Favours one religion, marginalising others and restricting discourse, limits the moral and legal obligations of Buddhist clergy.	Subjective and vague, enabling arbitrary enforcement. Discriminatory protection risks silencing minority religions.

Source: Author's Compilation

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>43</sup> Merriam-Webster, "Harm Definition & Meaning," Merriam-Webster, n.d.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>44</sup> Black's Law Dictionary, "HARM," The Law Dictionary, n.d.

**Table 1** illustrates how the legal frameworks of Indonesia and Thailand incorporate socio-cultural sensitivities into the definitions of harm, thereby shaping enforcement in a manner that prioritises societal harmony and institutional protection. In Indonesia, the EIT Law and its amendments defined harm as disruptions to societal norms; however, the broad and vague language allowed for the extension of perceived harm to legitimate expressions, disproportionately silencing dissent. This situation was worsened by the Joint Decree, which institutionalised overly rigid enforcement mechanisms that bypassed judicial safeguards.

In Thailand, harm was defined through the lens of institutional reverence, as evident in the lèse-majesté Law and the Sangha Act, where criticism of the monarchy or Buddhist clergy was equated with societal threats. These laws reinforce hierarchical sensitivities, but the subjective interpretations often suppress critical discourse under the guise of protecting public order or moral values, as further enabled by the Computer-Related Crime Act. Across both jurisdictions, perceived harm was more closely tied to socio-cultural preservation than to actual societal injury, exposing a tension between safeguarding traditions and upholding democratic freedoms. The negative implication could be considered more distinct and pronounced in the case of Thailand. This was because the relevant laws in question could be exploited to strengthen the influence of the monarchy and open doors to possible autocratic tendencies, while significantly limiting democratic discourses.

Indonesia and Thailand did not provide a clear normative framework in legal system to substantiate how harm was defined or measured, relying on culturally influenced sensitivities and broad terms. This absence of an objective standard showed that harm was often equated with perceived offence or institutional criticism, leaving enforcement mechanisms vulnerable to overreach and misuse. The laws failed to balance societal cohesion with the protection of individual freedoms without explicit principles to delineate harm. This situation undermined the legitimacy in a democratic and interconnected digital era.

#### Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has examined how Indonesia and Thailand define and regulate harm in the realm of digital expression, revealing considerable tensions between legal protections and sociocultural sensitivities. Despite decades of legal evolution, both countries continue to struggle in establishing robust and balanced regulatory frameworks that protect digital rights while addressing potential harms. In Thailand, the ongoing application of lèse-majesté law, through the framework of Feinberg's theory of harm, represents a morally driven legal process that privileges offence to collective sentiment over provable individual harm, deviating from liberal ideals championed by Hart. Although Indonesia has a comparatively lower risk of legal manipulation in authoritarian fashion, the country confronts considerable challenges in balancing cultural sensitivity with the right to digital

expression. The analysis recommends that both jurisdictions risk inscribing social tension into the legal system by collapsing subjective offence with actionable harm, thereby complicating efforts toward a just and inclusive digital sphere. This study highlights the urgent imperative for stronger, context-responsive legal interpretations that distinguish between legal harm and sociocultural offence. Future studies should adopt an empirical method by investigating public attitudes across both countries.

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