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Media, Political Power, and Social Harm: A Critical Criminological Perspective on Indonesian Political Narratives

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ABSTRACT: Media institutions play a significant role in shaping political realities, influencing public perceptions of legitimacy, authority, and social order. While conventional criminology focuses primarily on legally defined crime, critical criminology broadens the scope of analysis to include structural inequalities, power relations, and forms of harm that may be lawful yet socially damaging. Despite growing scholarly attention to media power and political communication, the relationship between media narratives and social harm remains insufficiently explored within critical criminological scholarship, particularly in the context of Indonesia. Using critical criminology as the primary theoretical framework, this article examines how political narratives are constructed, circulated, and legitimised through media discourse. The analysis is supported by insights from zemiology, state crime theory, and media capture theory to explore how media institutions may contribute to the production, normalisation, and concealment of social harm within democratic settings. Particular attention is given to the ways media representations shape public understandings of legitimacy, justice, accountability, and political authority. The discussion argues that media narratives are not neutral reflections of reality but contested sites where power is exercised and negotiated. Through processes of framing, selection, and omission, media discourse can reinforce dominant political interests, marginalise alternative perspectives, and obscure broader forms of social harm. At the same time, media institutions may also function as spaces of resistance by challenging dominant narratives and amplifying critical voices. This article contributes to critical criminological scholarship by proposing an integrated analytical framework that connects Critical Criminology, Zemiology, State Crime Theory, and Media Capture Theory to explain how media narratives participate in the production, legitimisation, and concealment of social harm. By moving beyond legal definitions of wrongdoing, the study demonstrates that media function not merely as channels of political communication but as institutional actors capable of shaping public understandings of legitimacy, accountability, and structural harm within contemporary democratic societies.

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, media have assumed an increasingly influential role in shaping political life across democratic societies. Their significance extends well beyond reporting political events. Through the continuous production and circulation of political narratives, media influence how citizens interpret political authority, evaluate institutional legitimacy, and understand questions of justice and accountability. Political reality is therefore not simply observed through media; it is actively constructed through processes of selection, framing, and interpretation that determine which issues become publicly significant and which remain largely invisible (Fairclough, 2010; van Dijk, 1993; Kunkunrat et al., 2026).

These developments have become more pronounced with the rapid expansion of digital communication. Online news platforms and social media have accelerated the circulation of political information while simultaneously transforming the ways political legitimacy is negotiated. Political actors increasingly compete not only through elections or formal institutions but also through their capacity to shape public narratives. Media organisations, in turn, occupy an increasingly strategic position because they determine which voices receive public attention, which interpretations are reinforced, and which political controversies become normalised or contested (Tapsell, 2017).

For this reason, media have become an important subject within political communication and media studies. Existing scholarship has provided extensive explanations of how framing, agenda-setting, and discourse influence public opinion and democratic participation (Entman, 1993; Fairclough, 2010). These studies have shown that media are not neutral transmitters of information but institutions capable of shaping political meaning and influencing the public understanding of political events. At the same time, research on media ownership and media capture has demonstrated that editorial decisions are often influenced by broader political and economic structures rather than by professional norms alone (Schiffrin, 2021; Dragomir, 2024).

Yet these discussions have largely remained within the boundaries of communication and media studies. Recent scholarship has further demonstrated that digital media and platform-based communication increasingly shape democratic legitimacy, political participation, and public trust through algorithmic curation and evolving forms of communicative power (Lorenz-Spreen et al., 2023; Patberg, 2025). However, these studies continue to evaluate media primarily in terms of democratic performance, political participation, misinformation, or institutional legitimacy, while considerably less attention has been devoted to understanding how media narratives themselves may function as mechanisms through which social harm is produced, legitimised, or rendered invisible. In other words, although scholars have convincingly demonstrated that media shape political reality, relatively little attention has been paid to whether the construction of that reality may itself become a mechanism through which structural harm is normalised or obscured.

A similar pattern can be found within critical criminology. Since the emergence of the New Criminology, scholars have challenged the assumption that criminology should concern itself only with conduct defined as criminal by law (Taylor, Walton, & Young, 1973; Quinney, 1974). Subsequent developments in criminology and state crime scholarship further expanded this perspective by arguing that some of the most significant harms experienced within society are produced through lawful political and institutional practices rather than criminal offences (Hillyard & Tombs, 2004; Green & Ward, 2004; Pemberton, 2016). Despite these important developments, media institutions have rarely occupied a central position within critical criminological analyses of social harm.

Despite extensive scholarship on media framing and political communication, and the growing body of critical criminological literature on social harm, little attention has been devoted to explaining how media narratives themselves become mechanisms through which social harm is legitimised, normalised, or rendered invisible. Existing studies tend to examine either media discourse or structural harm separately, leaving limited theoretical integration between these two fields. This article addresses that gap by proposing a critical criminological framework for analysing media as an institutional actor in the production of political legitimacy and social harm. Rather than examining media merely as channels of political communication, this study conceptualises media as institutional actors whose discursive practices actively participate in the production and legitimisation of social harm.

The Indonesian context illustrates the relevance of this issue. Since the Reformasi period, Indonesia has experienced substantial democratic transformation alongside profound changes in its media landscape. The expansion of media freedom and digital communication has widened opportunities for political participation, yet concentrated media ownership, close relationships between political and economic elites, and increasingly competitive political communication continue to shape the production of public narratives (Hadiz & Robison, 2013; Hadiz, 2017; Tapsell, 2017). These conditions make Indonesia an important context for examining how media narratives interact with political power and how broader forms of social harm may be legitimised, challenged, or rendered invisible through media discourse.

Against this background, this article asks: How can Critical Criminology provide an integrated framework for understanding the relationship between media power, political narratives, and the production of social harm within contemporary democratic societies?

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Critical criminology emerged as a response to the limitations of conventional criminology, which had long defined crime primarily through the boundaries established by criminal law. Throughout much of the twentieth century, criminological research was largely concerned with explaining why individuals committed offences and how legal institutions responded to criminal behaviour. Within this perspective, criminal law was generally treated as an objective and politically neutral standard for distinguishing criminal from non-criminal conduct. Questions concerning who defines crime, whose interests are protected by legal institutions, or why certain harmful practices remain outside the scope of criminal law received comparatively little attention.

This legalistic orientation was fundamentally challenged by the emergence of the New Criminology during the 1970s. Taylor, Walton, and Young (1973) argued that crime cannot be understood independently from the social, political, and economic structures within which criminal law is produced. Similarly, Quinney (1974) maintained that criminal law reflects relations of power rather than universal principles of justice, with legal definitions often serving the interests of dominant groups. From this perspective, crime is not simply a legal category but also a political construction shaped by broader struggles over power and social control. Critical criminology therefore shifts attention away from individual offending towards the structural conditions that produce inequality, exclusion, and institutional injustice (Scruton, 2007).

One of the most significant developments emerging from this tradition is zemiology, which proposes that criminological inquiry should move beyond crime and focus instead on social harm. Hillyard and Tombs (2004) argue that many of the harms experienced by individuals and communities are never recognised as crimes because they fall outside the boundaries of criminal law. Poverty, environmental degradation, unsafe employment, inadequate housing, and political exclusion may produce profound and long-lasting consequences despite remaining legally permissible. Restricting criminology to legally defined offences therefore risks overlooking some of the most damaging experiences affecting contemporary societies.

Pemberton (2016) further develops this perspective by arguing that harm should be understood according to its social consequences rather than its legal status. The distinction between lawful and unlawful conduct does not necessarily correspond with the distinction between harmful and non-harmful practices. Political and institutional decisions may comply with constitutional or legal procedures while simultaneously generating inequality, insecurity, or democratic exclusion. From a zemiological perspective, these outcomes deserve scholarly attention regardless of whether they constitute criminal offences.

The relationship between legality and harm has also been examined through State Crime Theory. Rather than limiting analysis to illegal acts committed by state officials, Green and Ward (2004) argue that states may produce serious forms of harm while acting within their formal legal authority. Public institutions often possess the legal power to implement policies, exercise coercion, or make administrative decisions that satisfy domestic legal requirements but nevertheless undermine human rights, democratic accountability, or social justice. State Crime Theory therefore challenges the assumption that legality should be regarded as the principal measure of legitimacy when evaluating the exercise of political power.

While critical criminology, zemiology, and State Crime Theory expand criminological inquiry beyond legal definitions of crime, understanding the role of media requires attention to the production of discourse. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approaches language not simply as a means of communication but as a form of social practice through which knowledge, power, and ideology are produced and reproduced. Fairclough (2010) argues that discourse both reflects and shapes social reality, making language an important site where power relations are negotiated and maintained. Political narratives, therefore, do not merely describe political events but actively construct particular understandings of legitimacy, authority, and responsibility.

Van Dijk (1993) further argues that access to public discourse is unequally distributed. Political elites, state institutions, and dominant media organisations generally possess greater opportunities to shape public knowledge than ordinary citizens. This unequal access enables powerful actors to influence which issues receive public attention, whose perspectives are considered legitimate, and which interpretations become accepted within public debate. Consequently, discourse is closely connected to the distribution of social and political power.

The institutional conditions under which media operate are further examined through Media Capture Theory. Rather than assuming that media function as fully independent watchdogs, Media Capture Theory argues that media organisations are frequently influenced by political and economic interests. Such influence does not necessarily occur through direct censorship.

Instead, it often operates through concentrated ownership structures, financial dependence, regulatory pressure, and close relationships between media owners and political elites (Schiffrin, 2021).

These structural dynamics are particularly evident in media systems characterised by concentrated ownership and strong political-business networks. As Besley and Prat (2006) demonstrate, media independence is closely related to the distribution of ownership and the incentives faced by media organisations. Similarly, Tapsell (2017) shows that Indonesia's media landscape continues to be shaped by the close relationship between media conglomerates and political elites, influencing editorial priorities and political reporting. More recently, Dragomir (2024) argues that contemporary media capture increasingly operates through subtle institutional mechanisms that shape editorial agendas without requiring overt political intervention. Under these conditions, media institutions remain formally independent while their capacity to provide pluralistic and autonomous political reporting becomes progressively constrained.

Taken together, these theoretical perspectives provide complementary analytical lenses rather than competing explanations. Critical Criminology establishes the broader concern with power and inequality, Zemiology shifts attention from crime to social harm, State Crime Theory explains how legally authorised institutions may generate harm, while Media Capture Theory and Critical Discourse Analysis illuminate the institutional and discursive mechanisms through which such harms become publicly legitimised or obscured. Their integration forms the conceptual foundation of this study.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative conceptual research design to examine the relationship between media, political power, and social harm through the perspective of Critical Criminology. Unlike empirical studies that generate primary data through interviews, observations, or surveys, conceptual research seeks to advance theoretical understanding by critically analysing and synthesising existing bodies of scholarly knowledge (Jaakkola, 2020). Accordingly, the objective of this study is not to evaluate a particular media organisation or political event, but to construct an integrated analytical framework capable of explaining how media institutions participate in the production, legitimisation, and concealment of social harm within contemporary democratic societies.

A qualitative conceptual approach is particularly appropriate because the relationship between media discourse, political legitimacy, and social harm extends beyond observable legal events and measurable patterns of media behaviour. Rather, these phenomena are embedded within broader structures of discourse, institutional power, and political authority that require interpretative analysis. Consequently, this study focuses on identifying conceptual relationships among existing theoretical traditions rather than testing causal hypotheses or measuring empirical media effects.

3.1 LITERATURE SELECTION

The analysis was based on secondary academic sources comprising peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, edited volumes, and authoritative theoretical publications concerning Critical Criminology, Zemiology, State Crime Theory, Critical Discourse Analysis, Media Capture Theory, media studies, and political communication. Literature was identified through systematic searches of major academic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and publisher databases.

Publications were selected according to three inclusion criteria. First, the literature had to provide substantive theoretical contributions relevant to media, political power, legitimacy, discourse, or social harm. Second, only peer-reviewed publications and recognised scholarly books were included to ensure academic quality. Third, the selected literature needed to contribute directly to the conceptual development of the study's analytical framework. Publications lacking theoretical relevance, opinion pieces, newspaper articles, and non-scholarly materials were excluded from the analytical corpus.

Rather than aiming for exhaustive bibliographic coverage, the literature selection followed the principle of conceptual relevance. This approach ensured that the analytical process focused on theoretical works capable of explaining the relationship between media institutions, political narratives, and broader forms of social harm.

3.2 DATA ANALYSIS

The selected literature was imported into NVivo to facilitate a systematic qualitative coding process. Although NVivo is frequently associated with empirical qualitative research, it also provides a rigorous analytical environment for conceptual studies by enabling transparent organisation, coding, comparison, and synthesis of theoretical concepts across multiple sources (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). The coding strategy followed the principles of reflexive thematic analysis proposed by Braun and

Clarke (2006; 2021), while the organisation of conceptual categories drew upon the coding procedures described by Strauss and Corbin (1998) and Saldaña (2021). This combination enabled a systematic comparison of theoretical concepts across the selected literature while maintaining conceptual flexibility appropriate for qualitative conceptual research.

The analysis followed an iterative thematic approach consisting of four stages (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The first stage involved open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), during which recurring concepts, theoretical propositions, and analytical categories were identified throughout the literature without imposing predetermined classifications. Codes relating to legitimacy, legality, political authority, discourse, media power, institutional influence, accountability, state power, and social harm were recorded as they emerged from the selected texts.

During the second stage, related codes were grouped through axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to identify broader conceptual relationships among different theoretical traditions. This process enabled the comparison of concepts originating from Critical Criminology, Zemiology, State Crime Theory, Critical Discourse Analysis, and Media Capture Theory while identifying areas of convergence and theoretical complementarity. The third stage involved thematic development, whereby higher-order themes were generated by integrating conceptually related codes. Following Braun and Clarke (2021), themes were continuously reviewed and refined through an iterative process to ensure conceptual coherence across the theoretical framework. These themes subsequently formed the analytical structure presented in the discussion section, including media and political legitimacy, media narratives as sources of social harm, and the integration of criminological and media theories. Finally, the fourth stage consisted of conceptual synthesis. Rather than treating each theoretical perspective independently, the identified themes were critically synthesised to construct an integrated analytical framework capable of explaining how media institutions contribute to the production, legitimisation, and concealment of social harm. This process moved beyond conventional literature review by generating new theoretical relationships between previously separate bodies of scholarship.

3.3 TRUSTWORTHINESS OF THE ANALYSIS

To enhance analytical rigour, the coding process was conducted iteratively through repeated engagement with the selected literature. Codes and themes were continuously refined throughout the analytical process to ensure conceptual consistency and minimise interpretative bias. The use of NVivo provided a transparent audit trail by systematically documenting coding decisions, thematic relationships, and conceptual linkages across the literature. Trustworthiness was established through credibility, dependability, confirmability, and analytical coherence following the criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985), while thematic consistency was strengthened through the recommendations of Nowell et al. (2017).

Although Indonesia provides an important contextual background for discussing media power and political legitimacy, this article does not constitute an empirical case study of Indonesian media. References to Indonesia are intended solely to illustrate the contemporary relevance of the proposed analytical framework rather than to evaluate specific media organisations, political actors, or political events. Consequently, the findings presented in the following discussion should be understood as theoretical propositions derived from conceptual synthesis rather than empirical observations.

4.1 MEDIA AND POLITICAL LEGITIMACY

Indonesia provides a particularly relevant context for examining the relationship between media, political power, and social harm because the country's democratic consolidation has occurred alongside increasingly complex patterns of media ownership, political competition, and digital communication. Since the Reformasi period, democratic reforms have expanded press freedom, electoral participation, and opportunities for public debate. Nevertheless, these democratic developments have also been accompanied by concentrated media ownership, close relationships between political and business elites, and intensified competition over the construction of political narratives (Hadiz & Robison, 2013; Hadiz, 2017; Tapsell, 2017). Rather than viewing these developments as contradictory, this study argues that they reveal an important characteristic of contemporary democracy: formal democratic institutions may coexist with unequal distributions of communicative power. Consequently, political legitimacy should be understood not merely as a product of constitutional procedures but also as an outcome of discursive processes through which political authority is publicly constructed, negotiated, and contested.

Existing scholarship in political communication has consistently demonstrated that media shape public understanding through framing, agenda-setting, and discourse. Fairclough (2010) conceptualises discourse as a social practice through which meanings and power relations are produced, while Van Dijk (1993) emphasises unequal access to public discourse as a mechanism of political domination. Although both perspectives successfully explain how media construct political reality, they remain

primarily concerned with communication and discursive power rather than the broader social harms arising from these processes. This limitation creates an analytical space for Critical Criminology, which extends the discussion by recognising communicative power itself as a potential source of structural harm. Recent democratic theory likewise suggests that contemporary political communication increasingly depends upon digital public spheres whose institutional design influences public legitimacy, participation, and democratic accountability (Patberg, 2025). Nevertheless, these perspectives remain primarily concerned with democratic governance rather than conceptualising communicative power as a potential source of structural social harm. The present study addresses this limitation by positioning communicative power within the analytical boundaries of Critical Criminology.

This limitation becomes evident when viewed from the perspective of Critical Criminology. Conventional criminology has traditionally focused on conduct defined as criminal by law, directing analytical attention towards offences committed by individuals and institutional responses to criminal behaviour. Critical Criminology challenges this legalistic orientation by arguing that significant forms of harm frequently emerge through lawful political, economic, and institutional practices that remain outside formal criminal definitions (Taylor, Walton, & Young, 1973; Hillyard & Tombs, 2004). Building upon this perspective, this study proposes that communicative power itself should be recognised as a potential source of social harm. Media institutions do not merely report political events; they actively influence the conditions under which political authority becomes accepted, questioned, or normalised. Consequently, the construction of political legitimacy is not only a communicative process but also a mechanism through which structural inequalities may be reinforced or obscured.

This interpretation extends existing discussions within both media studies and criminology. While media scholars have largely examined legitimacy in relation to democratic participation, public opinion, and political communication, critical criminological scholarship has primarily concentrated on state institutions, legal systems, and corporate actors. The integration proposed in this article bridges these traditions by positioning media as institutional actors capable of shaping the public recognition of harm. Political narratives therefore become analytically significant not only because they influence electoral preferences or democratic deliberation but because they determine which social harms become publicly visible, which remain politically marginalised, and whose experiences are recognised as legitimate within democratic discourse.

From this perspective, communicative power should not be understood as a secondary consequence of political authority but as one of its constitutive dimensions. Political legitimacy is continuously negotiated through the production, circulation, and contestation of media narratives. Consequently, media institutions function not merely as intermediaries between political actors and citizens but as institutional arenas in which legitimacy, accountability, and social harm are simultaneously constructed. This study therefore argues that recognising media as producers of social legitimacy also requires recognising their capacity to participate in the production, normalisation, and concealment of social harm, thereby extending the analytical boundaries of Critical Criminology beyond its traditional focus on state and corporate power.

4.2 MEDIA NARRATIVES AS SOURCES OF SOCIAL HARM

The relationship between media narratives and social harm extends beyond questions of journalistic accuracy or political bias. Existing scholarship has generally evaluated media performance in terms of objectivity, misinformation, or democratic accountability. While these perspectives remain important, this study argues that they are insufficient for explaining how media narratives may themselves become mechanisms through which social harm is produced, legitimised, and rendered politically invisible. From a critical criminological perspective, the significance of media lies not only in what they report but also in how they shape public recognition of harm through processes of framing, selection, omission, and interpretation.

Zemology broadens criminological inquiry by arguing that harm should be evaluated according to its social consequences rather than its legal status (Pemberton, 2016). Nevertheless, the theory provides relatively limited explanation regarding why certain harms become publicly recognised while others remain politically invisible. In contrast, Critical Discourse Analysis explains how discourse shapes public visibility through framing, representation, and unequal communicative power (Fairclough, 2010; Van Dijk, 1993). Rather than treating these perspectives separately, this study argues that they are theoretically complementary. Zemology identifies what constitutes social harm, whereas Critical Discourse Analysis explains the communicative processes through which such harms become legitimised, contested, or ignored.

Critical Discourse Analysis offers an important complementary perspective. Fairclough (2010) demonstrates that discourse actively constructs social reality by shaping how events, institutions, and political actors are interpreted. Likewise, Van Dijk (1993) argues that access to discourse is unequally distributed, allowing dominant institutions to exercise greater influence over

public knowledge and collective understanding. Taken together, these perspectives explain how media narratives influence public perceptions of legitimacy. Nevertheless, they stop short of conceptualising communicative processes as mechanisms through which social harm itself may be produced or normalised. By integrating Critical Discourse Analysis with Zemiology, this study proposes that discourse should be understood not merely as a medium of communication but also as a mechanism through which harm acquires or fails to acquire public visibility.

The relationship between discourse and harm becomes even more apparent when viewed through State Crime Theory. Green and Ward (2004) argue that serious forms of harm may arise from actions that remain legally authorised and institutionally legitimate. Building upon this argument, the present study suggests that the public recognition of state-related harm depends not solely upon governmental actions themselves but also upon the media narratives through which those actions are interpreted. Harm that receives little public attention is less likely to generate political scrutiny or institutional accountability, regardless of its actual social consequences. Consequently, communicative processes become integral to understanding why certain forms of structural harm remain politically acceptable despite their significant societal impact.

While Critical Discourse Analysis primarily focuses on discursive mechanisms, Media Capture Theory shifts analytical attention towards the institutional and political structures that shape those discourses. Schifffrin (2021) and Bektı et al (2025) emphasises political and economic influence over media institutions, whereas Dragomir (2024) demonstrates that contemporary media capture increasingly operates through subtle institutional mechanisms instead of overt censorship. Together, these perspectives suggest that media narratives cannot be understood solely through textual analysis because they are simultaneously shaped by organisational structures, ownership patterns, and political interests.

Although Media Capture Theory successfully explains how ownership structures and political interests influence editorial independence, it provides comparatively limited explanation regarding why these institutional dynamics should be understood as sources of social harm. Conversely, Critical Criminology and Zemiology shift analytical attention towards the societal consequences of communicative power rather than the institutional conditions alone. Integrating these perspectives therefore enables a more comprehensive explanation in which media influence is analysed not only as an organisational phenomenon but also as a mechanism capable of producing, legitimising, and concealing structural harm.

This interpretation is also consistent with recent scholarship demonstrating that platformisation and algorithmic news distribution increasingly influence editorial judgement, public trust, and the perceived legitimacy of media institutions (Hastuti et al., 2025). Rather than functioning as neutral technological infrastructures, digital platforms actively shape the visibility of political narratives and consequently influence public recognition of social and political issues. These developments further strengthen the argument that communicative power should be understood as an important dimension of structural harm rather than merely an aspect of political communication. By extending these insights through a critical criminological perspective, this study argues that algorithmically mediated communicative power should also be understood as a mechanism through which structural harm may be legitimised, normalised, or rendered politically invisible.

The Indonesian media environment illustrates the practical relevance of this theoretical integration. Democratic reforms have substantially expanded media freedom and political participation, yet concentrated ownership, political patronage, and increasingly competitive digital communication continue to shape the production and circulation of political narratives (Hadiz & Robison, 2013; Hadiz, 2017; Tapsell, 2017). This article does not seek to evaluate individual media organisations or specific political controversies. Instead, these developments illustrate how unequal communicative power influences which experiences of harm become publicly acknowledged, which remain politically contested, and which disappear from democratic debate altogether. Such observations reinforce the argument that media should not be understood merely as channels through which information circulates but as institutional actors that actively shape the social construction of legitimacy, accountability, and harm.

Accordingly, this study contends that social harm is not produced exclusively through political decisions, institutional practices, or legal authority. It is also produced through the narratives that determine how those decisions are interpreted, justified, challenged, or ignored within public discourse. Recognising media narratives as mechanisms of social harm therefore expands both Critical Criminology and media studies by demonstrating that communicative power is itself a significant dimension of structural inequality within contemporary democratic societies.

4.3 INTEGRATING CRITICAL CRIMINOLOGY AND MEDIA STUDIES

Rather than functioning as competing explanations, the five theoretical perspectives examined in this study operate at different analytical levels. Critical Criminology provides the macro perspective by explaining the structural production of inequality and harm. Zemiology redefines the analytical object from legally defined crime to social harm. State Crime Theory demonstrates how lawful institutions may nevertheless generate harmful outcomes. Critical Discourse Analysis explains how legitimacy and political meaning are constructed through discourse, while Media Capture Theory identifies the institutional mechanisms that influence the production of those discourses. Their integration therefore produces a multi-level analytical framework capable of explaining not only how social harm is generated, but also how it becomes publicly legitimised or rendered invisible.

Despite their significant contributions, these theoretical traditions have largely developed within separate academic disciplines. Research in media and political communication has predominantly focused on framing, agenda-setting, media independence, and democratic participation (Entman, 1993; Fairclough, 2010; Schiffrin, 2021), whereas Critical Criminology has primarily examined state violence, structural inequality, institutional injustice, and the social production of harm (Taylor, Walton, & Young, 1973; Hillyard & Tombs, 2004; Green & Ward, 2004). This disciplinary separation has limited scholarly understanding of how media institutions contribute not only to political communication but also to the public recognition, legitimisation, and concealment of social harm. Consequently, existing scholarship has paid comparatively little attention to the criminological significance of communicative power itself.

This theoretical integration also addresses an important limitation within existing scholarship. Previous studies have generally examined media discourse, political communication, and social harm as separate analytical domains. By synthesising these perspectives within a single framework, the present study demonstrates that communicative power should be understood simultaneously as a discursive, institutional, and criminological phenomenon. Consequently, the proposed framework contributes not merely by combining existing theories but by explaining the interrelationship between media institutions, political legitimacy, and the production of structural harm.

This study argues that integrating these theoretical perspectives provides a broader analytical framework for understanding media as institutional actors rather than merely channels of political communication. From this perspective, media do not simply transmit information or reflect political reality. Instead, they actively construct the interpretative frameworks through which legitimacy, accountability, and social harm become publicly recognised, contested, or ignored. Political legitimacy therefore emerges not exclusively through constitutional procedures or formal legal authority but also through continuous discursive processes that shape public interpretations of political events. Consequently, communicative power should be understood as an institutional mechanism capable of reinforcing, legitimising, or challenging broader structures of inequality within democratic societies.

This interpretation also extends the analytical scope of Critical Criminology. Traditional critical criminological scholarship has convincingly demonstrated that states, corporations, and other powerful institutions may generate significant forms of social harm while acting within legal boundaries (Green & Ward, 2004; Pemberton, 2016). Building upon this tradition, the present study proposes that media institutions should likewise be recognised as significant sites in which social harm is constructed, legitimised, and, in certain circumstances, concealed. Media do not necessarily produce harmful political decisions directly. Rather, they shape the discursive conditions through which those decisions become accepted as legitimate, challenged as unjust, or rendered politically invisible. In this sense, communicative power becomes inseparable from broader processes through which institutional power is exercised and sustained.

At the same time, this framework does not assume that media invariably reinforce dominant political interests. Media remain contested institutional arenas in which competing actors continuously negotiate the meaning of legitimacy, justice, and accountability (Fairclough, 2010; van Dijk, 1993). While ownership concentration, political patronage, and commercial pressures may constrain editorial independence (Schiffrin, 2021; Dragomir, 2024; Tapsell, 2017), media institutions also retain the capacity to expose institutional failures, amplify marginalised perspectives, and challenge dominant political narratives. Recognising this dual role avoids deterministic interpretations of media power while providing a more balanced understanding of the relationship between discourse, legitimacy, and social harm.

The principal theoretical contribution of this study therefore lies not simply in combining Critical Criminology, Zemiology, State Crime Theory, Critical Discourse Analysis, and Media Capture Theory within a single conceptual framework. Rather, it demonstrates that communicative power should itself be recognised as a criminological concern because it shapes the public

production, legitimisation, and concealment of social harm. By positioning media institutions within the analytical boundaries of Critical Criminology, this study expands existing debates concerning power, legitimacy, and structural inequality while proposing an integrated framework capable of guiding future empirical research on media, political narratives, and social harm in democratic societies. Beyond the Indonesian context, this framework may also provide a conceptual basis for comparative analyses of communicative power, media institutions, and structural harm across diverse democratic settings.

5. CONCLUSION

This article has argued that the relationship between media and political power cannot be understood solely through the perspectives of political communication or media studies. By applying Critical Criminology, it demonstrates that media should also be understood as institutions capable of shaping the production, legitimisation, and public recognition of social harm. Political narratives do not merely communicate political reality; they influence how relations of power are normalised, questioned, or contested within democratic societies.

By bringing together Critical Criminology, Zemiology, State Crime Theory, and Media Capture Theory, this article extends existing discussions of social harm beyond the actions of states or other powerful institutions to include the discursive role of media. In doing so, it proposes that harm is not only produced through political decisions themselves, but also through the narratives that shape public understandings of legitimacy, accountability, and democratic authority.

The principal contribution of this article lies in extending Critical Criminology beyond its traditional focus on state and corporate harms by positioning media institutions as active participants in the production of social harm. Rather than viewing media solely as channels of political communication, the proposed framework conceptualises media as institutional actors whose discursive practices shape public recognition of legitimacy, accountability, and structural inequality.

As a conceptual study, this article does not seek to empirically evaluate particular media organisations or political events. Rather, it proposes an integrated theoretical framework intended to guide future empirical investigations into the relationship between media, political power, and social harm.

Future research should empirically apply this framework to media coverage of electoral campaigns, judicial decisions, policy controversies, and digital political communication in Indonesia and other democratic contexts. Such studies would not only refine the proposed framework but also contribute to broader theoretical debates concerning media power, democratic legitimacy, and the production of social harm. Moreover, the proposed framework provides a conceptual foundation for comparative research examining how communicative power shapes institutional legitimacy and structural harm across different democratic settings, thereby extending the contribution of Critical Criminology beyond conventional analyses of state and corporate harm. In doing so, this study contributes not only to critical criminological scholarship but also to wider interdisciplinary debates within political communication, media studies, and democratic governance.

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