

SAFEnet and Civil Society Dynamics in Expanding Digital Public Space in Indonesia

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Abstract

The advancement of digital technology has reshaped civil society advocacy, particularly in the protection of digital rights in Indonesia. This study examines the evolving role of SAFEnet (Southeast Asia Freedom of Expression Network), a pivotal organization dedicated to defending online freedom of expression. This analysis, conducted using a qualitative case study, examines SAFEnet's strategies, structural barriers, and advocacy outcomes through a literature review and thematic analysis. Findings indicate that SAFEnet has evolved beyond its role as a policy watchdog to become a facilitator of digital discourse, a provider of legal aid, and a coalition builder, promoting freedom of expression, data protection, and digital justice. Its advocacy integrates social media campaigns, digital literacy programs, policy engagement, and technological innovation to strengthen civic participation. Operating amid restrictive laws marked by censorship and criminalization of dissent, SAFEnet exhibits resilience and creativity in expanding digital public spaces and enhancing democratic interaction. This study enriches the understanding of digital civil society by illustrating a localized advocacy model and reaffirming the relevance of network society and public sphere theories within Indonesia's dynamic digital democracy.

Keywords: digital advocacy, freedom of expression, data protection, civil society, digital public sphere

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Introduction

The development of information and communication technology over the past two decades has brought about fundamental changes in the way people interact, participate in, and advocate for public issues. The digital space is not only a medium for information exchange but also a field of contestation between state and non-state actors in shaping public opinion and influencing policies. In this context, the issue of digital freedom has become increasingly relevant amid growing state regulation and intervention in online expression (Wechsler, 2014). Regimes in Southeast Asia, including Indonesia, have been observed to use “authoritarian” technology such as digital surveillance, censorship, and online information manipulation to restrict the digital civic space. This underscores the intricate relationship between digital infrastructure, state policy, and public participation, which is further complicated by global internet governance challenges (Haristya, 2020). One of the main actors in digital freedom advocacy in Indonesia is SAFEnet (Southeast Asia Freedom of Expression Network), which focuses on protecting online privacy, freedom of expression, and access to information. The Freedom House (2023) report noted that Indonesia’s internet freedom index has declined significantly, underscoring the urgency of a proactive civil society presence amid democratic recession and eroding public support for democratic values in the region (Lorch and Mauk, 2025).

The transformation of the role of civil society in the digital era reflects a shift from conventional forms of activism to a technology- and network-based advocacy model. SAFEnet represents a new digital civil society actor that

actively leverages social media, online platforms, and technology infrastructure to voice public interest, organize campaigns, and build cross-sector collaboration. However, the organization also faces significant obstacles, such as disinformation, cyberbullying, state censorship, and the criminalization of digital activists. This phenomenon aligns with Tufekci (2023) Observation that while social media offers significant potential for digital mobilization, its effectiveness is often curtailed by platform algorithms and structural biases that sideline counter-narratives. Similarly, this pattern corresponds with the findings of Sukidin et al. (2025), who note that social media activity can stimulate public participation in democratic discourse but is also prone to polarization. The complexity of these dynamics indicates a need for an in-depth analysis of how SAFEnet adapts its strategies to remain effective as an advocate for digital freedom. Scholarly discourse on the relationship between digital technology and civil society has developed rapidly, but most studies still focus on general theoretical frameworks or global contexts. Meanwhile, strengthening digital literacy is crucial to ensure that citizen participation in digital advocacy becomes more effective and sustainable (Kashaka, 2024).

Empirical studies that specifically examine digital advocacy practices in Indonesia, particularly those conducted by organizations such as SAFEnet, are still limited. Therefore, this article aims to fill this gap by posing the research question: How has SAFEnet’s role as a civil society actor evolved in the digital era to advocate for digital freedom in Indonesia, particularly in addressing the challenges of utilizing social media as an advocacy tool? This

question is designed to explore not only the forms of strategic adaptation but also the structural, political, and cultural dimensions underlying those transformations. This study aims to contribute on three levels: (1) academically, by expanding understanding of civil society dynamics in the digital era and enriching the literature on digital advocacy strategies in Indonesia; (2) practically, by offering strategic insights for civil society organizations to develop advocacy models that are responsive to digital challenges; and (3) at the policy level, by providing constructive input for policymakers to balance digital security needs with the protection of citizens' civil rights.

Conceptually, this article combines two primary theoretical frameworks: Manuel Castells' Network Society Theory and Jürgen Habermas' Theory of the Public Sphere. Castells' theory provides an analytical framework for how social structures and power are reconfigured through digital communication networks. In contrast, Habermas' theory highlights the importance of public space as a discursive arena for critical and rational citizen participation. However, these theoretical perspectives have faced criticism. Habermas's theory of the public sphere, for example, has been widely criticized for being Eurocentric and idealizing a rational-liberal form of discourse. In practice, these assumptions do not always hold in Global South contexts, such as Indonesia, where public expression often unfolds through symbols, humor, or emotional activism. Similarly, Castells' network society theory must be contextualized, considering the political realities of digital authoritarianism shaping civil society in Southeast Asia.

Milan and Treré (2023) propose that civil society studies in the algorithmic era also consider resistance to algorithmic injustice as a new form of structural repression. For instance, Eubanks (2018) illustrates how ostensibly neutral algorithms in governance can entrench social inequalities, highlighting the need to examine power asymmetries in digital networks. Scholars such as Treré and Milan have observed that digital activism in the Global South often harnesses vernacular expression and grassroots innovation, further challenging the universality of Western public sphere models. Recognizing these limitations, this article utilizes both theories dialectically: not only as an analytical knife, but also as a lens through which to critique the new dynamics of power relations and the production of meaning in a non-neutral digital space. By integrating these two theories, this article analyses SAFE-net's strategic position in reshaping power relations in the digital space and its contribution to building rights-based public opinion.

Methodology

To address the formulation of this problem, this study employs a qualitative approach with a case study design, which enables an in-depth exploration of digital advocacy practices by SAFE-net. This approach is deemed appropriate for capturing complex, context-dependent phenomena in digital civil society (Yin, 2018), enabling the exploration of the meanings, strategies, and socio-political context underlying SAFE-net's advocacy (Kashaka, 2024). SAFE-net serves as a critical case for examining the interaction between power, technology, and civil society in the Indonesian context.

The data in this study were obtained through a comprehensive literature review that included the analysis of academic journal articles, books, organizational reports, and legal documents relevant to the issues of digital freedom and the role of civil society. Literature sources were selected based on their relevance to SAFEnet's advocacy and credibility, prioritizing peer-reviewed studies and key policy documents. The analyzed documents spanned roughly from 2013 (when SAFEnet was founded) to 2023, covering SAFEnet's emergence and evolution over the past decade. This technique enabled the tracing of digital footprints, policy developments, and public discourse, which have been widely documented. In addition, limited access to primary informants due to the sensitivity of the issue and potential risks to the digital security of activists makes this approach both ethical and methodologically accountable. However, relying on secondary data imposes certain limitations, as the analysis is constrained to publicly documented information and cannot fully capture SAFEnet's internal dynamics in real time. Organizational literature and documents are also considered social artifacts that reflect forms of symbolic resistance and articulation of collective interests in the digital space. Thus, the literature review served as the main source for understanding the structural, discursive, and political dynamics of SAFEnet's digital advocacy.

The data analysis process was conducted using thematic analysis, following the approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The stages of analysis in this study included four interrelated steps forming a systematic framework. First, data reduction was performed by filtering and selecting information relevant to

the study's focus (the transformation of SAFEnet's role in advocating digital freedom) and eliminating unrelated material. Second, the reduced data were analyzed through open coding to identify initial units of meaning, followed by axial coding, which grouped the codes into key categories, such as Advocacy Strategies, Advocacy Challenges, and Advocacy Impact. Third, the researcher identified themes and patterns by extracting central themes from these categories. Some important themes that emerged included Technological Adaptation as an Advocacy Strategy, State Repression in the Digital Space, and The Power of Network Solidarity. Fourth, data interpretation was conducted by relating the empirical findings to the theoretical frameworks of Network Society and the Public Sphere (Kashaka, 2024). Through this process, the research conceptually explains SAFEnet's role in reshaping power structures, expanding digital public spaces, and fighting for digital rights in Indonesia (Yin, 2018). This stepwise, thematic approach ensured a rigorous analysis by systematically connecting the empirical data with the study's theoretical lenses.

Result and discussion

After analyzing the collected literature, several key dimensions of SAFEnet's advocacy role were identified. These include SAFEnet's efforts in policy advocacy for digital freedom, the regulatory challenges in Indonesia's internet governance landscape, the strategic use of social media for digital mobilization, and the impact of new legislation on digital rights. For example, SAFEnet has actively campaigned for more open and transparent internet governance, highlighted challenges posed by restrictive

regulations (Aziz et al., 2022), leveraged social media platforms for digital campaigns (SAFEnet, 2021), and monitored how the Personal Data Protection Law affects digital freedoms (Aziz et al., 2022; Jun-E, 2019). In the context of global internet governance, the role of civil society is also influenced by coordination challenges at the multistakeholder level (Haristya, 2020). Furthermore, recent literature highlights emerging obstacles, such as algorithmic injustice, that can limit the reach of digital activism (Milan, S., Treré, 2023).



Figure 1. Three Main Categories of Advocacy.
Source: Formulated by Researchers

Figure 1 illustrates the three overarching categories of SAFEnet's advocacy identified through the coding process: 1) Advocacy Strategy, including digital campaigns, cross-institution collaboration, and the use of social media; 2) Advocacy Challenges, such as digital censorship, political pressure, and resource limitations; and 3) Advocacy Impact, including greater public awareness, government response, and changes in digital policy. One central theme that emerged is the evolution of SAFEnet's advocacy strategy in responding to challenges to digital freedom. SAFEnet has demonstrated adaptive capacity by

strengthening coalition networks, optimizing its use of digital technologies, and improving public digital literacy to respond to policy constraints on online rights (Kashaka, 2024). This finding aligns with Tufekci's (2023) argument that the effectiveness of digital mobilization depends on an organization's ability to navigate algorithmic dynamics and the limitations of platform structures.

The analysis further reveals that SAFEnet has evolved from merely a policy monitor to a significant player in digital freedom advocacy in Indonesia. Its social media-based strategies and research initiatives have increased pressure on the government to be more transparent. However, the enactment of new regulations, such as the Personal Data Protection Law (Law No. 27/2022), has created ambiguity: on the one hand, it protects personal data, but on the other, it opens opportunities for state control over the digital space. SAFEnet plays an important role in overseeing the implementation of such regulations to ensure the protection of citizens' digital rights. This study corroborates observations that governments in Southeast Asia now employ authoritarian technological tools to manage, monitor, and suppress civil liberties online. This environment has a significant impact on SAFEnet's operating landscape. This trend also highlights the connection between civil society dynamics and the process of democratic regression in Indonesia (Lorch & Mauk, 2025)



Figure 1. Digital Freedom Advocacy in Indonesia. Source: Formulated by Researchers

Figure 2 depicts the expanding role of civil society in the digital era, as technology becomes a primary tool for advocacy and public participation. Digital activism has enabled new forms of participation, including online petitions, social media campaigns, and data-driven advocacy (Li et al., 2021). Research by Sukidin et al. (2025) Confirms that social media activity plays a crucial role in facilitating public participation and fostering democratic attitudes. SAFEnet reflects this transition by integrating technological approaches into its advocacy work, expanding the scope of involvement from what was once limited to physical actions to become more digital and decentralized. Consistent with these trends, Ristovska, (2023) Finds that political visuals in online campaigns serve as a form of resistance to digital repression, a tactic that SAFEnet has embraced through creative design and symbolic narratives on social media. SAFEnet's use of visuals is exemplified by campaigns like #StopKekerasanDigital ("Stop Digital Violence"), which combine striking graphics with catchy slogans to rally public sentiment against online abuse. By leveraging memes, infographics, and hashtag activism, SAFEnet's symbolic tactics directly challenge dominant official narratives and engage citizens emotionally in the fight for digital rights.

Since its inception in 2013, SAFEnet has evolved into a leading advocate for digital freedom. Its activities include documenting violations of digital rights, providing public education on digital literacy, offering legal assistance to victims of online repression, and engaging in policy advocacy. Partnerships with international human rights organizations (such as Amnesty International) have strengthened SAFEnet's advocacy capacity at national and global levels. SAFEnet also participates in regional and global civil society coalitions, playing a role in shaping cross-border digital discourse and policy. In the context of Southeast Asia's increasingly constrained digital civic space, SAFEnet's regional advocacy responds to the trend of rising digital repression identified by recent studies (Internet Policy Review, 2023). Comparative observations suggest that the influence of civil society organizations, such as SAFEnet, mirrors patterns of NGO influence observed in other domains of Indonesian policy, including climate change advocacy (Vinata R, 2018).

SAFEnet's digital advocacy strategy encompasses a wide range of tactics. It conducts social media campaigns (e.g., #StopKekerasanDigital), produces educational content on platforms such as Twitter and Instagram, hosts webinars and Digital Rights training camps, and provides digital security training for activists and the public. SAFEnet also employs an evidence-based approach, publishing data-driven reports, issuing thematic policy briefs, and directly engaging in policymaking processes. Strategic collaboration and active participation in public discussions have made SAFEnet an important reference point on digital freedom issues in Indonesia.

Tufekci (2023) Emphasizes the importance of data-centric and literacy-oriented approaches as a response to the limitations of platform-dependent mobilization.



Figure 3. Digital Freedom Advocacy Challenges.
Source: Formulated by Researcher

Figure 3 illustrates the primary challenges to advocating for digital freedom in Indonesia, including the abuse of the Electronic Information and Transaction (ITE) Law, state censorship, internet shutdowns, the criminalization of digital activists, and limited funding and human resources. Additionally, the involvement of political “buzzers” (paid online propagandists) and non-neutral social media algorithms presents obstacles to disseminating advocacy messages. SAFEnet also faces digital access and literacy gaps in more remote areas. Milan and Milan and Tréré (2023) Emphasize that, beyond direct state repression, automated governance—algorithmic controls that institutionalize bias in information flows—now poses a significant challenge to digital activism. This insight resonates with Mogende and Ramutsindela (2020) Observations on how state power responds to and curbs collective action.

On the other hand, SAFEnet’s advocacy has achieved tangible impacts on policy and public awareness. Table 1 outlines the key implications

of SAFEnet’s advocacy. For example, SAFEnet actively contributed to the formulation of Indonesia’s Personal Data Protection Law by providing human-rights-based policy input. It also pursued legal action against the government’s 2019 internet shutdown in Papua – a policy later ruled unlawful by the Supreme Court. Additionally, SAFEnet has been at the forefront of public campaigns pressuring the government to revise the ITE Law, which is widely criticized for threatening freedom of expression. These efforts have encouraged the government to be more open to dialogue with civil society, especially on cybersecurity and personal data protection issues. In terms of public awareness, SAFEnet’s campaigns and training programs (such as its Digital Rights workshops and webinars) have helped improve people’s digital literacy and spur greater public participation in digital rights movements. However, challenges persist in reaching communities with limited Internet access and infrastructure, highlighting an ongoing gap in advocacy outreach

Table 1. The Impact of SAFEnet Advocacy

Impact Categories	The Impact of SAFEnet Advocacy	Explanation
Policy Changes	Contribution to the establishment of the Personal Data Protection Law (Law No. 27/2022)	SAFEnet provides input on the formulation of the PDP Law to ensure it aligns with human rights principles and international standards. Together with other civil society organizations, they have successfully

	encouraged the strengthening of regulations governing the management of personal data.	Public Awareness	Improving people's digital literacy	Through campaigns, webinars, and trainings such as <i>Digital Rights Camp</i> , SAFEnet helps people understand the issues of personal data security, digital rights, and freedom of expression.
Rejection of <i>internet shutdown</i> rules in Papua (2019)	SAFEnet is involved in public protests over the disconnection of internet access in Papua New Guinea. The Supreme Court later declared the policy illegal.			
Increasing public participation in digital policy discussions	SAFEnet's advocacy encourages the government to be more open to dialogue with civil society, especially regarding cybersecurity and personal data policies.		Increasing community participation in the digital movement	SAFEnet encourages active involvement of the public in digital movements such as online campaigns, petitions, and criticism of the government's repressive policies.
Pressure on the revision of the ITE Law	SAFEnet is actively involved in the campaign against the revision of the ITE Law, which is considered a threat to freedom of expression. They are rallying public opinion through petitions and online discussions.		Community approach in digital education	SAFEnet employs a community-based approach to disseminate information about digital rights, but challenges persist in areas with limited access to technology.

This strategic shift from a passive monitoring role to proactive, data-driven advocacy reflects SAFEnet's adaptive response to increasingly complex policy dynamics. The implications of this transformation include

strengthening civil society's role as a check and balance to the state, heightening public awareness of digital rights, and building collaborative networks across sectors. However, the efficacy of SAFEEnet's advocacy still hinges on bolstering its internal capacity and on the existence of policies that favor digital rights. According to the Internet Policy Review (2023), SAFEEnet is at the forefront of defending digital rights in Indonesia amid a digital ecosystem that is increasingly monitored and controlled by the state and technology corporations.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Advances in digital technology have fundamentally transformed the landscape of civil society participation and advocacy in Indonesia. The key findings of this study suggest that SAFEEnet has undergone a significant evolution in its role as a driver of digital freedom advocacy. Originally focused on monitoring digital rights violations, SAFEEnet now serves as a facilitator of public discourse, a provider of legal aid, and a catalyst for multi-sector collaboration. Its digital-based advocacy strategies, such as active social media engagement, data-driven campaigns, and public outreach, have proven effective in raising public awareness and pressuring the state to be more accountable in protecting digital rights (Sukidin, et al., 2025). Even when confronted with repressive regulations, digital criminalization, and state control over cyberspace, SAFEEnet continues to exhibit adaptive and innovative capacity that expands digital public spaces and strengthens democratic engagement (Lorch & Mauk, 2025). The transformation of SAFEEnet's role exemplifies the broader structural shifts of civil society in the digital age. SAFEEnet emerges

as a concrete example of how civil society can collectively articulate digital rights through adaptive, technology-driven, and cross-sector strategies (Haristya, 2020).

In practical terms, the implications of this study offer inspiration for other civil society organizations in designing effective digital advocacy strategies responsive to contemporary challenges. SAFEEnet's practices, including grassroots digital education, creative visual storytelling, and strategic coalition-building, can be replicated and adapted to suit various contexts. On the other hand, these findings theoretically enrich the literature on civil society in the digital age, demonstrating the relevance of network society theory (Castells) and public sphere theory (Habermas) in the context of digital freedom advocacy in developing countries. The digital space serves as a new arena where power is negotiated, resistance is built, and solidarity is strengthened (Vinata, 2018). Based on this study, four key strategic pillars are recommended to enhance digital advocacy efforts:

First, strengthen digital literacy. This is the top priority for building public resilience to disinformation, information manipulation, and other forms of digital repression (Kashaka, 2024). Civil society organizations must consistently educate the public about digital rights, privacy protection, and cybersecurity, so that citizens' awareness of digital issues increases and their participation in digital public spaces becomes more informed and critical.

Second, promote inclusive policy advocacy. Civil society actors should be actively involved in the process of formulating digital laws and policies. Such engagement is crucial to ensure that any new regulations, such as personal data

protection rules or cybercrime laws, uphold principles of social justice and human rights, rather than merely serving the interests of the state or corporations.

Third, forge multi-sector coalitions. Multi-sector collaboration is a key strategy for building a sustainable digital advocacy ecosystem. Synergy between civil society organizations, academics, journalists, the private sector, and reform-minded government elements can yield a more holistic approach to addressing the complexity of contemporary digital issues.

Fourth, leverage technological innovation. There is an urgent need to explore the use of cutting-edge technologies (e.g., artificial intelligence (AI), blockchain, big data analytics) in advocacy. Integrating these tools can make advocacy campaigns more adaptive, scalable, and evidence-based (Madon & Masiero, 2024), while also requiring vigilance regarding potential political and ethical risks to civil society.

Collectively, these measures can strengthen Indonesia's digital democracy and help create a more inclusive digital public sphere. This research still has several limitations. First, because it relies on a literature review approach, the analysis is confined to available secondary data; the absence of primary data limits the depth of insight into the organization's internal dynamics and the experiences of advocacy actors. Second, this study focused on only one case (SAFE-net), so the findings cannot be directly generalized to other civil society organizations with different contexts, approaches, and challenges. Building on these findings and limitations, this study proposes several directions for future research. First,

future studies should incorporate primary data through methods such as in-depth interviews, participatory observation, or digital ethnography. This would allow researchers to capture firsthand the dynamics of advocacy practice, personal narratives, and collective emotions that often cannot be discerned from documents alone. Second, comparative studies across organizations or countries are needed to understand variations in digital advocacy strategies, obstacles, and achievements under different political, cultural, and regulatory contexts. This comparative approach would enrich perspectives and help avoid over-generalizing from a single case. Third, a further critical analysis of digital policies is recommended, particularly examining laws such as the Personal Data Protection Law and the Electronic Information and Transactions Law (ITE) Law in greater depth to understand how these regulations affect the protection of citizens' digital rights. Fourth, researchers should explore the use of emerging technologies in advocacy, considering both their empowering potential and the political or ethical risks they might pose to civil society movements. Pursuing these research agendas will not only broaden the scholarly horizon regarding the transformation of digital civil society actors, such as SAFE-net, but also enhance our understanding of this phenomenon. Still, it will also help build a more adaptive, critical, and socially just framework for digital advocacy praxis amid the rapid evolution of information technology.

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