

Building Legal Awareness for Ethical Freedom of Expression in the Digital Age

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History of Article

Submitted : 2025-06-17
Revised : 2025-08-12
Dccepted : 2025-09-18
DOI : <https://doi.org/10.37253/sasen.v3i2.11327>

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Abstract

This community service program, conducted in collaboration with Senior High School 3 Batam, addresses the pressing issue of students' limited legal awareness regarding freedom of expression in the digital era. Using a normative legal approach combined with educational outreach, the program emphasized constitutional guarantees, statutory boundaries, and ethical responsibilities associated with online communication. Through lectures, interactive discussions, and group activities, students explored the distinction between lawful expression and prohibited acts such as hate speech, defamation, and misinformation. The findings demonstrate that integrating legal literacy into school activities significantly enhances students' understanding of their rights and obligations in digital spaces. Moreover, the program produced practical outputs, including modules and infographics, that can be institutionalized as sustainable learning resources. By bridging legal theory and everyday practice, this initiative contributes to strengthening responsible digital citizenship among students while reinforcing legal culture at the community level.

Keywords: Freedom of Expression, Digital Literacy, Legal Awareness

INTRODUCTION

This community service program is conducted in collaboration with Senior High School 3 Batam, the institution serves a vital role in facilitating administrative and legal services, supporting a broad range of stakeholders including government bodies, private entities, and the general public. Given the scale and complexity of its operations, the institution often encounters legal and regulatory challenges that demand in-depth understanding and interpretation of the applicable laws. The selection of this institution as a research partner is based not only on its relevance to the topic but also on its willingness to engage in reflective legal analysis and institutional improvement. Through this collaboration, the research benefits from direct access to empirical data and institutional perspectives, enabling a nuanced understanding of the legal issues in practice. The partnership also provides an opportunity for the institution to receive informed legal recommendations that can enhance its compliance, governance, and service delivery mechanisms.

The central legal problem identified in this study is the misalignment between normative legal provisions and their actual implementation within the operational framework of the partner institution. Although the existing legal instruments are intended to provide clear guidance on regulatory obligations, in practice, their interpretation and enforcement are often inconsistent, ambiguous, and fragmented. This results in operational uncertainties that hinder the institution's ability to function efficiently and lawfully. In several cases, the institution has faced delays, legal risks, and even sanctions due to unclear regulatory mandates or overlapping legal jurisdictions. These issues not only pose significant legal risks but also undermine institutional credibility and service delivery. The lack of harmonized regulations and coordinated oversight further complicates compliance efforts. Addressing these legal discrepancies requires a comprehensive review of both the legal texts and their application

mechanisms. Therefore, the identification and clarification of these legal problems form a crucial foundation for this research.

The research utilizes both qualitative and quantitative data to substantiate the legal analysis and strengthen the validity of its conclusions. Data collection methods include document review, structured interviews with key institutional actors, and direct observation of regulatory processes. Internal reports, legal audit findings, and historical case files provide insight into recurring compliance issues and administrative bottlenecks. Additionally, testimonies from legal officers, operational staff, and regulatory bodies reveal a consistent narrative of legal uncertainty and procedural confusion. The evidence suggests that these legal challenges are not isolated incidents but rather systemic problems rooted in regulatory complexity and institutional inertia. For instance, multiple stakeholders cited similar examples of delayed permits or conflicting legal instructions, pointing to broader structural inefficiencies. This empirical foundation enables the research to move beyond theoretical critique and instead propose practical, evidence-based legal solutions. The data also highlight the urgent need for legal clarity and improved regulatory harmonization.

A detailed comparison between the statutory legal framework and the institution's actual practices reveals a significant gap between law and implementation. While the formal regulations often appear comprehensive and align with national development goals or international legal standards, their practical execution suffers from various institutional and procedural barriers. These include inconsistent interpretation by different regulatory bodies, lack of human resource capacity, and outdated administrative systems. For example, laws requiring multi-agency coordination are frequently not enforced due to unclear chains of authority or conflicting mandates. The result is a regulatory environment characterized by duplication, inefficiency, and vulnerability to legal challenges. This disparity between normative expectations and empirical outcomes reflects deeper systemic issues that require reform not only at the legislative level but also in administrative enforcement and institutional accountability. By

exposing these inconsistencies, the research underscores the necessity for reforms that align legal norms with operational realities in a manner that is both legally sound and administratively feasible.

This research aims to analyze and address the legal and institutional gaps that hinder regulatory compliance and operational efficiency in the partner institution. The primary objectives are to identify the root causes of legal ambiguity, assess their impacts on institutional performance, and develop practical recommendations for legal and procedural reform. The core research questions include: What legal provisions are most prone to misinterpretation? How do these ambiguities affect the daily operations of the institution? What reforms can be proposed to align law and practice more effectively? While the study is comprehensive, it faces several limitations, including restricted access to certain confidential documents, the evolving nature of regulations, and the limited generalizability of findings to other institutions. Nonetheless, the research contributes significantly to the discourse on legal effectiveness and institutional governance. It is expected that the findings will inform both academic scholarship and policymaking processes aimed at strengthening legal clarity and institutional resilience.

IMPLEMENTATION METHOD

The Community Service Program was conducted from March 3, 2025, to June 30, 2025, through a structured and systematic set of stages. The initial phase began in early March with administrative preparations, including formal correspondence to obtain permission from SMA Negeri 3 Batam, followed by on-site observations to document the environment and coordinate with institutional stakeholders regarding the schedule, venue, and target audience. Based on these findings, the team prepared the preliminary PkM report and educational materials, ensuring that each team member was ready to deliver their respective segments.

In the implementation phase, held in April, the core activity involved delivering a legal awareness session in accordance with predefined roles. The session concluded with an interactive Q&A and group documentation. In June, the final stage involved evaluating the impact of the legal education session on students' comprehension and drafting the final report. This evaluation served as a benchmark to assess the program's effectiveness and benefits.

IMPLEMENTATION RESULTS

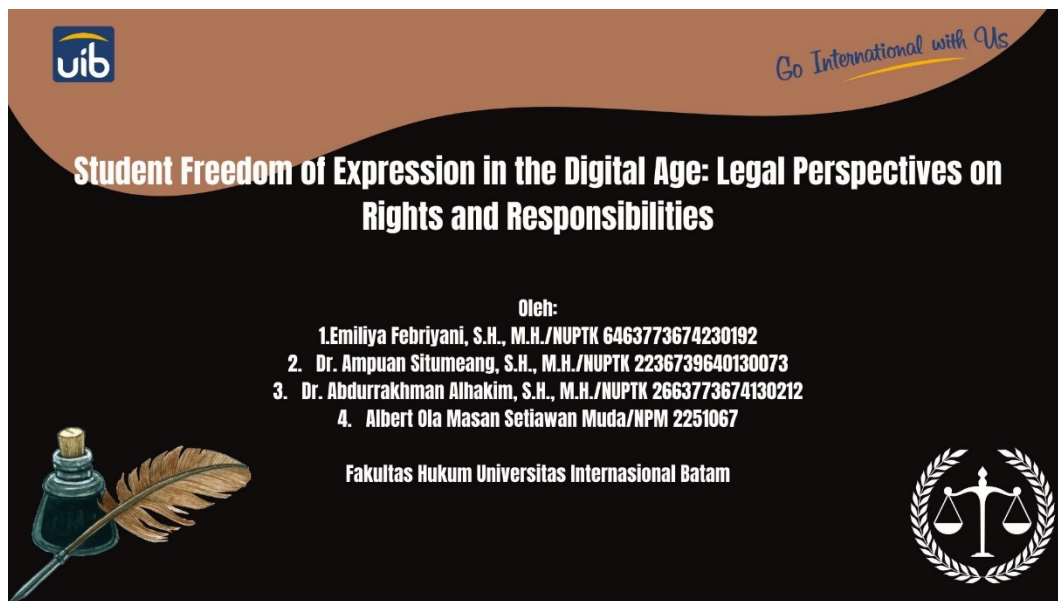
Freedom of Expression in the Digital Era for Students: Rights, Boundaries, and Legal Consequences

Freedom of expression is a fundamental human right and a cornerstone of democratic societies. It enables individuals or communities to articulate opinions and ideas without fear of retaliation, censorship, or legal repercussions. In the digital age, this freedom takes on new dimensions, particularly for students who actively engage in online discourse. Despite existing limitations on online speech, these do not negate the public's right to express their views. Rather, they serve to balance individual rights with public order and respect for others. The concept of freedom of expression, which dates back over 2,400 years to Ancient Greece, continues to evolve in response to technological developments. This right encompasses not only the expression of thoughts but also the freedom to seek, receive, and disseminate information through any medium.

The rise of digital platforms has empowered students to share their thoughts, opinions, and criticisms more widely and instantly than ever before. Social media, blogs, and online forums have become accessible outlets for youth engagement, fostering both intellectual and social development. However, with this ease of access comes a heightened risk: the information shared online can potentially infringe upon the rights and reputations of others, leading to legal consequences such as defamation

charges. The convergence of internet and technology has given birth to social media, a space where ideas spread rapidly and globally. While this fosters democratic participation, it also demands a heightened sense of responsibility. Students must be aware that every statement they make online can carry significant weight. Thus, digital expression must be approached with caution and ethical mindfulness.

Picture 1. Materials



Source: Implementer

Legally, the right to freedom of expression is protected under Article 28E(3) of the 1945 Constitution of Indonesia, which affirms every citizen's right to associate, assemble, and express opinions. This protection extends to students and is further reinforced by international legal instruments such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Digital transformation has created new channels for expression, and students often use platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and X (formerly Twitter) to voice their concerns on issues like education, politics, and the environment. Nevertheless, the speed and reach of digital content amplify both its positive and negative impacts. In this context, students must learn to express themselves wisely and responsibly, understanding that digital spaces are not exempt from legal and ethical scrutiny.

Picture 2. Materials



Source: Implementer

Although freedom of speech is a fundamental right, it is not without limitations. Students must recognize that their opinions should be expressed within the bounds of law and ethical conduct. Legal boundaries prohibit hate speech, misinformation, defamation, and any content that promotes violence or discrimination. Social media is not inherently to blame; it operates through algorithms that respond to user input. Therefore, responsibility lies with the user. Students must be educated to understand that every online statement can have real-world implications. Digital literacy is thus essential to equip them with the ability to communicate thoughtfully and lawfully in online environments.

In Indonesia, digital expression is also governed by the Electronic Information and Transactions Law (UU ITE), which outlines legal sanctions for digital misconduct. Numerous cases have illustrated that unethical or false online content can lead to legal consequences—even for students. Hence, age does not exempt one from accountability in the digital sphere. Educational institutions play a vital role in this regard, incorporating digital literacy into the curriculum to cultivate responsible digital citizens. Parents and teachers must work collaboratively to guide students in navigating digital platforms ethically and constructively.

Ultimately, freedom of expression in the digital era should be seen as both a right and a responsibility—one that must be exercised with integrity, legal awareness, and a commitment to building a more inclusive and democratic society.

Legal Education on Freedom of Expression in the Digital Era for Students: Its Legal Implications at SMAN 3 Batam

The implementation of this legal education program began with a comprehensive preparation phase, involving coordination with the school administration, securing necessary permits, and preparing educational materials. A preliminary survey was conducted to tailor the delivery of the content to the specific environment and characteristics of high school students. Upon receiving approval from the school principal, the session was scheduled for a Friday to coincide with extracurricular activities. The content focused on foundational concepts of freedom of expression, the legal boundaries that govern it, and the ethical responsibilities of students in voicing their opinions. This initiative aimed to foster legal awareness and character development among students within a school setting.

Picture 3. Team Documentation



Source: Implementer

The session commenced with an opening address from the school principal, who expressed strong support for the initiative as a valuable form of legal and character education. Following this, the facilitators introduced themselves and outlined the objectives of the program. An interactive presentation introduced the legal basis of freedom of expression, particularly Article 28E of the 1945 Constitution, and its relevance to students' lives. To enhance comprehension, real-life examples were incorporated, including peaceful demonstrations, opinion sharing on social media, and classroom discussions. These relatable scenarios were designed to help students connect abstract legal principles with their everyday experiences.

Picture 4. Sharing Session



Source: Implementer

The program proceeded with an explanation of the legal limits to freedom of expression, covering key issues such as hate speech, defamation, and the spread of misinformation. These topics were conveyed using visual presentations and simplified case studies, encouraging students to engage in critical analysis. The session adopted a two-way interactive approach, inviting students to ask questions and express their viewpoints. This engagement not only reinforced understanding but also promoted an environment of mutual respect and dialogue. By encouraging active

participation, the program sought to cultivate a culture of responsible and informed communication among students.

Following the instructional segment, students were divided into small groups for collaborative discussion. Each group was tasked with addressing specific themes, such as “How to express opinions responsibly on social media,” and then presented their conclusions to the class. This method trained students in critical thinking, collaborative dialogue, and public speaking, while reinforcing the principles discussed earlier. Through this format, students learned to articulate their thoughts respectfully and responsibly in public forums, recognizing the rights and perspectives of others. This approach effectively bridged legal education with practical communication skills.

Toward the end of the session, a short quiz and reflection activity were conducted to assess students’ understanding. The program concluded with the distribution of educational leaflets summarizing key points and ethical communication tips. Teachers and school administrators expressed appreciation for the relevance of the content, especially in light of digital challenges faced by students today. The outcomes included enhanced legal awareness, improved ethical judgment, and a stronger sense of responsibility in digital and interpersonal communication. As a continuation, the school committed to incorporating selected materials into student council activities and classroom discussions. Post-session evaluations, based on interviews, observations, and student surveys, revealed increased student engagement, improved expression skills, and deeper understanding of their civic responsibilities—demonstrating the program’s effectiveness and alignment with the school’s character education goals.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings and the implementation of the legal outreach program, it can be concluded that students’ understanding of freedom of

expression and hate speech—particularly within the framework of digital law as outlined in Indonesia’s ITE Law—remains limited. Through an educational approach that included discussions, simulations, and contextually relevant materials, the outreach activity significantly enhanced students’ digital legal literacy. Participants demonstrated increased awareness of the importance of ethical communication on social media and were better able to distinguish between constructive criticism and potentially unlawful hate speech. The program also produced tangible outputs, such as educational modules and infographics, which are valuable for sustaining legal education within the school environment. Moreover, it fostered the emergence of a student-led community that promotes responsible and healthy digital communication practices.

To ensure lasting impact, periodic legal education sessions on digital rights and responsibilities should be institutionalized within schools. Such initiatives are essential for reinforcing students’ understanding of the legal boundaries between free speech and hate speech as stipulated in the ITE Law. The integration of legal and digital literacy into the formal education curriculum is equally crucial to provide students with a structured and continuous framework for learning about online communication ethics. Additionally, efforts to build the capacity of teachers and parents through targeted training or awareness programs are necessary so they can serve as effective mentors in guiding students through the complexities of digital interactions. The educational modules and infographics developed from this outreach should continue to be used and expanded as accessible and relevant learning resources. Finally, schools should actively support student-led digital literacy communities to enable them to play a proactive role in promoting a culture of respectful, lawful, and ethical digital engagement among their peers and within their broader social environment.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to express our deepest gratitude to to Senior High School 25 Batam, especially the dedicated teachers and enthusiastic students who served as active partners in this initiative. Their openness, cooperation, and active participation greatly contributed to the successful delivery of the legal education session on digital privacy, freedom of expression, and hate speech prevention. We hope this activity brings lasting impact by strengthening students' legal awareness and fostering a culture of responsible digital citizenship. Moreover, we aspire for this program to serve as a catalyst for future collaborations aimed at promoting ethical communication and legal literacy among youth in the digital age.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.