Confronting Media Prosumer People With Manipulated Political Memes In Indonesia's Post Truth Era

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ABSTRACT. *The more easily people trust a content such as news or memes based only on what they believe in, and ignore the facts, making this issue pivotal to study because of its endangers to the stability and the unity of the Indonesian nation which consists of various ethnicities and religions. With the situation that is inversely proportional between the use of smartphones and media literacy owned, this research eager to uncover how people read political memes and what kind of factors influence them. This study uses a qualitative approach that rests on an critical paradigm with a digital ethnographic method implemented through an instrument in the form of a Focus Group Discussion. This is intended to understand the behavior of various backgrounds of people who are active in cyberspace, especially in reading political memes produced by Agan Harahap. The result of this research reveals that in reading visuals including political memes, there is a tendency to be influenced by political affiliation, religion, ethnicity, and culture over objective truth. Sensitive issues related to these things are able to create a movement that involves the masses. Increasing media and digital literacy, not only technically expert both in hardware and software, but also fully understanding the content before commenting and sharing it, in order to encourage media prosumer to be critical in responding to the era of partisanship and distrust or what is widely referred to as the post truth era.*

KEYWORDS: [digital ethnography; media prosumer; political memes; post truth]

1. INTRODUCTION

The digital revolution has impacted digital practice around the world and this sheer diversity will feedback into one of the main narratives of our time (Barendregt, 2020; Murfianti, 2017b). The development of technology makes it easier for people to post various kinds of information with several purposes, both educating (Chinmi, Marta, Haryono, Fernando, & Goswami, 2020), duplicating skills (Tannady, Resdiansyah, Andry, & Marta, 2020), to directing the sustainability of an information system to its users (Marta et al., 2019).

In this era, the audience can act as both producer as well as consumer. Alvin Toffler coined prosumers as in 1980, a term to simply illustrate the simultaneous nature of consumption and production from individuals (Ahluwalia & Miller, 2014), enabling humans to have new opportunities to engage in interaction, co-creation, and collaborative authorship (Jenkins, 2006).

The opening of information taps in Indonesia reform era became an important milestone for freedom of speech. But this turned out to cause increased flooding of information which made people confused to identify which was genuine and which were false. In the last four years, the community is relatively easy to believe various kinds of false information as long as it is following what they believe. This situation corresponds to what is written by Ralph Keyes as The Post-Truth Era, in which the boundaries of truth and lies, honesty, and dishonesty of news are not clear (Keyes, 2004).

According to the Oxford Dictionaries Web site, "post-truth" has been selected as the 2016 word of the year, largely due to Donald Trump's success in the presidential election. Several studies have been conducted concerning the post-truth era, most of which examine the situation and conditions that occurred during Donald Trump's US presidential election campaign and the after-effects of the elections (Keyes, 2004).

According to the Oxford Dictionaries Web site, "post-truth" has been selected as 2016 word of the year, largely due to Donald Trump's success in the presidential election. Several studies have been conducted concerning the post-truth era, most of which examine the situation and conditions that occurred during Donald Trump's US presidential election campaign and the after-effects of the elections (Klinenberg, 2016; Mihailidis & Viotty, 2017; Tornoe, 2017; Tsipursky, 2017).

In this era, fake data can be presented like a real data. It has resulted in the spread of false information on social media, including memes. Meme is one of the creativity that is often shared on social media as a form of freedom of expression. The spread of memes, particularly in social media, has seized the attention of the world, including Indonesia.

There are many genres of memes. This research focuses on Photo-Based Political memes that have been manipulated and sparked an extended debate. According to Shifman, Photo-Based Memes are categorized into three main genres: reaction photoshop, stock character macro, and photo fads. It usually done by combining two frames into a natural-looking photo. This photo editing-based meme is deliberately designed as an invitation to (creative) action (Shifman, 2014).

As far as the research has been carried out, many visual works in the form of political memes have flooded social media. Meme creator can create a political meme using a quote, illustration, comic or caricature, and photos, but only works of Agan Harahap focus on manipulating photos with Photoshop, by taking advantage of the hot issues that are widely discussed, then adding captions or short news stories that often deceive the audience. Base on Shifman's work (Shifman, 2014), the genre of Agan's work can be categorized as a Reaction to Photoshop. With high shrewdness in processing images of famous figures, Agan's work often becomes a separate 'trap' for netizens. For those who believe in, his creation has the potential to be used as material for spreading hoaxes.

Although seen as a humor or mere entertainment, politically engaged memes may give a huge impact to the society. As it is the case in Indonesia, people generally believe the memes to hold some truth (Murfianti, 2017a). This can be seen from netizen comments when it is posted on social media. Different parties argue about its authenticity. They even dare to risk anything to strengthen their beliefs. This possibly can create tension through Indonesian society, which is composed of a wide range of ethnic groupings, subcultures, and religions (Marta, 2017b). Furthermore, such a tension will increase significantly approaching the presidential or Governor election because memes have the potential to be influential as we have learned from previous elections, such as increasing the political involvement of citizens who are often viewed as depoliticized and apathetic (Sreekumar & Vadrevu, 2013).

So far there have been many studies on memes that have been done. Shifman identifies memes as a mode of political participation by categorizing these memes and exploring in more detail their role in digital culture (Shifman, 2014). While Bauckhage focuses on spreading memes (Bauckhage, 2011). In its distribution, some memes are considered successful and some are considered not. Knobel and Lankshear describe the factors that drive the success of a meme in terms of the qualities of the meme (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007). Talking about the human need for self-expression and ownership, Mitlner examines the LOL Cats meme series (Miltner, 2011), while Vickery examined Confession Bear memes (Vickery, 2014). Milner has also entered the realm of politics, exploring memes as the public discourse on politics related to the Occupy Wall Street movement (Milner, 2013a, 2013b) , while Tay focused on humorous political memes as a manifestation of non-serious play (Tay, 2012). Related to political meme, Vasiliki Plevriti Related to the political meme, Vasiliki Plevriti sees the potential of memes in encouraging increased citizen engagement, which can be used as a source of effective political criticism (Plevriti, 2014). However, there has been no research conducted on internet memes, focus on manipulated photo-based political memes, which are read by netizen particularly in the post-truth era where emotions and personal beliefs are more advanced than objective facts.

Indonesia is one of the developing countries which may have unique elements. According to Top 20 Internet User Statistics for June 30, 2016, Indonesia is among the top five smartphone users in the world. On the other side, the level of literacy is second-bottom after Botswana in Africa. This research would like to study in more detail how such a phenomenon occurs when the use of information technology is inversely proportional to the low level of media literacy as happening in Indonesia society, particularly in reading manipulated political memes. This study aims to explore the way Indonesian from various backgrounds reading political memes and the factors that influence it.

2. METHODOLOGY

Briandana and Mukti (2018) offer a critical paradigm as an effort to reveal the real structure of pseudo-reality in society. In line with that, the researcher tries to capture the understanding of the research participants on visual data in the form of political memes through Focus Group Discussion (FGD) as an important instrument in a qualitative research approach (Situmeang, 2017). This research moves from data in online media that is presented in the daily lives of communicants through their social media, so Westman (2015) places digital

ethnography as a central role in bridging the behavior of its users. Næss (2017) calls it a reflective effort to see real-life culture, in this research, it is implemented in the form of a combination of user netizen story elements with the characteristics of political memes that appear on their social media.

The behavior of new media users that is triggered by the rise of digitalization is an opportunity for digital ethnographers to map emerging problems, one of which is disinformation (Astuti, Giri, & Hidayah, 2020). To address the aforementioned questions, online FGD has been conducted among netizens actively giving comments on those memes. The questions posed in the FGD relate to political memes by manipulating photos through the photoshop application so that they appear real. How did audiences respond when they first saw the meme post, how did some of them immediately believe the authenticity of the photo, then explored further the factors that influenced the reading of the visual text.

FGD is a good strategy for "understanding people's attitudes and behavior", they offer flexibility in designing questions to be asked as well as follow-up afterward (Wimmer & Dominick, 2014). Through FGD, a lot of information can be provided, besides that FGD is also ideal for discussions on topics that require strong opinions on issues that are considered sensitive, such as politics and humor (Grauerholz & Donley, M, 2012). Another equally important factor is the interactivity, in which internet memes are generated and disseminated in interactive communities. Therefore, during the FGD, a responsive and interactive environment for discussion also needs attention.

Online FGD has been done through zoom. This is conducted with consideration of practicality issues, considering participants come from various regions in Indonesia. Memes are disseminated through social media, therefore ideally discussing these memes is more optimally done in their natural environment with the people who created and distributed these memes. Although participants may attempt to dominate FGD, successful moderators can limit such disruptive behavior. The literature study was conducted to support theoretical studies and to enrich references in analyzing the FGD results.

The researcher identifies the most popular photo-based political memes created by Agan Harahap, one of the best creator meme which focus on manipulating photo. His expertise in processing images with the help of Photoshop does not need to be doubted, Agan Harahap is an artist who lives in Yogyakarta, born January 28, 1980. His work has often been a controversy among netizens until it has been promoted to the national level mass media. He creates exploitable memes with the concept of combining a character that is being discussed a lot with other characters who are usually their opponents or make it seem like they are in a certain place. The meme was made solely as a satirical social criticism and at the same time opened the netizen's insight about the current issue.

Thompson et. al. (2020) states that visual data in the media, including things that are expressed verbally, to the tendency of interactive presentations online are the main focus of analysis. The analysis step taken by the researcher was to evaluate the data that was considered meaningful, then categorize it according to interpretation.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The following are political memes that are satirical by Agan, selected based on popularity and the number of comments posted on social media.

Figure 1. Habib and King Salman Memes
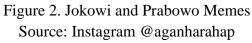Source: Instagram @aganharahap

This meme was made when King Salman visited Indonesia, and the political situation was heating up because of the Al Maidah case that befell the Governor of Jakarta at the time, Basuki Cahya Purnama and Habib Rizieq is the chairmen of Front Pembela Islam (FPI). Below the memes, Agan put the caption "*fanatik sih boleh saja tetapi logika harus tetep dipake ya*" (fanatics are fine, but you have to use logic.).

The meme picture of Habib Rizieq and King Salman is the work of Agan Harahap which received 4,502 likes and 1,105 comments. The very subtle edits made many netizens fooled into thinking the photo was real. This can be seen from the comments of other netizens when the photo is shared by other accounts. *"100% asli sumfeh"* (100% genuine) and there are also

netizens who ask *"Ini kejadiannya dimana dan kapan ?"*(When is it happened and where), another comment replied "*Di bandara, saat raja turun dari Lion air"* (At the airport, the King came down from the Lionair aircraft). These comments reveal that they believe in this visual.

This next meme is about Jokowi and Prabowo. This meme was made at the time of the 2019 presidential election. The situation of heated political temperature caused by the division of Indonesian society into two, supporters of the two presidential candidates, namely Jokowi and Prabowo. The meme got a lot of likes, 19,289, and 344 comments.

Figure 2. Jokowi and Prabowo Memes
Source: Instagram @aganharahap

Many netizens believe that the photo is genuine and then give a comment to feel happy about the situation and urge supporters of the two figures not to push each other, like the comment from gndi95 "They just get along like this, then why are the supporters pushing each other"

These memes were made solely as a satirical social criticism and at the same time opened the netizen's insight about the current issue. The meme was created solely as a satirical social criticism and at the same time gave netizens insight into current issues. The satirical nature of memes is very popular with young people because they are seen as having a level of authenticity according to reality which is usually different from the realities made by politicians, advertisers, and news media constructions (Jones, 2010).

To explore how netizens read photo-based political memes, online Focus group Discussion has been conducted, as discussed in the methodology section. The results of the FGD provided me with some insight to understand the reading process and the factors that influence it.

Eleven individuals participated in the focus group. Respondents have selected netizens who provide comments on the most popular memes of Agan Harahap's works that are posted on his social media Instagram, with ages ranging from 18 to 32 years, one female respondent and the rest are all male. Base on the data it can be seen that there is a tendency for men to prefer to watch political content than women. It is in line with Purcell's work, state that women like political content less than men (Purcell, 2013). More over, men are more likely than women to actively consume comedy content online, such as memes (Madden, 2007).

This age range (young age) is a very productive age in creating creative content (Wunsch-Vincent & Vickery, 2007). Research shows that this age range is also very fond of comedy. These participants are then categorized into three groups, namely; creators, sharers, and viewers.

Table 1. Respondents Data

No.	Category	Ages	Total	Gender
1.	Creators	21 and 30	2	All Male
2.	Sharers	21-32	6	All Male
3.	Viewers	19, 18, and 22	3	1 Female, 2 Male

The first category, meme creators, includes everyone who produces the content of the media. Only two people fall into this group, all-male and highly educated, aged 21 and 30 years. The number of content creators in this media is very small compared to those who enjoy the content both as sharers and only as lurkers, with different levels of participation. It confirms the results of previous studies which state that the amount of content creators is the least compared to the content connoisseurs itself (van Dijck, 2009).

The next category is political memes sharers. This category includes people who share political memes with other audiences. Not only share but also comment and rate content created by others. The number of respondents included in this category is the largest compared to other categories, more than half, aged between 21-32 years. Base on the focus discussion, it could be underlined that sharers never create content. In contrast to meme creators who not only create content but also often act as meme distributors

The final category, political meme viewers, represents an intermediate percentage of the sample; three participants claimed that their involvement with memes is only as silent readers (Lurkers). This group consisted of a woman aged 19 years and two men aged 18 and 22

years. They only reading the debates that occur between camps and the words that are said, without giving comments. This group never being involved in sharing and creating these internet memes with other audiences.

For the political memes viewers, entertainment is the main reason for consuming political memes. Especially when reading comments from other netizens on these memes, sometimes it is more interesting to read the comments than enjoy the memes itself. Here are some netizens who seem to use political memes for entertainment, relaxing and laughing, getting out of life's hardships without looking for deep meaning.

The categorization that has been done in this study is not much different from the categorization carried out by Li, Bernoff, and Fiorentino. Based on their level of participation, online media users can be categorized as creators, critics, collectors, joiners, viewers, and inactive (Li, Bernoff, & Fiorentino, 2007). They are categorized as critics if they rate and comment frequently, while collectors are those who use bookmarking services and bookmarking web pages. The next category, Joiner, is a category for users of social networking sites who often do activities such as sharing, while viewers who are mostly women usually consume content without creating it. Creators, critics, collectors, and Joiners are categories that are included in content spreaders, while people who create memes are included in the category of creators,

The simpler model also offer by Shao, which is based on the premise there are three ways how individuals engage with media content, namely consumption, participation, and production (Shao, 2009). Consuming refers to simply viewing content created by other audiences, while participating includes activities such as sharing, rating, and commenting, which involve user-to-user interactions and user-to-content interactions.

In terms of factors that influence the audiences in reading the visual including manipulated political memes, we should understand the condition of Indonesia as a diverse country, rich in ethnicity, religion, and culture (Marta & Rieuwpassa, 2018). It is very susceptible to strife and division. Moreover, after the 2014 presidential election, the Indonesian people seemed to be split into two camps, the supporters of their respective presidential candidates at that time. Even now, who have passed the next presidential election period in 2019 (Flora, 2019), and have already chosen the winner, the nuances of the cold war of the two camps are still felt. Both of them are very sensitive to the issues that arise, especially those related to ethnicity, race, and religion issues. Do not be too spicy, rude, insulting and insulting sentences related to these issues appearing on social media (Marta, 2017a).

Here, age also affects a person's acceptance of a visual that is considered humorous or satirical. Research results show that young people often prefer loud jokes (G Kuipers, 2006). On the other hand, people with old age tend to show rejection of humor which is viewed as harsh, cruel, and shocking curses. It is relate to Friedman' work which state that in general, audiences who have high culture, under 44 years of age prefer highbrow comedy (Friedman, 2014).

Not only the ages, but the reading of political memes is also influenced by religion, ethnic and cultural backgrounds because these three things affect the audience's sense of humor which determines whether a political meme is considered funny or not. As one of informan said that he will trust or support visuals that match to his beliefs and he will defend them

according to his religion and ethnicity. As far as my concern, various religions play a pivotal role in reading humor, including political memes. If a visual is deemed offensive to a certain religion, it can have detrimental consequences. Netizens will comment positively or agree with the political memes that are posted if the meme is following with what they believe, and vice versa, they will blaspheme and criticize if the political memes are against and even support the opposing camp. Not only what they believe, but every religion has a different size in terms of which humor can be tolerated and which is not, which is acceptable and which is not.

Ethnic and cultural background also plays a paramount importance role in shaping cultural boundaries (Wiest, 2016), which in turn influences a person's sense of humor; consequently, something that is considered funny in one culture, maybe grossly inappropriate or shocking in another (Murfianti, 2018). Perceptions of what is not appropriate are actively shaped by cultural and ethnic backgrounds because there are "specific cultural order constructions" in each culture. This then causes that the numbers often violate social norms or destroy established social patterns.

Regarding to the discussion about educational background, it can be seen that highly educated individuals have a lower sense of humor than those with less education. Kuipers argues that this may be because higher education allows people to be more critical, giving them more to "reject and look down on" (Giselinde Kuipers, 2009). So the educational background also affects the audience in reading a visual in social media.

4. CONCLUSION

The development of digital technology has influenced the development of internet memes. The rise of editing software, coupled with capable skills, makes the photos look so real. Text/caption plays an important role to make the audience believe. A low level of digital literacy encourages people to believe and share it easily. This has the potential to become a hoax. In the post-truth era, age, gender, social class, religion, culture, education, and political affiliation greatly influence the public's reading of photo-based political memes. Therefore, the speed of information technology development must be balanced with digital literacy as a whole, not only be able to operate hardware, mastery in software but also really understand the content from visuals/news on social media. The literacy level of a social group affects how they respond to meme content on the internet.

5. LIMITATION AND STUDY FORWARD

Although it involved quite several participants in assessing social media uploads, this research was still focused on one account, namely @aganharahap. In the future, research complexity can be developed on multiple accounts or even multi platforms.

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