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Beyond the “lulz”

Audience engagement with political memes
in the case of Indonesia

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Abstract

This thesis explores the roles of Internet memes as a form of contemporary political discourse in Indonesia from the individual perspective of audience members. In-depth qualitative interviews with fourteen Indonesian young adults were conducted to understand the ways in which they engage and create meaning of political memes, allowing for a closer examination on the media's potential for contribution to civic cultures. For a grounded analysis of their engagement, the research is based on two recent case studies in Indonesia where memes perform as distinctive modes of discourse: political dissent to challenge a figure of authority, *Setya Novanto*; and partisan opinions in the context of electoral politics during the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election campaign period, also known as *Pilkada DKI*.

In recent years, Internet memes have received growing scholarly interest and are treated as fundamental to the various aspects of contemporary digital culture. It is suggested that memes have broadened opportunities for political discourse among citizens in a democracy by extending political commentaries through accessible and inclusive means. In countries that are sensitive to dissent, political memes may help amplify the public voice, thereby empowering civic engagement.

However, the results from this study suggest a nuanced view of memes' civic potentials. While the use of satire in political memes serves as an avenue to undermine the political elite, the media's modes of discourse also prove to facilitate argument and antagonism. Especially in the case of election-memes, the empowering nature of the media was subject to challenge, as audiences indicate the likelihood for institutional influence to interfere with the discourse. As more opportunities and challenges are addressed, the findings further reveal the respondents' active negotiations of self-positioning as meme audiences and citizens in the digital environment. This translates into dynamic forms of engagement that may subsequently foster *or* hinder their civic agency and citizenship in the nation's democracy.

Keywords: *audience engagement, citizenship, civic engagement, civic agency, civic cultures, democracy, election memes, Pilkada DKI, political memes, political discourse, political dissent, Setya Novanto*

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Introduction

2017 marks a tumultuous year in Indonesian politics, where a heated contest for the governorship of the nation's capital, Jakarta, took place against the backdrop of a divisive campaign period over the course of six months. Throughout this period, various political discourses emerged on social media, fuelling conversations surrounding the candidates' qualifications, or lack thereof. Among these communicative forms were Internet memes, often used to illustrate the contradictory or incongruous campaign promises made by the candidates. While the contents primarily demonstrate both capacities and weaknesses of the opposing candidates, sectarian and racial sentiments also surfaced; reflecting the polarised nature of electoral politics in the country. These heavy contestations were facilitated predominantly through social media platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter.

Several months later, Internet memes made headlines in the news as several individuals were arrested for spreading satirical memes to mock the former parliamentary Speaker, Setya Novanto (often abbreviated to *SetNov*); a politician notorious for avoiding numerous corruption charges. These memes point to an image that was circulated shortly after SetNov was due for hearing with the Corruption Eradication Commissions, where he was pictured resting on a hospital bed in a setting that appears to be staged. Over 20 Internet users who circulated the SetNov memes were identified as suspects on the grounds of defamation, which is subject for criminalisation under Indonesia's ITE law¹. Few weeks following this incident, and officially named as a prime suspect in a graft scandal, the politician was reportedly missing and subsequently found in a car accident where his car came into collision with an electricity pole. This time, Internet users circulated even more memes and pictorials that satirise the incident with more "lulz"² through the hashtags *#SaveTiangListrik* (Save the electricity pole) and *#IndonesiaMencariPapa* (Indonesia in the search for Papa³).

Internet memes—characterised by satirical humour, often referencing pop culture, typically

¹ Indonesia's Electronic Information and Transactions Act, also known as UU ITE or the ITE law, criminalises the act of distributing, transmitting and/or making accessible any form of electronic media communication that could be considered defamatory or slanderous. The act allows for a maximum penalty of four-years prison term and maximum fine of 750 million Indonesian Rupiah (approximately US\$54,000).

² Lulz is typographical subversion of "LOL", an acronym "for laugh(ing) out loud" which denotes a type of humour that is derived at another's expense.

³ The reference to the word "Papa" or father is used ironically, in relation a previous scandal known as "Papa minta saham" (Papa asks for shares) in 2015 where Setya Novanto sought to extort shares in the country's largest mining project, *PT Freeport Indonesia*.

created anonymously and circulated online—have received growing scholarly interest and are treated as fundamental to the various aspects of contemporary digital culture. In recent years, research has examined the potential of memes in broadening opportunities for political discourse (Milner, 2012) and electoral politics (Heiskanen, 2017). In the case of Indonesia, academic and popular debates question its implications, as digital humour appears to spark new hopes for civic engagement and electoral participation through free artistic creation in the participatory culture of social media. Some have pointed out its ability to drive resistance, while others caution against reading too much into its roles. Moreover, studies have paid scant attention to how meme viewers engage with the media content, particularly when the subject touches on electoral politics.

The events illustrated above have thus far demonstrated the role of memes as a contemporary form of political discourse, which widens the realm for democratic participation in Indonesia among the youth (Allifiansyah, 2016). They also reveal memes as an opportunity structure for civic cultures, or the cultural patterns where ‘the foundations for civic agency are embedded’ (Dahlgren, 2009:103), in which the media can be treated as avenues to learn and perform citizenship (Miegel & Olsson, 2013). Yet, little is currently known about how the youth, who represent the majority of Internet users in Indonesia, actually engage and make meaning of the media content. This thesis therefore argues for the need to analyse the phenomenon from the perspective of audiences who engage with political memes on social media, to allow for a closer understanding of their implications in today’s media environment.

Aim and Research Questions

The present study seeks to explore the roles of memes within the context of Indonesian politics based on two political events in 2017, where the media performed as distinctive means of discourse. Firstly, the Jakarta gubernatorial election or *Pilkada DKI*⁴, where election-memes predominantly conveyed expressions of support or opposition toward the candidates and hence contained partisan cues. Secondly, the *SetNov* memes, which acted as a tool for political dissent by exposing the politician’s continuous attempt to avoid prosecution of corruption charges, while challenging the enforcement of Indonesia’s media regulation under the ITE law.

⁴ In *Bahasa Indonesia* or the Indonesian language, the Jakarta gubernatorial election is termed as “Pemilihan Kepala Daerah Khusus Ibukota Jakarta” and commonly abbreviated as “Pilkada DKI”.

The following research questions have been formulated to address the main objectives of this thesis:

1. How do audiences define and engage with political memes on social media?
2. How do audiences construct the implications of memes on contemporary political discourse, in the context of Indonesian politics?
3. In what ways do political memes foster or hinder the Indonesian youth's civic engagement?

This research therefore aims to contribute to the scholarship of memetic media and provide contextualised study on political memes to fill the knowledge gap on the mediation of politics through humour, that is predominantly analysed in the context of modern western societies. Through in-depth interviews with Indonesian young adults, the thesis examines the ways they view and engage with Internet memes to provide a closer understanding of the cultural and political values of Internet memes within the participatory culture of social media. The way these values are understood has an inference on how memes are treated as a form of political discourse in the contemporary digital culture. This, in turn, allows for further exploration of the political memes' roles and implication on the civic agency, which is crucial in determining the media's potential in promoting, or impeding, the audiences' civic engagement.

Contextual Background: Digital democracy & the Meme Phenomena in Indonesia

Indonesia's media development has been strongly shaped by the post-1998 democratic transition, a period characterised by the return of freedom of expression and a rapid commercialisation of the media sector (Lim, 2011). While the Internet only serves roughly 105 million out of a total population of 263 million (Statista, 2017a), Indonesia has witnessed a tremendous growth in social media usage since 2012 where 90% of online activities devoted to browsing social networking sites (Lim, 2013) with Facebook, Twitter and Instagram as the dominating platforms. There has been enthusiasm about the democratic effects of social media, in a sense that it can be used as a solution to address injustice and serve as a counter-balance force from the mainstream media (Sugiarto, 2014). Such idealistic view can be held in regard to the Internet's role in 1998 as a medium to challenge the state under former President Suharto's authoritarian regime, prior to the nation's democratic transition (Lim, 2006).

It is crucial to note that this study is contextualised within the rise of personalised forms of political engagement of the educated urban middle-class youth. Over half of Indonesia's

population is comprised of people under the age of 30 (Index Mundi, 2018); and with a mere 44% active social media penetration rate nation-wide (Statista, 2017b), access to social media is highly concentrated in urban areas. For instance, in an empirically-grounded study on social media activism in Indonesia, Merlyna Lim (2013) discovered that the narratives of grassroots activism were predominantly targeted to urban middle class consumers. The use of social media in politics—for both political activism and electoral politics—has become embedded in the day-to-day social and cultural activities of the urban middle class youth.

Indonesia witnessed a shift in its democratic paradigm during the presidential election campaign in 2014⁵. Through social networking sites and other interactive forums, the Web 2.0 facilitated intense political contestations toward the candidates' electability in various modes of discourses and applications, which include satirical pictorials in the form of memes (Wadipalapa, 2015). These memes predominantly served as a tool to communicate the audiences' political partisanship by means of expression of support or opposition toward the presidential candidates (Arditya, 2014); a phenomenon that it arguably parallel to that of Pilkada DKI 2017. Simultaneously, Internet memes have increasingly become a vehicle for political expression among the Indonesian youth to challenge legislations, mainly by highlighting the absurdities in politics involving individual and political elites (Allifiansyah, 2016).

With the growing number of Indonesian Internet users, Indonesian President Joko Widodo warns that cybercrimes have similarly been on the rise and pledges for tougher sanctions through the country's Internet laws. However, Internet activists have expressed their concerns towards the implementation of the law for the consequence it holds towards free speech; the definition of "cybercrime" not only includes criminal acts like online fraud and money laundering, but also considers defamation, blasphemy and hate speech. According to SAFEnet⁶, over hundreds of Internet users have been reported to the police for online defamation and blasphemy since 2008, despite showing no evidence or indication of such deeds. Individuals have been arrested for expressing their opinions freely on the Internet—and in some cases, detained for raising their voices against corrupt government officials (Deutsche Welle, 2016).

⁵ The 2014 Indonesian presidential election matched former general Prabowo Subianto against the governor of Jakarta, Joko Widodo (also known as Jokowi). Jokowi's victory was announced on 22 July, where he was subsequently sworn-in for a 5-year term.

⁶ Abbreviation for the Southeast Asia Freedom of Expression Network

Following the case of arrests over the SetNov memes, the incident was openly criticised by members of the public as the loose interpretation of the term “defamation” under the ITE law proved to benefit the powerful and the wealthy, and may discourage the ordinary citizens’ willingness to extend social criticism toward state officials (Rahadian, 2017).

Amid SetNov’s demand to prosecute those who ridiculed him through memes, his disappearance and second round of hospitalisation fuelled even more mockery from Internet users. After being declared missing for 24 hours while anti-corruption investigators visited his residence for questioning, he was discovered to suffer a serious concussion from the car accident. Yet, as photographs and footage taken from the scene emerged, the alleged scale of SetNov’s injuries did not correspond with the evidence of a fairly minor car accident (Harvey, 2017). This event ties in with his previous hospitalisation, as the original photo depicted SetNov being wired to a breathing machine and non-functioning heart monitor, despite supposedly admitted for diabetes and vertigo. In response to the incident, Internet users conveyed satirical remarks regarding their concerns toward the electricity pole by using the hashtag *#SaveTiangListrik*, which became a number one trending topic in Twitter (Noor, 2017). The hashtag *#IndonesiaMencariPapah* also emerged (BBC Indonesia, 2017), pointing to the politician’s past attempts at avoiding questioning by anti-corruption investigators⁷.

Months prior to the SetNov case, political memes also made rounds in the Internet during the divisive political campaign period of Pilkada DKI. Circulated through social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, memes offered alternative discussions regarding the candidates’ eligibility by depicting their political career tracks or campaign rhetoric; and served as a tool for Internet users to convey their partisanship (Kurniasih, 2016). However, it gradually appeared that the nature of the discourse turned into a form of deliberate attacks between the opponents—many of which contain sectarian, religious and racial sentiments (Dewi et al., 2017)⁸. This links to the election’s deep political, religious divide between supporters of then-incumbent Basuki “Ahok” Tjahaja Purnama, an ethnic Chinese Christian who was charged with blasphemy for allegedly insulting the Qur’an in a speech, and his rival Anies Baswedan, a former Education Minister who made overtures to hard-line Islamist groups (Kwok, 2017). As put by Wimar Witoelar, a political analyst, Indonesia’s pluralism came to challenge in this election in its normally secular politics (Allard & Suroyo, 2017).

⁷ See Appendix B (SetNov) for examples

⁸ See Appendix B (Pilgub DKI) for examples

In an empirically grounded study of Pilkada DKI, Lim (2017) discusses the relationship between social media and electoral politics that further the divide between “pro-Ahok” and “pro-Anies” supporters. The study reveals how the use of social media campaigns—ones that employed “buzzers”⁹—which, combined with the heavy spread of negative information and “fake news”, contributed to the increasing polarisation among ordinary Indonesian citizens (ibid.). As election-memes emerged and overlapped with these heavy contestations, the nature of Internet memes as an alternative, dissenting critique from “the people” (Shifman, 2014) and form of well-received, “shared humour” becomes subject to question when applied in the context of electoral politics, especially when the media contain partisan cues. To account for this case is therefore crucial in exploring the civic potentials of memes within the context of Indonesian politics, as the media content may potentially be appropriated for institutional influence.

⁹ The term “buzzer” is used to describe an Internet user, typically with a large number of followers, who is paid to disseminate promotional information of a certain product and/or brand on social media platforms.

Literature Review

To gain a better understanding of how the present study has been approached, this chapter provides a literature overview of the relationship between political memes and civic engagement. The theoretical concepts of humour are firstly addressed by outlining its functions and forms in relation to politics, as well as its modes of discourse and generic forms. The second part gives an understanding of Internet memes through the media's definition and conceptualisation, and briefly examining the relationships between the political and the cultural aspects of memes. Thirdly, the notion of memes as a form of contemporary political discourse is situated within the context of online public spheres and public discourses in memetic participation, which points to the polyvocal nature of the media. How meme audiences are positioned within this participatory network is subsequently examined, with reference to their agency as Internet users in the Web 2.0. The fourth section deals with existing studies on the outcomes of political entertainment media and memes on knowledge and attitudes, and how these connect to the civic agency of audiences in the digital environment. Finally, the chapter concludes by discussing the analytical framework adopted by this thesis: the circuit of civic cultures, to survey political memes' potential of fostering, or hindering, the audiences' civic engagement in performing citizenship.

The functions and forms of humour

Using humour as a mechanism for political discourse is not a new concept. Referring to the Middle Ages, Bakhtin (1981:23) stresses the importance of humour in advancing civilisation for 'laughter demolishes fear and piety before an object, before a world, making of it an object of familiar contact and thus clearing the ground for an absolutely free investigation of it.' His notion of the Carnavalesque crowd in the streets or marketplaces during the Renaissance designates an alternative social context, where the established order is reversed and ridiculed, therefore connecting humour to the common people (Bakhtin, 1968). Humour is thus located in the operations of social power, where 'the people' or audiences are provided with relief from the injustices of the governing institutions to which they are subject to. Adapting Bakhtin's Carnavalesque concept, Robert Hariman argues:

Parody and related forms of political humour are essential resources for sustaining democratic public culture. They do so by exposing the limits of public speech, transforming discursive demands into virtual images, setting those images before a *carnavalesque* audience, and

celebrating social levelling while decentering all discourses within the “immense novel” of the public address system. (2008:247)

‘Social levelling’ is linked to democracy’s social make-up, in which democratic citizens are equally entitled to public speech, just as democracy is defined as a domain of public debate (Hariman, 2008). With humour’s social functioning as a ‘crucial part of society’s political discourse’ (Peifer, 2012), the use of humour can be perceived as subversive and empowering to the people. Regime leaders throughout history have banned humour, for they recognise the ability of laughter to diminish the power of those being ridiculed (Goodall et al., 2012).

Adding more nuance on the scholarly arguments regarding humour, Michael Billig (2005) highlights the negative implications or ‘the cruelties’ of humour, which he argues, is under-researched in contemporary academic and popular debates. Most researches have created an overemphasis on the positive or empowering aspect of humour and lack focus on the ridiculing aspects of it. Goodall et al. (2012:73) moreover put a caution to humour as a weapon with ‘a sharp double edge’, stressing that the rhetoric of humour may both unite and divide audiences from intended outcomes by making it open to interpretation and change (ibid.:76). In other words, humour can be both alienating and motivating in ways that are obstructive to greater goals. To underline this aspect is important, as it contrasts with the inviting nature of humour, in the sense that it can be rather excluding, than including. Accounting for national specificity in this sense becomes important to determine how humour plays into civic subjectivity (Corner et al., 2013).

Humour is exhibited in many modes of discourse: wit, parody, slapstick—and satire, commonly characterised in Internet memes. Prior to engaging in the discussion of satire manifested in memes, it is crucial to render its concept as intelligible. A special attention to the media’s generic form serves to demonstrate its connections with the individuals’ consciousness and subjective perception (Corner, 2011:51) which is necessary when promoting an audience view on the media. In her dissertation on political comedy engagement, Doona (2016:33) illustrates the ways in which genre work offers insights into more diverse constructions held by audience members in relation to present ‘political media, citizenship and democracy’. It is necessary, she holds, to ‘define what it is we are studying “prematurely”, because we need a working understanding of the genre’ (ibid.).

Colletta (2009:860) offers a brief definition of satire, which is ‘not a comic device—it is a commentary, but uses comedic devices’ that combine the pleasures of humour and the morality of social critique. Ziv (2010:16) corroborates this distinction by defining comedy as a form of criticism which ‘emphasises the human side of events and behaviour, the good aspects and the bad ones,’ whereas satire concentrates on situations that are specific to a given society and period and ‘scourges certain events, sometimes with brutality, and emphasises their negative aspects almost entirely’. Satire, which has historically been used to discredit individuals in authority (Cameron, 1993:6) is an immensely diverse comedic form as seen through recent works on political entertainment media (Holbert et al., 2011). It is manifested in poetry, caricatures, novels, television shows as well as in digital format; such as blogs, YouTube channels, and Internet memes—as further elaborated in the following section.

Defining and contextualising Internet memes

The term “meme”, coined by biologist Richard Dawkins in his book *The Selfish Gene*, is originally defined as ‘self-replicating units of culture’ (Dawkins, 1976). The word, however, has been appropriated to refer to a specific form of Internet ephemera. On this account, Limor Shifman suggests that Internet memes can be described as distinct from the meme-gene analogy, where she defines it as follows:

- (a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristic of content, form and/or stance, which (b) were created with awareness of each other, and (c) circulated, imitated and/or transformed via the Internet by many users. (2014:41)

In other words, Internet memes represent remixed and iterated messages that are rapidly spread by members of the participatory digital culture (Wiggins & Bowers, 2014). The media can be treated as a ‘(post)modern folklore, in which shared norms and values are constructed through cultural artifacts such as Photoshopped images’ (Shifman, 2014:15), structured by five fundamental logics: multimodality, resonance, reappropriation, collectivism and spread (Milner, 2016). Another key facet is the intertextual quality of memes, which adapts humorous texts to a particular culture, language, and context, often with references to popular culture (Shifman, 2014). As they contain attributes like simplicity and whimsical content, Shifman concludes that the “incompleteness” of memes may serve as a hook for further dialogue and successful circulation in the participatory network (ibid.:86).

According to Ryan Milner (2013b), memetic media manifest as a ‘lingua franca’ for digitally mediated participants that is decided by social processes, enabling geographically-dispersed audiences to connect and share. Through the memetic process, memes shape public conversations that are made more dynamic by the participation of many public voices, leading to a new kind of participatory conversation that disrupts the traditional culture industries (Milner, 2016:7). In this sense, memes have changed the nature of contemporary media discourses; in line with Carpentier’s (2011) definition of an alternative media, which ‘enable citizens to participate in content creation and exercise their right to communicate’ (ibid.:68) and include forms of media that ‘provide a different point of view from that usually expressed by the mass or mainstream media’ (ibid.:98).

Central to the recent debates on Internet memes is whether they should be defined as principally “cultural” or “political” (Heiskanen, 2017). In examining the relationship between political and popular culture, Tay (2012) demonstrates how the latter is employed in memes as a common ground to discuss politics. Being part of people’s everyday lives and cultural identities, popular culture allows the subject of politics to become more accessible to viewers (ibid.), thereby serving as a channel through which digital participants can communicate about politics with each other in a light-hearted and engaging manner. Taking Jenkins et al.’s (2013) assertion that acts of remix and circulation, as demonstrated in meme communities, mould the cultural and political landscape, the present study stresses the interdependent character of culture and politics; politics do not take place outside of culture, and vice versa. As such, the next section attempts to further contextualise memes as a form of political discourse within the online public spheres and establish how meme audiences are positioned within the participatory network of the Web 2.0.

Online public discourse & audience engagement

A growing area of memetic media research has pointed to Internet memes’ implications for public discourse and commentary (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007; Milner, 2012). Memes, through their peer-to-peer sharing characteristics and communal participation, offer citizens the means to voice political dissent by undermining the elite influence of the mass media and political figure (Hristova, 2014; Milner, 2013a). For instance, Mina (2014) analyses the relationship between memetic media and political subversion in China, where the meme culture offers citizens an outlet for new forms of public conversation and community building in response to the country’s Internet censorship regulation. Hence, Internet memes inspire hope for broader

discussion by facilitating and amplifying the public voice, particularly within a restrictive media environment. In the context of Western democracy, Heiskanen (2017) reveals the role of memes as alternative parallel discourses to the mainstream media perspective during the US presidential election, as they enable Internet users to respond to political events in real time.

As illustrated above, scholars have looked beyond the qualities of memes to explore their societal functions as a vehicle for public voice. When considering memes as a form of public discourse, it is useful to approach the theory of ‘the public sphere’ to put memes in context. Coined by Habermas (1989), the political ‘public sphere’ is a normative concept regarding citizens’ discourse. The tradition sees civic interaction through the public sphere as being comprised of institutional communicative spaces, where citizens listen to each other in a process of reasoned and rational debate to form public opinion and political will-formation (ibid.). Communicative rationality and deliberation are thus fundamental to the discursive process. However, the rise of the Internet has renewed interest and debate regarding the public sphere, as it generates new possibilities for citizen interaction than do the traditional forms of mass media (Dahlgren, 2005).

Peter Dahlgren (2006) argues that the Habermasian view of the public sphere limits our interpretation of the kinds of cultural practices that should characterise civic agency in the public sphere—which in turn, pushes away certain forms of communicative competencies and practices that are important for democracy, such as the role of everyday talk. As he conveys, ‘For a democracy to happen, citizens must be able to encounter and talk to each other’ (Dahlgren, 2009:114). On this note, Dahlgren (2005:152) has pointed to the Internet’s contribution to the public sphere with the expansion of communicative spaces for politics, such as discussion groups, chat rooms or grassroots advocacy sites. While online discussions are not always rational, and various forms of interaction may lack tolerance toward those holding opposing views, specific public spheres on the Internet enable engaged citizens to play a role in the development of democracy through political communications that result in deliberation (ibid.).

van Zoonen (2005:10) speaks of popular culture as ‘the discourses of everyday life’ which can create an act of ‘opposition to elite affairs and politics’, wherein ‘popular genres and means’ facilitate greater participation in public discourse. This notion is adapted by Milner (2012:52), where he points to the diversity of voices in the public sphere of memetic participation:

‘polyvocality’. The hope for mediated polyvocality, he infers, lies in the interactivity and reach to form new avenues for public discourse – that is, ‘having the means to find information and engage with public dialogue’ and ‘interact with diverse members of the public’ (ibid.). Moreover, as memes exist within a political environment larger than their own, it would be productive to account for the ‘alternative avenues of participation’ and ‘alternative means of argumentation’ manifested in political commentaries on the sites through which they circulate, as the discourses are ‘interdependent and interdiscursive with broader narratives’ (ibid.:284). In his subsequent analysis on memetic public participation, Milner points to the evidence of memes’ polyvocal nature; ‘that is, many voices can connect and converse, as well as argue and antagonise’ (2016:111). In this sense, the ambivalent potential for polyvocality in memes allows for political contestations to take place and as a result, complicates how public participants engage with the diverse identities and ideas that are manifested in the online public discourse (ibid.:112).

Regarding the emergent ‘participatory culture’, where members of the society simultaneously consume, create and distribute media content (Jenkins, 2007), memes may provide a strong support not only for free artistic expression, but also civic engagement. What has lacked in contemporary research on memetic media, however, is to analyse the civic potentials of memes from the standpoint of Internet users as audiences who engage with the media content. In theorising agency within user-generated content, van Dijck (2009) argues that the emergence of Web 2.0 applications cannot be presumed to turn everyone into “active participants”. Citing a survey which categorises users’ behaviour in the Web 2.0, she indicates that only a small percentage of Internet users actively create content, whereas the majority consists of viewers who may engage in activities like rating, commenting, or simply reading and watching online media content (ibid.:44). From this viewpoint, “participation” is not necessarily equated to “active contribution” to user-generated content platforms (ibid.), such as creating memes. Not every media interaction embodies participation (Carpentier, 2011:69), as not all Internet users participate equally or for similar reasons.

van Dijck further (2009) suggests that any research which merely focuses on “active participants” risks downplaying the outcomes of user-generated content on the users’ agency. Because viewers may engage in an array of practices within the participatory network of social media, what constitutes for participation have evolved (Shifman, 2014); and this arguably reveals a change to the civic cultures where citizenship is performed (Dahlgren & Olsson,

2007). The present research thus asserts the need to analyse memes from the perspective of viewers as audiences, to provide a holistic approach in tracing the civic potentials of the media. Guiding the perspective on audience participation is Carpentier's (2011:67) use of the interrelated terms 'participation *in the media*' and 'participation *through the media*'. The former concept refers to everyday practices of citizens such as the production of media content, whereas the latter denotes 'opportunities for mediated participation in public debate and for self-representation' (ibid:68), which is adopted in this thesis.

The work of Nick Abercrombie and Brian Longhurst (1998) is also used to inform the concept of audiences in this study, who are understood as the 'diffused audience' that are dispersed and fragmented, yet embedded in the closely interwoven aspects of the media and everyday life (ibid.:69), such as being connected to the Internet routinely. Because of the intrusion of the media into everyday life, people simultaneously perceive themselves as audience members in an imagined community, where their sense of belonging connects to the construction of identity (ibid.:117). Combining this perspective with that of Carpentier's conception of audience participation, it can be deduced that while being engaged in identity formation, there are possibilities and hopes for audiences as citizens and Internet users to take part in a democratising mediated participation. As Dahlgren (2009:80) asserts, to participate in politics presupposes some degree of engagement; further uncovering the need to focus on the notion of engagement within the participatory culture in the Web 2.0. Before touching on the empirical entry points into the study of citizens' engagement, the following section will firstly delve into existing studies on the impact of political satire media on the knowledge and attitudes of audiences in the digital environment—in relation to the civic agency.

Information & influence in the digital environment

Because political memes are often humorous and devised as entertainment, it is useful to delve into studies on other related forms of media in the field of political entertainment. In exploring existing literatures on political entertainment media and its relevance with memes, Huntington argues:

It is important to consider political entertainment scholarship in a study of Internet memes because they have many characteristics in common with some political entertainment. For example, memes aren't news, but many political memes contain references to events in the news and prominent people; additionally, memes are often humorous in the way they approach these topics,

a quality typically associated with entertainment media rather than news media. (2017:32)

Political entertainment media can cover everything, from talk shows to satirical sitcoms (Holbert, 2005). News readers, especially the youth, have been found to rely more heavily on such alternative information source in order to escape the perceived bias and unreliability of mainstream news (Tsfati, 2010; see Baumgartner & Morris, 2006). Accordingly, political entertainment shows have been examined for their influences on viewers' political knowledge and opinion. Brewer et al. (2013) indicate that the metacoverage of political satirists, when introducing complex policy issues to viewers, can lead to knowledge gain and internal efficacy, as they simultaneously entertain their viewers. Young and Hoffman's (2012) study on viewers of *The Daily Show* also discovered knowledge gain as part of the outcome variables. The authors postulate that, while the information presented in these programmes may lack in-depth analysis and complexity, the cumulative information could gradually result in better-informed citizens (ibid.). Moreover, viewing satirical political entertainment may produce outcomes on the viewers' perception and feelings toward political actors that prompt political participation intention (Hoffman & Young, 2011).

Yet, in relation to political memes, Shifman (2014:138) critically suggests that the dependence on pop culture, at certain lengths, creates a process of "depolitisation" where the political and critical facets of Internet memes are diminished in favour of pure enjoyment. Seiffert-Brockmann et al. (2017:2) also assert that through Internet memes, digital participants engage in interactions that 'represent a re-appropriation of the original image according to some set of internal political schema, which may result in an active battle over the preferred meaning' as individuals attempt to express their respective political preferences. This becomes problematic if, for instance, audiences scrutinise contents that are opposed to their ideological position for "flawed logic" and as such, disengage from the conversation rather than seeking truth within them. In addition, Shifman et al. (2007) argue that online humour is likely to have a limited role in making viewers more politically engaged. In their analysis on online humour in the context of the 2005 UK election, the authors conclude that the deployment of humour can be useful for mobilising those who are already politically committed, but unlikely to achieve much beyond that (Shifman et al, 2007).

Furthermore, political satire in the form of news may convincingly instil a false sense of truth in the viewer if taken at face value (Rubin et al., 2017). This discussion is in reference to the

hotly contested debate surrounding the notion of “fake news” in post-truth politics, which has been linked to political satire and parody shows (Amarasingam, 2011). Either the falsehood is poorly obscured and spread with the intention to deceive *or* audiences simply do not apprehend the humour, the deception can be further aggravated and result in grave consequences (Rubin et al., 2015). Heiskanen (2017:21) points to the epistemological debates regarding memetic representations for electoral politics that have been intensified with reference to discourses in the post-truth era within the US context. There is a need to account for this phenomenon because at present, Indonesia is similarly encountered with a wave of fake news which ran rampant during Pilkada DKI (Pearl, 2018). While the present study does not delve deeper into the notion of post-truth politics, it reveals that the link between satire and misinformation must be accounted for as it potentially influences the audience’s subjective interpretation of satirical humour, which is manifested memes.

Considering the specific characteristics of a media content that may contribute to its effectiveness or persuasiveness, another aspect to account for is the role social media such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, through which these memes are circulated. This is where the notion of power arises; in discussing the systemic power of the media, both the power over the media along with the common notions of power of media ought to be considered (Dahlgren, 2009). Facebook’s algorithmic power has been analysed in relation to visibility, or the lack thereof, in granting viewers with different information; hence confining them to a “filter bubble” which isolates them from a diversity of viewpoints (Bucher, 2012; Pariser, 2011). In a world where people’s subjective constructions are driven by data processes or ‘datafication’ (Couldry & Hepp, 2017:139), the Internet users’ behaviours are guided by the systemic infrastructure of the social media platforms that they use on a day-to-day basis. This phenomenon, as Couldry & Hepp (2017:141) posit, may pose a challenge to Internet users’ social knowledge and everyday awareness.

In addition, this research considers memes containing partisan cues that were circulated during the Pilkada DKI period, where heavy contestations took place regarding the candidates’ eligibility. Studies in media and politics have pointed out the ability of partisan media to reinforce the opinions and attitudes of viewers, which as a result contributes to political polarisation (Levendusky & Malhotra, 2016). More specifically, Lim (2017) discusses the relationship between social media and electoral politics, and how it was instrumental in the increasing polarisation among ordinary Indonesian citizens during Pilkada DKI. In this sense,

memes with partisan cues may contribute to selective judgments about the media's content. For instance, as uncovered in the analytical chapter, a respondent who supports one of the gubernatorial candidates would selectively avoid memes from the political opposition sites, or scrutinise the argument, credibility and perceived quality of the media content.

The phenomenon also brings question to the nature of memes where, as a user-generated content, they are typically characterised as being grassroots or generated as product of the mass (Shifman, 2014). The present study reveals that the notion of "anonymity" and "authenticity" becomes subject to scrutiny as partisan memes emerged, simultaneously with the deployment of social media for political campaign in the case of Pilkada DKI. However, by taking these factors into account, this is not by any means done to undermine the agency of audiences. On the contrary, the present study seeks to identify the ways in which audiences, with their political subjectivities and beliefs, interpret and formulate their perception of the memes they have engaged with; and how they negotiate their position within the intertwining of systemic power and perceived institutional forces. The final section thereby explores the concept of engagement in performing citizenship and the analytical framework used to study the factors that shape civic agency, with respect to the links between politics and memes.

Mememes within civic cultures: performing citizenship through engagement

Dahlgren (2009) holds that for democracy to function properly and thus be legitimised, it requires many conditions to be met; including, the engagement of citizens. Engagement, he argues, is the prerequisite for participation and requires 'not just cognitive attention and some normative stance, but also an affective investment' which involves a form of passion (ibid.:83). In order to give rise to civic agency, 'there must be a connection to practical, do-able activities where citizens can feel empowered' (ibid.:81). Few scholars indicate the importance of considering the 'affective investment' of citizens (van Zoonen, 2005:65) and the view of modern era citizenship which is suffering from an 'affective deficit' (Coleman, 2013). Accounting for the role of emotions on a subjective level, which is inseparable from the rational (Coleman, 2013; Dahlgren, 2009), hence becomes crucial in order to examine why and how audiences engage with political memes.

On this account, Stephen Coleman offers a useful framework of engagement that links to the contemporary development in political citizenship among the youth, which is useful in clarifying the perspective on citizenship presented in this study:

...to be a democratic citizen is, at the very least, to be informed – not about everything but about enough to feel capable of contributing to the political conversation; to be encouraged to participate – not all the time, but at least some of the time; to feel engaged – at least to the point of not feeling like a permanent outsider; and to experience a sense of political confidence – a subjective belief that one has at least some chance to influence the world around one, and particularly its institutions of governance [...] In the face of the complex and paradoxical forces that are opening up and closing down contemporary democratic space, it is important to look at emergent spaces of political communication. (2013:378)

Political memes, as a form of alternative media by Carpentier's (2011) definition, may therefore be considered as one of the 'emergent spaces of political communication' through its ability to make the youth 'feel capable of contributing to the political conversation'. In addition, because this study points to the interdependence of the cultural and political aspects of memes, rather than *either/or*, it can also benefit from approaching political memes through the study of 'cultural citizenship' as developed by Joke Hermes. This term is used to describe the ways in which the Web 2.0 has promoted new forms of communications, where people through text-related practices can read, consume, celebrate as well criticise ideas or issues provided 'in the realm of (popular) culture' (Hermes, 2005:10). In her discussion on *Citizenship in the Age of the Internet*, she states:

Web communities serve different types of citizenship goals [...] political, national and cultural. All, however, should be understood from the broad, cultural definition of citizenship: they involve a great variety of knowledges and activities; they include emotion, sensation and experience and deliver, in varying degrees, a state of being informed and of commitment to larger communities. (2006:304)

The concept therefore helps make visible the foundation of the willingness to engage with the political, which she argues, requires motivation (*ibid.*). Taking this approach would deepen our understanding of citizenship as well as adding to the analytic capacity in exploring the civic potentials of memes. On this account, this thesis is informed by Dahlgren's (2009) circuit of civic cultures which combines cultural and political perspectives to the study of engagement. Civic cultures refer to cultural patterns where 'identities of citizenship, and the foundations for civic agency, are embedded' (*ibid.*:103) and can be used as an analytic framework to explore citizens' engagement and participation in democracy. In this case, to analyse political memes

with respect to the civic cultures helps inform the research in understanding how the media serve to facilitate, or inhibit, civic engagement. The circuit includes six interdependent dimensions: knowledge, values, trust, spaces, practices and identities, as briefly outlined below.

The first key dimension of civic cultures includes *knowledge* about the political world and one's place in it, to which the individual 'must have access to reliable reports, portrayals, analyses, discussions, and debates about current affairs' as well as the relevant knowledge to become civically engaged (Dahlgren, 2009:108). Do political memes provide such opportunities for learning? This is one of the central points explored in the analysis, since the youth rely on more alternative sources as opposed to mainstream news (Tsfati, 2010). On this account, despite lacking in-depth analysis and complexity, the literature has pointed out that viewing political entertainment shows leads to knowledge gain (Young & Hoffman, 2012; Hoffman & Young, 2011). The second dimension in the circuit touches on *values*, whereby a distinction is drawn by Dahlgren (2009:111) between substantive values, such as 'equality, liberty, justice, solidary and tolerance' and the procedural ones, including 'openness, reciprocity, discussion and responsibility/accountability' which altogether should be treated as universal. As memes carry the potential for discursive participation, the present study further explores how audiences perceive the media's modes of representation as well as the political commentaries that surface as a result of its circulation, and whether they do reflect values that follow democratic principles, such as virtues of liberty and reciprocity.

The next dimension in the circuit is *trust*. Dahlgren (2009:112) explains, 'the bearers of trust are usually seen as the citizens, and the objects of trust are the institutions or representatives of government.' Yet, for civic cultures, trust operates in an ambivalent manner, especially with respect to institutions and their representatives (ibid.). For instance, Brewer et al. (2013) point to the evidence that low political trust, in conjunction with high internal efficacy, fuels unconventional forms political participation. In this study, the perceived unreliability of mainstream news may usher audiences to seek alternative forms of political discourse. However, the same notion can be challenged when the media content carries partisan cues with indications of institutional influence. Afterwards comes the concept of *space*, in which 'citizens need access to each other to develop their collective political efforts to act together' (Dahlgren, 2009:114). With reference to the Internet's potential for opening up new communicative spaces, as previously addressed in this chapter, Dahlgren (2009:153) also suggests the capacity for "interspatiality" or for Internet users to move freely between sites, forums and networks. Hence,

apart from being able to engage with ‘the discourses of everyday life’ (van Zoonen, 2005) through memes’ popular culture form, audiences may also select from an enormous array of political meme sites to be engaged in, and customise the information they receive according to their personal purposes.

Moving along in the circuit comes the dimension of *practices*, which conveys ‘embodied agencies and skills’ that contribute to ‘communicative competencies’ (Dahlgren, 2009:116). By referencing McPherson’s study on digital youth, Dahlgren posits that cyberspaces have offered new forms of communicative activity, where ‘the innovative and unexpected character of online experience can empower individuals as well as lead to new social encounters’ (ibid.:156). Chadwick (2006:87) also points to the emergence of political knowledge via interaction with others. Audiences as Internet users may therefore engage in practices that serve to enhance their civic agency, such as communicating about politics with memes as the medium through private exchanges and/or mediated online participation in the form of political commentaries. The last dimension, *identities*, refers to ‘people’s subjective view of themselves as members and participants of democracy’ (Dahlgren, 2009:118). This dimension is perceived as the centrepiece of civic cultures, with other five dimensions playing a part in shaping the conditions of its existence; ‘identities build on knowledge and values, they can be reinforced by trust and embodied in particular spaces via practices’ (ibid.:119). There are two critical schematic components to civic identity: the sense of being an empowered political agent (ibid.:120); and membership in one or more political communities (ibid.:121). In this sense, the audience member, as an Internet user and citizen, possesses the ability to position oneself to be empowered; making own choices and constructing the self, when being engaged with memes. At the same time, memes also offer opportunities to reflect upon the political subjectivities which one holds and speculates about the self. Altogether, these aspects carry an implication on how political memes may foster or hinder identities of citizenship among the audiences.

Methodology & Method

This research employed qualitative semi-structured interviews with 14 urban Indonesian young adults who are engaged in social media on a daily basis. The recruitment was premised upon the subject's following of Indonesian political memes directly from political entertainment accounts on Facebook, Twitter and/or Instagram (8); or indirectly from the network of friends on social media (6). The distinct classification of respondents was included to identify and delve deeper into the nuanced interpretations of political memes from the standpoint of viewers who are engaged in the media content on various levels. Following van Dijck's (2009) proposal, the agency of viewers as audiences—engaged in a wide array of practices within the participatory culture—are placed in focus to determine the political outcomes of memes as a form of alternative media and user-generated content.

The exploration of memes' civic potential in the present thesis is studied in relation to youth citizenship. As Indonesians are eligible to vote at the age of 17, to analyse the ways in which young adults form their perception surrounding politics in the contemporary media environment is essential as they determine and shape the future of the nation's democracy. In understanding how the youth become citizens, Barnhurst (1998:215) suggests that young adults recognise the media's framing of political events, thus seek and expose themselves more widely to alternative media forms. They can be described as active citizens, in the spaces of power or knowledge (*ibid.*). By acknowledging their deep commitment about the political worlds they live in (*ibid.*:216), the youths' scrutiny over memes as a medium for political discourse reveals the greater potential and challenges that the media possess.

Selecting the case(s) and method

Using two case examples was a strategic approach to allow for a grounded analysis on the wider phenomena of political memes within the context of democracy in Indonesia. Since 2014, memes have become a vehicle for political expression among the Indonesian youth to challenge legislations, by highlighting the absurdities in politics involving individual and political elites (Allifiansyah, 2016). Within the same year, the nation had witnessed the growing presence of memes in electoral discourses through social media, many of which contained partisan cues. Acknowledging the parallel between these events with those that took place in 2017, the cases selection of SetNov and Pilkada DKI is useful to provide broader insights into the prevalence

of memes and how they have become pertinent to politics in the nation, as two distinctive modes of discourse: political dissent and partisan opinions.

Flyvbjerg (2011) argues that “the power of example” serves to increase the generalisability of events—something which has been criticised for lacking in social science researches. In his rebuttal of the term ‘case study’ in the *Dictionary of Sociology*, he notes that while a case study does provide in-depth analysis of ‘a single example’, it is not correct to assume its inability to provide reliable information about the broader phenomenon (ibid.:66). Flyvbjerg further holds that in-depth, qualitative cases can in fact be productive at contributing to scientific development, especially when serving as a supplementary method (ibid.:77). As such, taking on two representative cases that illustrate the polyvocal nature of memes, in support of conducting interviews, can provide a contextualised analysis of how audiences define and engage with political memes, as well as determine the wider civic potentials that the media carry.

The present study seeks to explore the civic potentials of memes from the standpoint of audiences who engage with the media content. In exploring the concept of the civic, Dahlgren (2003:155) argues that instead of analysing media for their direct influence on publics, researchers should ‘underscore the processual and contextual dimension’ because the political and politics are not merely prescribed, ‘but constructed via word and deed’. Adopting an audience-focused research therefore prioritises the contextualisation of people’s engagement with media within the everyday—whereby people, in their reception of media, actively participate to seek meaning, yet not always accept, and at times negotiate or even resist the textual meanings (Livingstone, 2005:30). This approach is constructive to analyse, for instance, how viewers make meaning of political memes, or scrutinise the use of satirical humour in extending political commentaries.

The basis in researching audiences lies in their ambivalent level of critical interpretation, which draws upon a ‘contradictory sense of identity or belonging which motivates them towards the kinds of collective action expected of a public’ (Livingstone, 2005:31). What is meant here is that identities, subjective interpretations, practices and relationships shape the ways in which audiences engage with others within the private and public spheres. Since contemporary media have merged into public and civic processes, researchers must address the cultural engagement of located audiences that is influential to the public sphere (ibid.). Such practice is relevant to

this study in determining memes' potential in facilitating or inhibiting civic engagement, guided by the audience's construction of identity and belonging to a community within a participatory network which offers alternative avenues for participation.

When conducting qualitative audience research, Hermes (2009:124) contends that comprehending media power and audience agency is important, especially to gain an understanding of how the world is changing. Especially in a social world that is continuously mediated, or changed in its dynamics as media take part in its everyday structures, how audiences make sense of the world becomes intertwined with 'the constraints, affordances and power-relations that are features of media as infrastructures for communication' (Couldry & Hepp, 2017:15). With their social knowledge being shaped by media practices, it is therefore useful to consider the audience's mediated perception toward memes on top of their agency in negotiating positions within the entanglement of data infrastructures, such as algorithms.

Hence, through an in-depth guided conversation, qualitative interviewing explores respondents' feelings, emotions, experiences and values within their 'deeply nuanced inner worlds' (Gubrium & Holstein, 2001:57). Through this method, the researcher may gain access into the interviewees' subjective construction in order to obtain a better understanding of one's beliefs and attitudes. It also enables the researcher to approach sensitive issues by accommodating the subtle differences in people's positions and to respond accordingly, followed by reflecting on the complexity (Seale, 2012:210). Audience research would first and foremost require a strong reflexivity on my part as the researcher (Hermes, 2009), as unravelled in the subsequent section.

Reflecting on knowledge and social positioning

While qualitative interviews are often scrutinised for bias, or presenting a distortion of the truth to a certain extent, the method is heavily influenced by the theoretical orientation which considers reality to be socially constructed (Brennen, 2013). Rather than treating audiences as passive receivers of information, they are important meaning-makers in the sense that knowledge is sustained by how informants interpret and negotiate meaning (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Svend Brinkmann and Steinar Kvale (2015) moreover set a distinction between 'knowledge collection' and 'knowledge construction'; in the former concept, the researcher collects knowledge that is already given and merely obscured; whereas the latter explores the topic together with the informant, thereby knowledge becomes constructed between the interviewer and interviewee (ibid.: 57). As such, in lines with the aim of this study,

taking the latter approach allows me to explore how interviewees create meaning of political memes based on the two case studies according to their subjective interpretations, while acknowledging issues of objectivity.

In doing qualitative interviewing, Clive Seale (2012:213) holds that the social positioning of the researcher needs to be scrutinised as it affects the ways in which the research approach is taken. Being a 25-year-old Indonesian native from the urban city of Jakarta, who has spent two-thirds of my life in various social and cultural environments overseas, certainly exerts an influence on the political or ideological views I hold. While carrying a personal attachment to my home country, the “distance”, to some extent, has enabled me to critically reflect on recent socio-political events that have unfolded in Indonesia with the perspective of an outsider. Learning about major corruption scandals and the growing political tension following the 2017 Pilkada DKI—where Internet memes became among the centre of focus in these events—led to my desire to further explore the phenomena in this research. Consequently, as the interviewer in this study I had to be aware of the issues of power, in terms of who controls the direction of the interview, the results and ultimately who benefits (Seidman, 2006:99).

To build an equitable relationship is crucial in addressing such issues of power within interviewing (*ibid.*). On this aspect, my shared social identities with those of the interviewees in terms of age group, nationality, language and social class helped negotiate these variables and develop equity. However, to discuss about memes in the context of politics means to touch on the interviewees’ ideological views regarding issues like freedom of expression within Indonesia’s democracy or identity politics when speaking of Pilkada DKI. As interviewees acknowledged my profile as a researcher, they might engage in what Goffman (1959:208) refers to as ‘impression management’, where their conscious and subconscious selves attempt to influence the perception of their image to give a positive impression (*ibid.*). Efforts like these were evident when interviewees respond to questions by giving remarks like, “How can I make this sound politically-correct...” or “It’s not good if I assume too much”. Impression management risks preventing interviewees from expressing personal thoughts in entirety, especially if their views on a particular phenomenon are articulated for the first time during the interview (Jensen, 2012:270).

As an attempt to remove hierarchies between the researcher and respondent, I engaged in ‘a mutual self-disclosure’, which Rapley (2014:19) suggests ‘can encourage ‘deep disclosure’ on

the part of the interviewees. The interviews were conducted by developing an approach which Seidman (2006:96) denotes as a balance between an ‘I-Thou’ relationship and a ‘We’ relationship. Through this method, I could act as an equal participant where the outcome of the discourse would be a conversation, instead of a rigid data-gathering interview, but at the same time allowing the participant to express one’s responses as independently as possible (ibid.). This results in building an ‘appropriate rapport,’ that is, striking a balance between saying enough about oneself, while keeping the focus of the attention on the interviewees’ experience (ibid.). Offering information on my own subjectivities in this case helped reinforce the respondents’ collaboration in the interview process, while also easily set aside for more normative objectives of the research.

Piloting, sampling and interview process

Pilot interviews began to be conducted in January 2018 via Skype, as opposed to face-to-face, due to geographical restrictions. Initially, the research design only considered to explore the roles of memes in the case of Setya Novanto’s hospitalisations. However, after conducting two pilot studies it became evident that the respondents’ understanding of memes was greatly informed by the media’s pervasiveness during Pilkada DKI, further revealing the need to account for the two separate events to fully comprehend the civic potentials of political memes within the context of Indonesian politics. This is fitting to Corner’s (2011:86) suggestion where scholars need to ‘assume less and investigate more, to place the relations between ‘media’ and ‘selfhood’ within a denser sense of plurality’. The piloting was also informed by Seale’s (2012) guide on analysing qualitative data through thematic coding. By applying the ‘zigzag approach’, an early analysis took place to unpack further themes which emerged throughout the interviews, and inform the subsequent data collection (ibid.: 369). In total, 4 pilot interviews were conducted to ensure that the finalised interview guide covered themes that are central to the study. As minor revisions were made to the interview questions following the first two pilot studies, the remaining two were incorporated to the main empirical data.

While simultaneously conceptualising the literature framework in accordance to the finalised interview guide¹⁰, the recruitment process began. With the research’s time constraints, the study additionally recruited an adequate number of 12 respondents. Although convenience sampling dominated through colleagues and acquaintances, the research also included the snowball

¹⁰ See Appendix C

sampling technique where initial contact with one participant generates further contacts (Jensen, 2012:239), as is the case on four occasions. During this process, 10 interviews were conducted in person, whereas the remaining two took place via Skype to further accommodate the informants' schedule. In total, 14 interviews, including two derived from the pilot studies, were treated as the main empirical data, where the median age of participants is 26; ranging from 20 to 32 years old¹¹.

Kvale (1996) stresses that researcher must use own knowledge and experience to act with integrity, honesty and fairness. Prior to conducting the interviews, a full disclosure was made regarding the research scope and how the material will be utilised. This is useful to guide respondents in perceiving the relevance of the project, while expressing my genuine interest in their views and experiences. For interviews that were conducted face-to-face, interviewees were presented with a consent form, outlining the research scope and objective; addressing one's right to withdraw his or her own responses at any point during or after the interview; guaranteeing the respondent's confidentiality, as well as asking for one's approval to have the interviews recorded. The rest who were interviewed via Skype were informed of the exact terms verbally and agreed to the conditions of their participation. Although most respondents indicate that anonymity is not imperative, I acknowledge my moral responsibility to protect respondents from potential harm (Brennen, 2013). As a result, each respondent in this study received a pseudonym.

Treating the data

Following the data-collection process, all 14 interviews were fully transcribed and analysed by means of open coding, combined with deductive and inductive approaches. Each interview transcript was coded sentence by sentence to ensure that every part of the data is treated equally. While the overarching themes had been deductively formulated prior to the analysis, inductive coding was applied to leave more room for capturing new and unexpected themes that may emerge throughout the analysis. In this sense, the process was motivated by grounded theory, through which the data were allowed 'to speak for itself' prior to finalising the theoretical frameworks which they correspond to (Seale, 2012:372).

¹¹ See Appendix A for further information about participants in the study

The Indonesian language was primarily used as a means of communication by the majority of respondents (9 out of 14), hence to facilitate the analytical process, the open codes consist of terms that were directly taken from the data and translated to English. The challenge of the translation method to the inductive approach lies in the notion that it is an interpretive act, in which meaning may be lost in the translation process (van Nes et al., 2010). Yet, arguing that there is no single correct translation of a text, Simon (1996) suggests that the solution to the translator's dilemmas is 'to understand the way language is tied to local realities, to literary forms and to changing identities'. In reference to my prior knowledge and social positioning, I stood at the ability to evaluate the cultural meanings which the text carry and examine the extent to which it corresponds to the English language.

During the coding process, critical quotes that support the main arguments of the research were highlighted. Around 690 open codes were generated from 14 interview transcripts¹². Consistent with the deductive and inductive approaches, the open codes were respectively assigned to the corresponding sub/categories and overarching themes that were developed before, as well as during, the coding process. In total, 10 categories that fall within four main themes were identified. These main themes include: Memetic Media, Engagement, Citizenship and Context. The categories within the themes were afterwards examined carefully to develop the main analytical points of the study in correspondence to the research questions.

¹² See Appendix D

Exploring the ambivalence of political memes through engagement

This chapter explores the civic potentials of memes from the standpoint of Indonesian youths who form their perception of the media's use for political discourse. As the analysis reveals, their nuanced views are constructed by two momentous events in 2017 where memes play a significant role in shaping the online discussions surrounding the phenomena, and set against their everyday awareness of contemporary political issues. With the memes' distinct modes of discourse: political dissent and partisan opinions, audiences in this study are confronted with diverse identities and ideas that are further complicated by the systemic power over the media, on top of a perceived institutional influence. Altogether, these factors are surveyed with reference to the agency of audiences that points to their various levels of engagement as citizens in the nation's democracy.

Based on these concepts, the chapter is divided into three main themes. The first part sets to contextualise political memes based on how participants in the research create meaning and identify with the media's cultural and political values, followed by their contestations surrounding the notion of anonymity and systemic power of social media. The second section looks at how audiences construct the implications of memes on contemporary political discourse, where the outcomes of the media's spreadability and polyvocal nature complicate their way in navigating the civic potentials of political memes. Lastly, a reflection of political memes as a space of civic cultures is made to examine the ways in which the media may foster, or hinder, the civic engagement of audiences.

The blending of culture and politics in the online sphere

This section demonstrates the interdependent nature of politics and popular culture in memes, as a form of alternative media that creates a mutual ground for audience to engage with political discourses through means that are not only accessible, but also culturally resonant with the media lingua franca. This common tongue establishes a form of bond that translates into their identification as members of the "meme-generation". As audiences touch upon the aspects that constitute memetic representation, they reveal the media's polysemic potential or likelihood for ambiguity. Additional reflection is given on the attributes of memes, which are typically characterised as being grassroots, yet become heavily contested as participants in the study similarly engage with those containing partisan cues. More challenges are addressed in relation to the systemic power of algorithms, which altogether brings up the question of how audiences,

through their mediated engagement, reflect on the intertwining of systemic infrastructure and perceived institutional force in the online public discourse of memetic media.

The lingua franca of the meme-generation

Internet memes have gained attention from scholarly and popular discourses for serving as a vehicle for public voice during the 2014 Indonesian presidential election campaign. This is acknowledged by few respondents, as reflected in the following:

I think I started seeing political memes since the 2014 presidential election campaign. Before that, there weren't as many political memes in Indonesia, right? After Jokowi became nominee, many people of my age started to care about politics. Before Jokowi, I didn't bother as much about Indonesian politics, but ever since, I became interested, and started reading more [news]. Around the same time, we used memes – so we mixed memes with politics. (Eko, 25)¹³

There are few ideas to be unpacked in this statement. Eko states his growing investment in politics and current affairs following Jokowi's candidacy for president based on his perceived electability. The use of the terms 'care' and 'interested', which leads to his increasing news consumption, reflects a motivation that entails the investment of both the emotional and the rational, which is the foundation of being engaged as a citizen (Dahlgren, 2009:80). Subsequently, he ascribes the growing popularity of political memes to the election period, where people of his age—young adults—began to use memes as a medium for political discourse, by 'mixing' politics with a product of popular culture.

As Shifman (2014) notes, popular culture is a constitutive element of the everyday life, hence using it to extend political discussions allows for politics to be more inclusive and approachable. Similarly, audiences indicate the ability of memes to generate interest toward politics; especially among the youth. To be heavily engaged in political news and conversations could be mundane, or in the words of Melati, age 20, '*plain and boring, just old people's stuff*'. On this note, many participants designate memes as a generational phenomenon; where the youth enact as the key players—creator and/or viewer engaging in the media content—who popularise ideas that would be unthinkable to people of older age groups. Yet, to attribute a common age group to the concept of "generation" here is not sufficient to give an account of the entire

¹³ See Appendix E for original excerpts of translated interviews

phenomenon. For instance, few respondents point to memes' potential for serving as a bonding mechanism among Indonesian Internet users, by combining politics and popular culture with the use of contextualised humour.

[With memes] I feel entertained, personally. And it's just funny, to see how Indonesians make jokes out of politics. Sometimes it's pretty good, like "cheap" or lame, in a particular Indonesian way. In a way, it can serve as a bonding mechanism. (Dian, 25)

To describe the humour as "cheap" or lame, in a particular Indonesian way' translates into an interpretation of a nationwide inside joke, which adheres to the concept of memes as a 'media lingua franca' that touch on culturally resonant ideas (Milner, 2013b). The 'bonding mechanism' between meme creators and audiences reflects a sense of belonging between individuals within the participatory network or 'imagined community', wherein members of the group, marked by predominantly symbolic boundaries, have something in common with each other (Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998:117). Indeed, as Hermes (2005) notes, when being engaged in media we actively connect to others by producing, and reproducing, feelings of belonging to them.

To interpret memes as a generational phenomenon among Internet users who grow up with access to digital technologies would therefore be rather simplistic. In analysing the Internet as a generation phenomenon, Miegel and Olsson (2012) adopt the work of Karl Mannheim (1936), wherein the term generation signifies members who are in a position to understand and make sense of social and cultural processes in a similar manner. Not every particular age group shapes a force in social development, hence in order for a generation to become a dynamic factor for social change, it must be realised through what he describes as *generation as actuality*, or the potential to destabilise the premise of established beliefs and values in a society (ibid.). The same understanding can be applied to the context of the "meme-generation" presented in this analysis; as a form of alternative media, in accordance with Carpentier's (2011) definition, memes may change the nature of civic agency by interplaying with the audience members' mediated engagement in politics—through the media lingua franca.

Political memes are enticing to members of this generation for various reasons. One includes the interdiscursive combinations of popular culture and political commentary through satirical humour and creativity. For instance, in the series of SetNov memes, respondents indicate the

heavy use of pictorials integrated with intertextual references to multiple texts, which captured their attention and draw them into the construction of the argument. The appeal of memes is moreover found in a number of key attributes such as simplicity and flawed text, which is in line with Shifman's (2014:86) inference, "bad" texts make "good" memes in contemporary participatory culture'. This was particularly remarked by one respondent:

Memes are like a modern version of political cartoons, which have been around for ages [...] a shorter version, and maybe slightly more to the point, and maybe sometimes not as clever, but I think, why not, right? The clever thing about memes is that it is so simple, yet, so understandable, you look at it, sometimes it doesn't even have any word on it, it's just a drawing, or a badly photoshopped picture or something, but it gets you to think, "Ah, this is what the person is trying to say." (Sinta, 25)

While memes are normally expressed in an understood vernacular, as indicated by Sinta, an implication of their visual and intertextual nature is the polysemic potential; or the tendency to be open to contrasting interpretations, which brings ambiguity to the message (Shifman, 2014:150). As Milner (2016:109) argues, 'the interactions between participants within the lingua franca are as varied as their perspectives, relationships, and contexts'; to which the memetic lingua franca can be applied to the participants' own contexts and needs. In this regard, participants describe the satirical element in memes as an aspect that requires contextual understanding since, as indicated by Eko, age 25, '*it doesn't point out the obvious*'. On the one hand, the sarcastic nature of memes is appraised by participants for being a '*smart*' type of humour or '*savage*'¹⁴, particularly when used to convey issues of often sensitive political relevance with an amusing anecdote on a perceived absurdity. The use of the term "savage" in this context implies the emphasis on satire as a form of commentary that stresses the negative aspects, 'sometimes with brutality' (Ziv, 2010:16). On the other hand, also taking the latter point into account, respondents point to satire's ability to instil a false sense of truth if taken at face value. This illustrates that within the memetic media lingua franca, there are certainly ambivalent potentials for polyvocality—making the modes of discourse rather exclusive, instead of inclusive, even within members of the meme-generation.

¹⁴ Savage is used as a slang term to describe an act of rebuttal toward someone or something in a manner that is very well-put.

Contesting power: anonymity and algorithms

The common conception of Internet memes is its ability to diminish structural power as they are characterised as being informal, casual, and spontaneous; in the way that they typically come from the bottom up, rather than being dictated by a powerful organising force (Shifman, 2014). This attribute is evident in the SetNov memes, where respondents discuss the powerful role of humour in challenging the injustices carried out by individuals of the governing institution. An interviewee apprehends the hospitalisation incidents as follows:

Everyone was talking about it, it was hilarious, and to me, it became an example of how people in power in Indonesia, will not get away with just doing things the way they wanted. And that people will call them out for it. Because somebody, among the hundreds of millions of people in Indonesia, will speak up. (Surya, 28)

Following Surya's statement, the power of the individual elites in this context can be challenged by "the people" through the use of humour. In line with Bakhtin's Carnavalesque theory (1981:23), memes enable the subject of ridicule to become an object of familiar contact, which clears 'the ground for an absolute investigation of it'. However, the empowering nature of memes is subject to question, as respondents reflect on the growing presence of media contents with strong partisan cues especially throughout the Pilkada DKI period. The notion of anonymity is heavily discussed by participants of this research, to which the possible sources and motive are scrutinised, such as the question of whether the memes are created to steer a particular political agenda.

When I chance upon a meme, I don't even know if it's "organically-created" or informed by some candidate's political campaign volunteers. That's very possible, I think. (Dian, 25)

The term "organic" in this context refers to Dian's perception of memes that are typically characterised as being grassroots. With the possibility of being appropriated by institutional forces like 'volunteers'¹⁵ of the political campaign, the preconception of memetic participation in adding a democratic voice to mediated political discourses becomes challenged. Many respondents indicate their vigilance toward the information they engage in, as memes may be appropriated by institutional forces that are established within a top-down system. Such an

¹⁵ As part of their branding strategy, each of the gubernatorial candidates for the 2017 Pilkada DKI designated a social media team during the campaign period who enact as "volunteers", for they claim to be unpaid.

instance is further supported by a respondent who critically observes and reflects on the possible gatekeepers of the political meme Facebook pages which he follows:

I can't really say it's from the political elites or the authorities themselves... but for some [Facebook] pages, it looks like it's systemic. You can see the pattern. If you follow or observe the posts in order, it looks like it's guided by a certain party. (Adi, 29)

Memes that contain partisan cues contribute to the scrutiny level which one applies to the content's persuasive arguments, based on the remarks made by participants in this study. As Adi remarks, the memes and platforms through which they circulate may be guided by structural processes that are 'systemic', as is the case with the Facebook pages he follows. The notion of anonymity is subject to greater scrutiny, as several respondents speak in regard to anonymous groups and "bot"¹⁶ accounts that had made accounts in the news during the period in which the interviews were conducted¹⁷. Combining these factors together, the civic value of memes becomes strongly contested as audiences reflect on the media's vulnerability to be created and spread by anonymous networks for a top-down political agenda. This adds to the challenge that respondents face in navigating the media's civic potentials.

Subsequently, the notion of algorithms is discussed at great lengths. Most point to the problems imposed by the systemic power over memes, especially when engaging with the ones containing partisan cues. In the wave of 'datafication', Couldry & Hepp (2017:139) assert that 'data transform the nature of the self's reflexivity and performance in the processes of operating within social media platforms'. This very notion is registered in one of the interviewees:

I see memes on my Facebook page, but this is what I notice [...] memes that do not conform to my beliefs, or to my political leanings, they don't show [on my feed]. Which further shows you that these things create a confirmation bias, and then I think that, "Oh, this guy is right! The other people are stupid," and I don't even know what the other side is saying. So, that risk of confirmation bias, it is real. And it is something was made worse by the fact that there are Facebook algorithms. You tend to click something that you agree more, and it tends to appear on

¹⁶ An Internet bot refers to a software application or system that runs automated tasks over the Internet, which can be used to share information online.

¹⁷ A cyber network was identified and charged for spreading a wave of fake news and hate speech on Twitter, in an operation that was allegedly designed to destabilise the government. An investigation on the cyber network was further carried out by *The Guardian*, which uncovered the use of bots to tweet inflammatory messages containing sectarian and racist sentiments (see: Lamb, 2018).

your news feed. It makes you lazy – it prevents me from looking from the other side of the angle.
(Yuda, 25)

Data-processing may be intertwined with one's political subjectivity as algorithms enact as 'stabilizers of trust, practical and symbolic assurances that their evaluations are fair and accurate, and free from subjectivity, error or attempted influence' (Gillespie, 2014:179). As Yuda suggests, memes can be manipulated to echo commentaries of partisan perspectives and create 'confirmation bias' among meme audiences. Added with algorithm's role in placing people into their own "filter bubble", this potentially leads to an increasingly polarised public which may inhibit discussions among citizens in a democracy (Levendusky & Malhotra, 2016; Lim, 2017). Yet, Yuda's awareness of such implication, and that of the other respondents, indicates a form of agency; which involves the ability to make decisions and act according to a coherent sense of self and identity (Dahlgren, 2009:102). How this agency is translated into the ways they negotiate their position as meme audiences will be treated in the following sections.

Memes as political discourse: opportunities and challenges

The body of literature in the present study has indicated the potential of Internet memes as a form of political discourse that provides enrichment to the online public spheres (Milner, 2012). This part of the chapter thereby examines how audiences, through their engagement with memes, construct the implications that the media may carry on contemporary political discourse. Thorough discussions take place on the contradictory values of political memes in a participatory culture where "spreadability" is a measure of value (Jenkins et al., 2013), for this generates awareness that potentially leads to oversaturation. The use of memes as distinct modes of communication for political dissent *and* partisan opinions further reflects the ambivalent potential of memes for online public discourse and raises the debate on whether the media serve to promote conversation or conflict. This reveals the complexities of audience engagement with the media content, as they are confronted with diverse identities and ideas that may facilitate both voice and antagonism.

Spreadability: awareness vs. oversaturation

Memes are characterised for being spreadable; their accessibility allows for audiences to easily engage with the content, and the variety of communicative modes they convey, on social media. As political memes predominantly contain references to events in the news, respondents see their potential in raising awareness on certain political issues, such as SetNov's perceived

attempts at avoiding prosecution and the outcome of the series of public election debate between the gubernatorial candidates. Some further suggest the potential of memes to act as a gateway to acquiring more knowledge on recent political events.

Sometimes from these memes, I see what kind of subject they're discussing. This triggers my curiosity to find out what the original news is about, so afterwards I search for [more information].
(Eko, 25)

Online competition for attention is massive; and in this sense, the spreadability of political memes may draw the audiences' attention to specific developments of political news. From Eko's statement, we can infer that the accessibility of memes gives rise to awareness, which may contribute to their willingness to obtain more knowledge on particular issues. All interviewees stress the importance of keeping oneself informed, and for some, to be engaged with memes also serves as a coping mechanism to address their frustrations regarding politics.

I have a motto in life. "Life is a big joke, the only thing that you can do is just to laugh." And I think that's the only way that I can react [to] Indonesian politics, to be honest. I mean you read the news, it's depressing, so the best thing we can do is to make a joke out of it. (Agus, 29)

To Agus, the fact that SetNov managed to avoid yet another hearing from the court indicates a sign of weakness on the part of the nation's judicial system in tackling issues of corruption. Through satirical humour and comedic relief, he finds himself capable of tuning in to recent political events, despite finding them emotionally-draining or 'depressing'. Yet, most participants remarked that the heavy reliance on humour causes a process of "depolitisation", where the political and critical dimensions of memes become devalued for pure enjoyment (Shifman, 2014:138).

I think the negative thing about having all these memes around, is that it just... you know when you do research, an interview, there's this thing called the respondent fatigue. So when you see something so much, so often, you just sort of, don't want to see it anymore. I became meh, I don't want to look at it. I guess that's where memes are right now, it's just purely for the entertainment value, and there's so many of them out there, it's so common. (Sinta, 24)

By making reference to the term 'respondent fatigue', Sinta discusses the pervasive spread of memes, which at a certain point may lead to oversaturation of the issue at hand. In this case,

while the media have the capacity to raise awareness by highlighting issues about situations that require change and improvement, spreadability may also impede their civic potentials in extending social awareness, as the value can be diminished in favour of ‘the entertainment value’.

Creating conversation or conflict?

As a product of the participatory media culture, memes enable diverse participation in online public dialogue. What is denoted by public dialogue here does not solely refer to engagement with the media content, but also the political commentaries that manifest on the sites through which they circulate, such as the comments section. Participants of this research point to the role of public commentaries in sparking conversations that lead to discussions, as exemplified in the following:

These memes, they are a product of the mass. They produce one meme and generate a lot of comments. Eventually, you are able to read in between the lines, like for example, when Setya Novanto was called for the hearing in the court and then staged an accident. Because of these memes, you read between the lines, it educates in a way that... it is sort of like the power of the mass, the wisdom of the crowd, as we discuss more and more, we sort of crystallise a few [matters] which allows us to read between the lines. (Yuda, 28)

According to Yuda, the SetNov memes create an avenue for the exchange of dialogues to take place between Internet users, where they engage with commentaries that helped ‘crystallise’ the events leading up to the incidents followed by refuting the claims made by the politician. Referring to the same case, another interviewee, Taufik, is capable of deducing that the first SetNov hospital incident was evidently fabricated, after his Facebook friends pointed out the inconsistencies in the scenario, such as the subject being wired to a respiratory machine when he was supposedly admitted for diabetes and vertigo. In this case, memes not only serve to ‘crystallise a few matters’, but also provide an outlet for ‘the wisdom of the crowd’ to transpire through the role of everyday talk.

At the same time, participants are doubtful that such mediated participation can be generally democratising. The issue of authenticity comes to mind again as respondents question if the

conversations are generated by bot accounts, or simply populated by Internet “trolls”¹⁸. Many remark that the discursive participation lack a sense of reasoned deliberation, as most conversations that take place turn into senseless debates where the discussion points become completely derailed from the original subject. Yet, the same respondents appear to have ambivalent attitudes toward the political commentaries, as they find them to be entertaining too, and at times, even more amusing than the memes. Eko and Taufik, for instance, frequently go through the comments section to observe if any participant is able to rebut the claims made by the meme while providing factual evidence. Eko particularly finds amuse in reading the conversations that transpire between Internet users, particularly if they begin to “roast”¹⁹ each other through savage commentaries. As such, these commentaries in various degrees invite audiences to be engaged in the discursive process.

When participants are further enquired about memes’ potential for political discourse, some express their doubt for several reasons. Firstly, the intertextual nature of memes that is associated with attribution can be problematic (Milner, 2016:208), as it may perpetuate logical fallacy.

Memes, to me, are not a means of discussion. It’s more like leading people to discuss other issues that are taken out of context. For example, using a visual of Jokowi who’s in the middle of laughing, but looking idiotic at the same time; the narration that could be given is that, our president has no wisdom. (Guntur, 24)

Guntur believes that memes do not qualify as a constructive means of discussion, as they represent a re-appropriation of images that may be guided by an internal political schema. He observes, while an active battle over preferred meaning may be taking place, the majority of meme audiences would only engage with discussions that further reaffirm their political predispositions. On this note, respondents reflect on the controversy surrounding memetic representations for electoral politics. A lot of the memes they have encountered appear as a tool for negative campaigning by making “deliberate attacks” toward political opponents, often containing sectarian sentiments.

¹⁸ The term trolls in this context refers to an Internet slang which describes individuals who deliberately post aggravating, irrelevant or off-topic messages in online communities to provoke readers to an emotional response, often for the troll’s personal enjoyment.

¹⁹ The act of “roasting” someone is to publicly make a joke at the person’s expense, often in a humiliating manner and intended to entertain the wider audience.

Based on my personal observation, memes that are political seem to be guided by specific parties [...] especially since the recent *Pilkada DKI*. It became really evident—like if we refer to the previous presidential elections when Jokowi became presidential nominee, there were already partisan memes, but they were used to address the weaknesses of the opposing candidates and not done blatantly. Now, it's more like war. (Bima, 26)

By referencing 'war', Bima indicates the polyvocal nature of memes; as memes facilitate voices to connect and converse, they also enable arguments and antagonism to take place. While the affordance of contestations demonstrates the potential for memetic media to facilitate counter-political discourses, audiences in this research become cynical about the promise of voice in public commentaries through memes, as they actively question their positions within the diverse identities and ideas of memetic participation that can easily play by the 'mob rule' (Milner, 2016:112).

Dis/engagement? Reflecting on the civic potentials

We have thus far demonstrated the contradictory outcomes of memes as a means of political discourse; while it holds the potential to generate awareness and empowered voices, it may also lead to depoliticisation and antagonistic dispute. The polyvocality of memes complicates the ways audiences engage with diverse identities and ideas, to which certain modes of discourse in memes are considered to be emotionally distancing. At the same time, by bringing important issues to light and help spark conversations among Internet users, memes may also be considered as an opportunity for audiences to learn citizenship. Therefore, by applying Dahlgren's analytical framework of the civic cultures, this section firstly delves into the ways in which memes may foster, or hinder, knowledge, which then translates into the values and trust that the media hold in the context of democracy; followed by surveying how the identities of audiences are channelled through the space and practices of political discourse via memes.

Transmitting knowledge to trust and values

As previously discussed, the ability of memes to generate interest and draw the audiences' attention to current affairs may contribute to their willingness to acquire knowledge. With simplicity being one of the main attributes of memes (Shifman, 2014:81), participants note that the information becomes relatively easier to be grasped, especially when the subject of

discussion contains technical discourses. Memes' simplicity serves to navigate viewers to the construction of the argument that would otherwise be difficult to follow.

Memes are interesting because it [...] has to be creative to capture our attention. That's why I consider memes as more entertaining than reading the news, like to keep myself updated. With conventional news formats, I would have to look through the articles one by one and feel, "Oh politics, this is heavy." (Darma, 32)

Drawing from this statement, the modes of communicative discourse in memes prove to be appealing to the respondent's emotion, as they are often entertaining in addressing certain political subjects. As issues of political relevance became increasingly complex during the election period, Darma turns to memes as alternative source 'to keep' himself 'updated', since they are able to form multiple framings of the news into easily grasped ideas. As a form of alternative media, memes allow him to assess which recent topics are actively discussed or hotly contested by the public, without having to browse through the ceaseless flow of news 'one by one' and feeling overwhelmed by the complexity of political discussion on conventional news format. Yet, most respondents do problematise the same notion of simplicity, as it implies that a singular Internet meme does not capture enough nuances when used to provide information.

I find [memes] entertaining, but the thing I do worry about is whether memes are enough to capture nuances [...] with the future trends of digitisation, movement towards simplification and the memetic communications. Having such simplified elements, you kind of worry that a lot of nuances are getting lost in the process. (Surya, 28)

From the standpoint of a communications consultant, Surya questions the ability of memes to offer an in-depth picture to relevant issues or news events. For instance, the policies proposed by the gubernatorial candidates during the election debates are undoubtedly nuanced, and to criticise their implication through memes would be reductive of its actual complexity. This becomes problematic when, as cautioned by Milner (2016:208), Internet users create and transform content with inconsistent accuracy and credibility, which potentially leads to the spread of both information and misinformation. Interviewees cast further doubt on the potential for knowledge acquisition through memes, due to the perceived unreliability of the mainstream media which few political memes base their content from.

For me, [political memes] only serve to entertain. Cause whoever makes the content, bases the information from online mainstream news media, which actually lack depth to begin with. (Krisna, 24)

For Krisna, he mainly recognises the cultural, rather than political, value of internet memes due to his declining trust in the online mainstream media. He attributes his scepticism to the pervasiveness of clickbait headlines, inaccuracy of information due to struggle for timeliness, as well as the increasingly biased and partisan news coverage. Other respondents also refer to instances where memes, particularly ones that are partisan, manipulate news article screenshots in the media content as a baseline of their proposed argument. Although this is not particularly reflected across the multitude of memes that went viral over the course of Pilkada DKI, such technique certainly challenges the core conception of memes as a form of alternative parallel discourse to mainstream media viewpoints.

Apart from the perceived bias of the mainstream media, participants also attribute their distrust toward institutions and their representatives. This is especially highlighted when discussing regulations that are deemed restrictive to freedom of expression and may benefit the political elites, such as the ITE law, or a controversial law referred to as UU MD3²⁰ that was recently passed by the house of representatives when the interviews in this study were conducted. The notion of trust performing in an ambivalent manner in civic cultures (Dahlgren, 2009:112) is evident in this case: by exposing the perceived absurdities of those in power, the value of memes as a form of alternative media to voice political dissent is still considered by some respondents.

I don't think memes are trivial; they are serious and I don't think they should be regulated. There is hardly any more channel for people to be able to seriously convey what they feel and what they think in such an effective manner [...] it is a great tool for mass movements. I do believe in the notion that if you really want to see some change then you really have to act [...] But what other options do you have? You cannot get published in the newspapers anymore, with this enchanted generation that does not believe in mainstream media anymore. (Yuda, 28)

²⁰ The legislation concerning the People's Legislative Council, Regional Representatives Council, and Regional House of Representatives, also known as *UU MD3*, contains a new law under Article 122 that gives the House of Representatives' Ethics Council the power to criminalise individuals, groups or legal entities that "degrade the honour" of the members of the House of Representatives. In this article, what constitutes "degradation" is undefined.

Linking to the growing distrust in mainstream media among the youth, Yuda reflects on memes' potential as 'a tool for mass movement'; or the potential of memes for social change which does not necessarily coordinate or mobilise activist movements, but more towards how citizens are able to articulate and discuss about conflicting ideas in the society. On this note, memes may be in line with certain values of democratic principles, which according to Dahlgren (2009:110) include 'substantive values' such as justice and liberty and 'procedural' ones, like openness and discussion. Respondents point out that due to their subtlety, satirical narratives enable both meme creators and spreaders to offer their dissenting critique while avoiding prosecution under the ITE law. Therefore, memes spark hope for broader discussions to take place and explore or even challenge the limits of governmentality, as exemplified in the series of memes that emerged after SetNov's hospitalisation.

On the other hand, it must also be noted that different types of satire would have different persuasive influence on the audience (Holbert et al., 2011). Participants in this research similarly indicate their concern over viewers who may not understand the context of the media content due to its polysemic potential. Satirical humour also becomes problematic when used to spread antagonistic voices, which ran rampant during the Pilkada DKI campaign period. Few respondents found these types of satire to be juvenile and offensive on a personal level, as exemplified below:

I think in some cases using satire in political memes is applicable, it depends on who writes it. Sometimes very smart creators can touch a very sensitive topic while using satire, and I think it's still appropriate, but in other cases I think some people are just blatantly rude. (Melati, 20)

The notion of anonymity is another paradoxical aspect to the empowering nature of memes:

There is this sense of anonymity that comes with it, there's this sense of virtualisation, whatever you are saying goes to this mass of aggregation and you can say whatever you want and it doesn't matter. You can be as passionate as you want to become, project whatever sort of identity you want... nearly, without consequences. (Surya, 28)

For audiences like Melati, being exposed to memes with antagonistic voices causes emotional distance, thus hindering them from engaging with the broader discussions of the political issues at hand. Especially for modes of discourses that contain sectarian and racist sentiments, which,

as Surya asserts, can be created and spread anonymously ‘nearly, without consequences’, such attributes are undoubtedly contradictory to the civic values which according to Dahlgren (2009:111) must be upheld in a democracy, such as responsibility and accountability.

Embodiment of identity in space via practices

Throughout the interviews, participants in this research are visibly reflexive about their sense of self in relation to others, which in turn contributes to the ways they engage with memes. For instance, some deliberately disengage themselves from political memes which they deem “toxic” by “unfriending” or “unfollowing” Facebook friends who tend to share media contents that are disagreeable to their political subjectivities. The potential to be grouped into filter bubbles, or the personalisation of information that effectively isolate them from a diversity of viewpoints, comes to mind, and some indicate the implication it brings to their opinions and attitudes.

Since we’re talking about memes that are political, clearly this would affect my opinions. Although I’m seeing memes from the comedic value, but like it or not, this would have an effect on me. Since I’m only following memes that are in line with my political views, when they’re being criticised by an opponent, this would form my opinion to despise that person. (Darma, 32)

While ‘like-minded spheres’ may serve to strengthen collective identity, they also risk encouraging ‘one-dimensional mentalities’ (Dahlgren, 2009:165). In this regard, Darma reflects on how engaging with memes that reaffirm his preconceived notions may not only reinforce his confirmation bias, but also intensify the antagonistic view he holds toward his perceived ‘political opponents’. As Livingstone (2002:12) suggests, because political engagement is increasingly a matter of identity and of belonging, these matters may overflow into notions of identity politics, as well as social inclusion and exclusion. In Indonesia, the polarisation between two political camps based around identity politics has become increasingly evident after the divisive gubernatorial election in Jakarta (Lim, 2017). Participants of this study opt to avoid showcasing their political views “publicly” on social media out of the fear offending others, or the regard that their opinions would not matter. This includes preventing oneself from “sharing” memes that are evidently partisan.

By satirising a political figure, somehow you show who you're siding with. Memes are one of the ways to showcase your identity; showing your political preferences to people, so-called, implicitly. (Krisna, 24)

Krisna's statement reflects that being engaged in a meme is not merely a matter of being entertained, but also identifying with the media content based on the political subjectivities which one holds. As Abercrombie & Longhurst (1998:117) assert, the construction of identity links to one's sense of belonging as a diffused audience in an imagined community. Although few respondents distance themselves from further engaging in memes to avoid expressing their political views openly, more in fact indicated their continued engagement in various ways. Many actively rate or "react" to the content; "tag friends" under the post's comments section; share the meme on their timeline or newsfeed; as well as "export" the content to other social networking sites for private exchanges. One of the criteria for such modes of 'participation through the media' (Carpentier, 2011:68) is the extent to which respondents find the meme to be informative and amusing at the same time. This is exemplified in Sintia's case; in spite of not "following" any political entertainment site on social media, she is engaged with memes that are shared by her peers.

[My boyfriend] sends me all these memes everyday, and when we have time we would talk about it. When he sent me the meme about *rumah lapis*²¹, I didn't actually know anything about it at all. So I think we talked about it, cause I didn't know [the context]. (Sintia, 25)

Dahlgren (2009) maintains that engagement emerges via talk, which is shaped by discourses. Sintia's deliberate discussions with her partner, while taking place privately, reflects the significant role of communicative competencies and practices like the role of everyday talk in characterising one's civic agency. Indeed, in 'doing citizenship', civic competence cannot be acquired solely from political society; it is manifested from the entire development of the subject (Dahlgren, 2006:273). In reference to online discourses that take place under the comments section, one interviewee, Adi, particularly indicates his frequent interaction with other Internet users through memes.

²¹ Various memes on the subject of "rumah lapis" or "layered housing" were circulated to satirise the new urban planning concept proposed by Jakarta Governor Anies Baswedan and Deputy Governor Sandiung Uno in the attempt to modernise the city's slum areas (see: Salim, 2017). The use of the term "layered" to describe vertical housing, as opposed to (housing) flats, received online mockeries from Indonesian Internet users.

Normally I just leave a reaction, but if it looks very, very interesting, I would leave a comment to burn up “the battle”. Usually I get positive responses because I’m on the right side – like, aligning with what is right, based on facts. Sometimes people don’t agree with the content but their understanding is false to begin with, because the meme is based on a hoax. So I just tell the truth, and people support me. I don’t think I have any special role, just having fun while making people realise what should be right. (Adi, 29)

By ‘burning up the battle’, Adi contests the credibility of the information constructed in memetic contents which may at times contain misinformation. In this sense, his ability to determine and challenge misinformation reflects his identity construction as an empowered civic agent, which requires a set of knowledge (‘aligning with what is right, based on facts’), emotions (‘if it looks very, very interesting’) and activities (‘tell the truth’). In line with Hermes’ (2006) concept of cultural citizenship, Adi’s mediated participation in this political discourse illustrates a state of commitment to larger communities, through the affordability of everyday resources, like social media and memes. His mention of receiving support from fellow Internet users who approve of his stance, further reaffirms his sense of belonging in the community (Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998).

Another aspect to pay attention to is the role of motivation, which sets the foundation of willingness to engage with the political (Dahlgren, 2009). Participants in this study, despite coming from various ethnic and religious background, as well as field of education and profession—express their collective desire for the nation to advance with pro-diversity and progressive ideals. They exhibit genuine concern over the growing political tension, especially in response to the divisive election and growing threat of identity politics. On this account, a respondent who articulates his sense of nationalism actively negotiates his position as a citizen and member of the meme-generation by following Twitter accounts that circulate partisan memes from both sides of the polarising camps. Being aware of the challenges imposed by algorithms and the filter bubble, he attempts to confront his viewpoints, instead of reaffirming his preconceived notions, as follows:

From memes and social media, I get to learn a lot more about the current [state] of Indonesian democracy and what is actually happening. I think the reason why people have become less “chill” lately is because they only see the picture from one perspective. Like what they call it... the media bubble. They only see, what they want to see. So I think that's what I'm always trying to do, to follow the [conversations] from both sides, then try to understand more about it. (Guntur, 24)

Guntur expresses his aspiration to enlighten those around him by acting as a mediator between the divisive political rhetoric and rampant hate speeches which have dominated debates in social media. Following Coleman's (2013) framework of engagement, the subject's construction of identity and engagement in communities may be translated into his agency as a democratic citizen. Being part of the meme-generation to him, means to have access to multiple online sites and to engage in the multiple voices within the polyvocal conversations. This illustrates the potential of meme engagement, which mobilises the rational—being engaged with both sides of the discussion, *and* the affective response—the passion to witness progress in the nation, in shaping his civic agency to participate in the nation's democracy.

Conclusion

This thesis sets out to understand how audiences engage with political memes, which translates into the ways in which the media content is understood and treated as a form of contemporary political discourse. Building on the theoretical perspectives of online public spheres, public discourses in memetic participation and civic cultures, the study explores the implications of political memes in facilitating, or inhibiting, the everyday civic engagement of audiences. The research acknowledges the different modes of discourse employed by political memes, by focusing on two case studies in order to gain a comprehensive outlook on the media's civic potentials in the context of present-day Indonesian politics. As reflected in the analytical chapter, memes as a tool for political dissent and partisan opinions pose varying outcomes on the nature of public discourse. The audiences' mediated engagement within the entanglement of the systemic power over the media is moreover addressed, as they consequently negotiate their position as meme audiences and citizens in the digital environment.

The research begins by answering the question of how audiences define and engage with political memes on social media. Participants in this study reflect a notion of being part of “the meme generation”; setting themselves apart from the older generations of society and bonding over the media lingua franca of memes. Through memes, discussions about politics can be packaged in a fun, humorous way—often with satirical, whimsical content and “savage” commentaries—that can only be understood by members of the meme-generation. Furthermore, the potential of memes to empower citizens, by serving as an alternative, dissenting critique against corruptors is demonstrated. Such civic potential, however, is challenged by issues of anonymity. In relation to political memes containing strong partisan cues during the gubernatorial election campaign period, audiences indicate the likelihood for the media content to be appropriated for institutional influence and integrated as part of the candidates' campaign strategy on social media. Although they fundamentally could not verify this notion, such perception contributes to the scrutiny level which one applies to the content's persuasive arguments; contesting the nature of memes which are supposedly “organic” or “a product of the mass”, rather than coming from the top-down.

In the discussion of engagement, respondents demonstrate various forms of online activities; while few appear to be merely observing political memes that appear on their social media, most actively rate or “react” to the content; “tag friends” under the post's comments section;

“share” the meme on their timeline or newsfeed; or “export” the media to other social networking sites to discuss about the content through private exchanges. The basis for these modes of participation to take place includes the extent to which respondents find the meme to be informative and entertaining at the same time, which showcases an interplay between one’s cognitive attention and affective investment (Dahlgren, 2009). Yet, some participants also point to their deliberate disengagement from partisan memes which they treat as “toxic” or disagreeable to their political subjectivities. This perspective generates the discussion of algorithms and the risk of being confined into “filter bubbles”. In this regard, few respondents attempt to minimise such risk by actively seeking information from a variety of political meme sites in order to acquire a diversity of political viewpoints. Such awareness and effort are an indication of their civic agency as meme audiences, as well as citizens of the nation.

The implications of memes on contemporary political discourse are subsequently discussed. Memes serve an inviting function; they are communicated in a mode of discourse familiar to the youth, through online channels that allow for ease of access that are complemented by the media’s spreadability. However, the findings also suggest that spreadable media and heavy reliance on popular culture can lead to a process of “depolitisation”, which as Shifman (2014) suggests, risks taking the critical facets away of the issue. Through political commentaries that manifest under the comments section, respondents can engage in dialogues that enable them to read between the lines and crystallise issues that are contested in the media content. For instance, it becomes clear to a respondent that the SetNov incidents were likely to be fabricated after engaging in online discussions which reveal the inconsistencies in the scenarios. The role of everyday talk (Dahlgren, 2006), in this sense, allows for “the wisdom of the crowd” to transpire.

However, respondents also express their doubt in the ability of the mediated public discourses to be democratising since they generally lack the sense of reasoned deliberation. With memes being perceived as a re-appropriation of images guided by an internal political schema, disagreeable information and discussions that take place among Internet users may only serve to confirm their political predispositions, as senseless debates appear to dominate online public discourses. This transpires into discussions surrounding the use of memes for electoral politics, where often times partisan memes generate conflict or “battle” between supporters of each candidate, especially when the media contain antagonistic views. As such, audiences are

sceptical about the promise of voice in public commentaries that manifest under memes due to their general incompatibility in achieving rational consensus.

With regards to how political memes may foster, or hinder, the youth's civic engagement, the present study analyses the postulation through Dahlgren's (2009) circuit of civic cultures through its six dimensions: knowledge, values, trust, practices, spaces and identities. Respondents indicate that memes have the ability to spark their interest on particular issues and serve as a gateway to acquiring *knowledge* by seeking additional external sources. However, due to the simplicity of the content's format, they also address its inability to capture nuances. In the case of election memes, being extensively exposed to narratives that are one-sided may lead to uninformed opinion. Few audience members are moreover cynical about memes' potential for knowledge acquisition, as the media have increasingly based their content from online mainstream news that are often perceived as biased and unreliable. This links to the notion of *trust* and how the incorporation of news article screenshots in building the base of the content's argument further complicates the very notion of memes as an alternative media in Carpentier's (2011) term.

Similarly, as respondents attribute their distrust towards the governing institutions and their representatives, they also acknowledge memes' potential as an alternative dissenting critique; particularly in response to problematic policies that may put the common people at a position of disadvantage, such as the misuse of the defamation clause under the ITE law. In this context, the subtlety of satirical humour is discussed in relation to the *values* it shares in a democratic system, for it sparks hope for broader discussions to take place under a media regulation that is deemed restrictive to freedom of expression. At the same time, satire may also convey divisive rhetoric by spreading hate speech or antagonistic voices, as in the case of Pilkada DKI. Such modes of discourse can be emotionally distancing to the audience members, on top of being problematic on an ethical level.

Finally, the notion of *identities* is reflected across the findings. In general, participants in the study express their desire for the nation to advance with progressive ideals. This outlook translates into their motivation in engaging in an array of practices through memes in ways that promote their civic engagement, such as seeking political knowledge from various sources and participating in discourses through numerous online *spaces*. As they take on meaningful *practices* like actively discussing about recent development that are made aware through

memes, and addressing misinformation that is depicted in the media content in public commentaries, these activities reflect a form of engagement that enhances their civic agency, where they ‘are able to see themselves as participants and find engagement meaningful’ through ‘the interplay of reason and passion’ (Dahlgren, 2009:102). Through political meme sites on social media, audiences have the avenue to contribute to political discussions and simultaneously receive support from fellow Internet users engaged in the conversation; this illustrates the media’s role as an everyday resource that facilitates the state of commitment to larger communities, bringing together the notion of cultural citizenship (Hermes, 2005) and sense of belonging in an imagined community (Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998).

In relation to the growing political tension following the Pilkada DKI campaign period, audiences actively negotiate their position as citizens and members of the meme-generation. While few appear to be disengaging themselves from the issue, as they do not perceive any purpose beyond acquiring general knowledge on the subject, some also attempt to attain a broader picture of the current state of democracy in Indonesia. A respondent perfectly exemplifies this instance, as he critically reflects and attempts to challenge his personal subjectivities by engaging in conversations that take place on various political meme sites to better understand the present political polarisation in the country. He constructs his role as an active mediator between the rampant, discordant political rhetoric that has dominated the debates on social media. This identity formation and engagement in communities connects to his agency as a democratic citizen, which is in line with Coleman’s (2013) view on political citizenship.

In retrospect, there are many ways of being a citizen and of ‘doing citizenship’ (Dahlgren, 2006). The contribution of political memes to civic cultures remains equivocal, with challenges that may hinder the civic engagement such as the potential for “depolitisation”, the interference of antagonistic voices and perceived institutional influence, on top of the systemic power over the media. Yet, memes also offer resources for audiences to explore various political discourses that may touch them in various ways. As the findings indicate, political memes hold the potential to incite knowledge, inspire values, suggest practices and mobilise identities, which altogether foster the civic engagement of the Indonesian youth. Therefore, despite the media’s limitations, to reflect on political memes as a space for civic cultures allows us to go beyond the mere “lulz” and narrow definition of politics, and identify their civic potentials.

Concluding reflections

This research has addressed the ambivalence of memes as a form of political discourse and the civic potentials they carry in the case of Indonesia. Instead of analysing memes for their direct influence on publics, exploring the media's opportunities and challenges from the standpoint of audiences enables a deeper exploration of the 'civic' (Livingstone, 2005:32). Indeed, the research avoids the common conception that the political and politics are simply given (Dahlgren, 2003:155). Since existing studies have predominantly adopted a semiotic or discursive approach in analysing Internet memes, future dissertations can benefit from investigating the phenomenon from the perspective of audiences as 'active meaning makers' (Hermes, 2009), for it may constitute a further step in the investigation of the meme culture as a whole.

The present study moreover illustrates the importance of applying national specificity to determine how humour plays into civic subjectivity (Corner et al., 2013). Based on two case studies in Indonesia where memes manifest as distinct modes of discourse, the findings indicate the ambivalence of the media's civic potentials with relevance to contemporary political issues in the country. Wherein most studies have tended to focus on the empowering aspects of memes, the analysis reveals certain challenges that are highly complex and multifaceted, such as the intertwining force of algorithms on social media and perceived institutional influence. While the former poses the risk of confining meme audiences into 'like-minded spheres' which encourage 'one-dimensional mentalities' (Dahlgren, 2009:165), the latter challenges the intrinsic nature of memes which are typically perceived as, in the word of a respondent, "organic" or coming from the bottom-up, instead of dictated by an organising force (Shifman, 2014).

To further explore the aforementioned concepts, future research can benefit from a multi-method study by investigating the ties that audiences establish in political meme sites through 'social network analysis'. This qualitative approach permits researchers to detect the flow, direction and evolving patterns of communication (Scott, 2017) and further analyse the circulation of memes. In her dissertation on political memes in the case of Russia, Denisova (2016) applied this method to explore the dynamic relationships between like-minded users versus those who are oppositional. When probing into the notion of "authenticity", in-depth interviews with meme creators and sharers can be taken into account, in addition to other qualitative approaches, for instance discourse analysis, to examine how political discourses are

linguistically constructed and how social contexts are depicted through the producers' narrative (Rose, 2001:150).

Although this research offers contextualisation by drawing upon two recent cases, more research particularly in the case of Pilkada DKI could benefit from *better* contextualisation. This is done by sampling an extensive number of memes that were disseminated within the timeframe of the election campaign period and analysing them through a semiotic lens, to generate elaborated analytical accounts on how the interpretations of the media are formed, as well as the broader structures of ideologies at work (Rose, 2001:73). Such approach permits an in-depth exploration of the ambivalent potentials for polyvocality in memes that were generated within the duration of Pilkada DKI. Audiences in this research have only accounted for memes that contain partisan cues; this may discount other forms of public expression that offer empowering contribution to the meme ecology.

When discussing the pervasiveness of memes as a medium for contemporary political discourse in Indonesia, respondents continuously reflect on the opportunities and challenges which the media carry in relation to the nation's civic cultures. What is conveyed to be the greatest obstacle lies in the lack of critical thinking and awareness, or the knowledge of recipients to detect whether the information conveyed are factual or not. Especially in this post-truth era, social media in Indonesia have become filled with negative information and "fake news" that target minorities (Pearl, 2018). This understanding heightens the controversy surrounding memetic representations containing sectarian sentiments and misinformation, as well as the implications they carry on identity politics, which the present findings have briefly touched upon.

Steven J. Allen (2014)²² cautions that 'false memes often have very real effects, providing the basis for bad laws that hurt people, or twisting people's views of history to make them easier prey for extremist politicians'. Reflecting on the epistemological debates regarding the practice of political representation in memes, Heiskanen (2017) draws a distinction between memes and post-factual information, and suggests the ease of differentiating Internet memes from news reporting for being a recognisable genre. Because her study was analysed in the context of the 2016 US presidential election, this calls for future research to apply more national specificity

²² In an article titled "The Court of Memes: Why People Believe Fake Facts"

when examining the modes of representation in memes, in relation to post-truth politics within specific cultural contexts.

As Dahlgren (2009:106) holds, ‘robust civic cultures are necessary prerequisites for viable public spheres and thus for a functioning democracy.’ To further assess how the civic cultures are manifested in the Indonesian society, this research finally calls for further qualitative interviews with experts such as politicians, media scholars, or civil society representatives, since they can contribute in forming a clearer picture that corresponds to the complexity of the Indonesian democratic system. Based on this notion, the civic potentials of memes in Indonesia would remain restricted without the viability of the nation’s civic cultures.

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Appendix A: Empirical Data, Interviews

- “Rahman”, 27, M, Indonesian, Graphic Designer. Interview with L. S. Hapsoro. 5th of March, 2018.
- “Dian”, 25, F, Indonesian, Graphic Designer. Interview with L. S. Hapsoro. 6th of March, 2018.
- “Adi”, 29, M, Indonesian, Software Engineer. Interview with L. S. Hapsoro. 6th of March, 2018.
- “Melati”, 20, F, Indonesian, Software Engineer. Interview with L. S. Hapsoro. 7th of March, 2018.
- “Yuda”, 27, M, Indonesian, Market Reporter. Interview with L. S. Hapsoro. 11th of March, 2018.
- “Eko”, 25, M, Indonesian, Marketing Officer. Interview with L. S. Hapsoro. 14th of March, 2018.
- “Sinta”, 25, F, Indonesian, Research Associate. Interview with L. S. Hapsoro. 15th of March, 2018.
- “Guntur”, 24, M, Indonesian, Business Developer. Interview with L. S. Hapsoro. 15th of March, 2018.
- “Surya”, 28, M, Indonesian, Strategic Communications Consultant. Interview with L. S. Hapsoro. 16th of March, 2018.
- “Taufik”, 25, M, Indonesian, Materials Coordinator. Interview with L. S. Hapsoro. 16th of March, 2018.
- “Bima”, 26, M, Indonesian, Civil Servant. Interview with L. S. Hapsoro. 18th of March, 2018.
- “Agus”, 29, M, Indonesian, Student. Interview with L. S. Hapsoro. 21st of March, 2018.
- “Krisna”, 24, M, Indonesian, Medical Researcher. Interview with L. S. Hapsoro. 22nd of March, 2018.
- “Darma”, 32, M, Indonesian, Student. Interview with L. S. Hapsoro. 24th of March, 2018.

Appendix B: Meme Examples

SetNov



Image 1²³

Photoshopped image of Setya Novanto depicted as the fictional supervillain Bane
(Right: original photo)



Image 2²⁴

One of the memes that had gone viral under the hashtag #IndonesiaMencariPapah

Translation

Orang Hilang (Missing Person)

Terakhir terlihat pura-pura sakit di klinik (Last seen pretending to be ill at a clinic)

Bagi yang menemukan harap hubungi KPK (If found please contact the Corruption Eradication Commissions)

²³ Source: Tribunnews.com (<http://www.tribunnews.com/nasional/2017/11/07/dikritik-terlalu-semangat-tindak-kasus-meme-setnov-polri-jalan-terus>)

²⁴ Source: BBC Indonesia (<http://www.bbc.com/indonesia/trensosial-42008209>)

Pilgub DKI



Image 3²⁵

The meme satirises then-governor candidate Anies Baswedan's 0% down payment housing campaign promise during an electoral debate. It points to Anies' follow-up statements in the press, which suggests that the campaign promise was misleading.

Translation

Jangan lakukan pembodohan (Do not mislead others)
Demi suara dalam Pilkada (To win a voice in Pilkada)



Image 4²⁶

A meme that was circulated during the election campaign period under the hashtag #pilgubdki on Instagram. The textual reference suggests that recipients should vote for leaders of similar faith.

Translation

Ini bukan SARA (This is not discriminatory)
Muslim pilih muslim (Muslims choose Muslims)

²⁵ Image credit: Humor Politik (fb.com/MemeHumorPolitik)

²⁶ Source: Instagram, adapted from Dewi et al. (2017)

Appendix C: Interview Guide

1. News consumption habits:
 - To what extent do you follow news on Indonesian politics?
 - How often do you read the news?
 - Medium (online/offline); specific platforms?
2. In what ways do you engage with memes?
 - When was the first time you encounter memes?
 - How often do you see memes on your social media feed?
 - What kind of memes have you seen?
3. What characteristics of political memes do you like or dislike?
 - Positive vs negative attributes?
 - Other feelings you obtain from engaging with them?
4. What sort of ideas do you attain from political memes?
5. Are you actively following any political meme site on social media?
 - If YES:
 - How do you engage with the community?
 - ✓ React? Comment? Share?
 - How do the members within the community interact with each other?
 - If NOT:
 - Have you observed any?
 - What is your impression of their modes of interaction?
6. The case of SetNov memes:
 - What is your general take on the whole case?
 - How do you perceive the role of memes in this event?
7. The case of Pilkada DKI:
 - How do you perceive the role of memes throughout the election period?
 - How and when does the content become credible and legitimate?
8. Current state of democracy:
 - In your opinion, where is it heading?
 - Other dynamics in politics? Give examples.
9. Personal reflection on media regulations:
 - ITE law in regard to defamation and hate speech?
10. What do you think the responsibilities of the youth as citizens in our democracy should entail? Regarding politics, memes and extending political conversations:
 - How do you perceive your personal role in this society?

Appendix D: Data and Coding

After transcribing 14 interviews up until April the 6th, the data is analysed through thematic coding and combined with an inductive and deductive approach. About 690 open codes have been generated from 14 interview transcripts. These open codes are assigned to various sub/categories and overarching themes, which correspond to the theoretical frameworks that form the basis of the study.

The following illustrates a sample of open codes from the theme “Engagement/Disengagement”. Each colour represents the interview to which the open codes correspond to.

Theme	Category	Subcategory	Open Code
ENGAGEMENT/ DISENGAGEMENT	Civic circuit	Knowledge	the need of education to increase critical thinking; the youth rarely consume news today; varying access to information; the need for education and critical thinking; the educated guiding the uneducated; the need for critical awareness; necessary to read & learn to broaden knowledge; the need for promoting political literacy; the educated to support the uneducated; acquires knowledge from second-hand information; the means are available, but knowledge missing; profession demands for knowledge on current affairs; knowledge gap; comprehension level is unequal; critical thinking needed; improve basic media literacy; critical awareness must be increased
		Values	focus on news that connect with identity; follows "neutral" media sources; not a fan of limiting any form of humour; freedom to be ridiculed and respond to the ridicule; believes shedding light on facts is crucial; responsibility of the youth to "fix" politics; unfollows people sharing provocative news; only wants to view insightful discussions; prefers news with more analysis; disagrees with SetNov's reaction to his memes; laughter needs to be spread; the act of laughing or criticising is human nature & should be protected; seeks out credible sources; reads more objective news portals; avoids unreliable news sources; news preference based on credibility of sources; places value in conversations & interactions; require time to verify news authenticity; free speech should be protected by state; dislikes baseless/unconstructive arguments; freedom to criticise govt must be protected

		Trust	<p>less Indonesian, more American news; lack of quality online local news; local online news not trustworthy; political view echo chamber; fear of “infocalypse” and data distortion; many inaccurate news due to timeliness; misleading news sources with clickbait headlines; biased broadcast media channels; media lacking transparency; finds several memes blatantly rude; memes too shallow for news; far-right vs far-left wing have different memes; counter political memes don't appear on news feed; enchanted generation no longer believes in mainstream media; many clickbait news headlines; memes spread all sorts of facts; SetNov memes lead to questioning of truths; news are easily twisted, which affect memes; widespread misleading news in the online media; biased news are prevalent; biases found in memes; a lot of fake news being spread; disappointed at news quality nowadays; news value decreasing; less journalistic investigation in the news; sympathetic towards current ruling incumbent</p>
		Space	<p>sees updates from strongly-opinionated friends; sees memes organically from friends; lack of constructive discussions due to limited worldviews; being in own universe bubble; unconsciously/not deliberately follow news; comment section as the battlefield; political patterns are evident across comedy pages; identity being challenged & defended; gear public opinions; shares funny memes to friends; creating conversations vs conflicts; follows memes for the comments section; people "roasting" each other at the comments section; comments may serve to moderate the media content; people have "less chill" because stuck in own media bubble; conversations that take place aren't authentic; only interacts with fellow proponents of the incumbent; learns news from closest peers; civil society still robust; questions the authenticity of comments/reactions; bots vs real commentators; "meme wars"; heavy role of the youth in promoting memes; the youth as engine for virality; reaction & responses are better than the memes; engaged in arguments on the comments section; people comment with various intentions; truths exposed through reaction to memes; filters news based on political preference; many nuances in the comment section</p>
		Practices	<p>reads news shared by FB friends & IG; doesn't read newspapers; limited news consumption; lack of news exposure; only clicks interesting headlines; engaged in online feminist activism; avoids comments section; shares content by duplicating & exporting media; only follows news that are interesting; generally leaves a react/like button; leaves comments to fuel the online</p>

			<p>debate; clarifies/sheds light into facts vs hoax; avoids sharing political views on social media; avoids commenting; filters timeline from politics; skips/scrolls through memes; prefers to avoid conflict at any cost; discusses about events illustrated in the memes; follows major news event through closest peers; many close peers interested in politics; avoids sharing political stance on social media; shares memes through other online platforms; only focuses on Indonesian political news; attempts to set the record straight among peers; tries to cool down heated debates; avoids being too vocal on public spaces; retweet with sarcastic commentary; shares media content to point out absurdity; attempts to challenge own political views; doesn't follow current affairs closely; only reads interesting news; consumes more Singaporean news than Indonesian; picks up political memes from second-hand sources; wouldn't fact check; very attuned to the media dynamics; preference for viewing political talk shows; mostly pay attention to viral news events; only shares & likes media content; shares memes that make the audience reflect; promote memes that encourage religious & ethnic harmony; intentionally doesn't share partisan memes; avoids spreading misinterpretation; only shares positive meme contents; hate speech laws lead to caution; deliberately unfollows friends with differing views; tagging friends on memes to share joy & frustration; avoids sharing media content publicly; engaged in local news more than foreign ones; also reads news on the move; avoids sharing political memes; not particularly engaged in current affairs; reads news that appear on timeline & notification; unfollows "toxic" media content/friends; avoids political conversations & conflict</p>
		Identity	<p>admits to being biased; self-identified liberal; feminist; self-attachment to identities and values when conversing; in strong support of the incumbent; swing voter; taking a post-modernist view/approach; the meme generation; the youth as agents of change & future of democracy; strong sense of nationalism; has lived majority of life overseas; seeing own country from the outside in totality; physical distance allows for better critical awareness; gives a consultant's point of view; the youth as key players in society; identity is at stake; entertained by news that don't inflict own identity; prefers blunt humour; fanatic supporter of the ruling incumbent; political views/opinion becomes affected by memes</p>
	Emotions/ Affect	Productive	<p>focus on news that connect with identity; feels entertained by memes; admire & fear comedy</p>

			<p>simultaneously; questions the virality of certain events; personally enjoys memes; online practices not affected by media regulation; takes more interest in recent political events; entertained by Jakarta election memes; apathetic about current events until living abroad; finds comments section entertaining; begins to care about politics after incumbent came to power; enjoys any partisan meme as long as humorous; interested in politics, economic & religion; takes memes with a pinch of salt; rise of qualified political leaders gives hope; feeling entertained by memes; enjoys reading news, especially with upcoming elections; desire for the nation to progress; follows memes for entertainment; depressing news hence seeks out entertainment; laughing at current political events; best way to cope is through laughter; reads depressing news amusingly; takes memes lightly; sees memes to be entertained; concerned about criticism towards the current incumbent</p>
		Unproductive	<p>not particularly engaged in news; hesitant to share personal reflection; low-key fear of getting caught and jailed; hard to find legit discussions; admire & fear comedy simultaneously; feeling excluded & powerless as object of ridicule; easier to sit back & do nothing; unaffected by content; politically-apatetic while abroad; enjoys entertaining memes over political ones; not amused by political memes regardless of subject; political memes can be offensive; indifference towards memes; political news not a matter of primary concern; only for "shit & giggles"; purely for entertainment value; to comment is pointless; reading timeline can be mentally-destructive; fears the risk of arrest; feels indifferent, losing hope; memes often too dumb to be shared; not interested to showcase political views; indifference towards netizens' reaction; cause hatred towards political opposition; annoyed when incumbent is criticised</p>

Appendix E: Translated Quotes

[1]

“Gue rasa, meme politik baru liat dari 2014 keliatannya, dari pas pilpres kan. Sebelumnya, ngga begitu banyak kan meme politik di Indonesia? Sejak Jokowi naik, banyak orang-orang yang seumuran gue pada mulai peduli politik. Dulu sebelum Jokowi, gue ngga gitu bother soal politik Indonesia lah. Karena itu gue mulai tertarik, mulai baca-baca. Dan dulu mainan kita meme. Jadi kita campurin meme sama politik.”

Eko, 25 (page 31)

[2]

“Gue terhibur sih, personally. Dan lucu aja gitu, liat-liat orang Indonesia bikin becandaan soal politik. Kadang it's pretty good, kayak receh atau lame, in a particular Indonesian way. In a way, bisa jadi bonding mechanism.”

Dian, 25 (page 32)

[3]

“Meme yang gue suka, karakteristiknya pertama, menurut gue sarkastik. Ngga selalu directly ngomong, ini itu. Sama savage sih, menurut gue.”

Eko, 25 (page 33)

[4]

“Kalaupun gue notice meme, gue ngga tau apakah itu “organically-created” atau diinsight sama tim suksesnya kandidat mana. That's very possible, I think.”

Dian, 25 (page 34)

[5]

“Nah, kadang dari meme-meme itu kan, gue lihat ada berita apa, terus gue penasaran, berita aslinya itu apa, terus gue cari lah.”

Eko, 24 (page 37)

[6]

“Meme buat gue ngga untuk diskusi, itu lebih kayak mengantar orang buat mendiskusikan hal lain. Misalnya kayak pake foto si Jokowi lagi ketawa, tapi kayak ketawa bego; narasi yang bisa dibawa adalah, kita punya presiden yang ngga berwibawa.”

Guntur, 24 (page 39)

[7]

“Kalau pengamatanku pribadi sih, untuk sekarang meme-meme yang bersifat politik itu lebih mengarah ke satu pihak tertentu [...] apalagi semenjak Pilkada DKI yang kemarin. Semenjak itu, udah keliatan banget—pada awalnya kan emang, kalau liat meme politik yang jamannya Jokowi mau jadi presiden, udah ada meme partisan, tapi yang cenderung untuk saling melemahkan satu pihak kan. Tapi ngga yang begitu terang-terangan. Kalau sekarang, lebih kayak perang.”

Bima, 26 (page 40)

[8]

“Meme itu menarik karena [...] dia juga harus kreatif gitu, karena dia harus menarik perhatian. Jadi makanya aku liat meme itu sering lebih asik daripada baca berita, kayak untuk update. Kalau berita konvensional itu harus diliat satu-satu dan ngerasa “Oh, berat, politik”.”

Darma, 32 (page 41)

[9]

“Buat gue, sebatas untuk menghibur sih. Karena yang buat meme pun, ngambil faktanya toh bersumbernya dari media online, yang di mana itu sendiri ngga terlalu dalam sebenarnya.”

Krisna, 24 (page 42)

[10]

“Karena kita ngomongin meme yang politik, jelas itu akan mempengaruhi opiniku. Walaupun itu diliat dari lucunya, tapi mau ngga mau, akan mempengaruhiku. Karena aku ngikutin yang sepaham sama aku, jadi, kalau mereka dikritisi sama lawan, itu ikut membentuk opiniku untuk membenci dia.”

Darma, 32 (page 44)

[11]

“Dengan lo mensatirin satu tokoh politikus itu, somehow lo nunjukin itu lo berpihak sama siapa. Meme itu salah satu cara untuk nunjukin identitas lo; nunjukin preference politik lo ke orang-orang, so-called, implicitly.”

Krisna, 24 (page 45)

[12]

“Dari meme sama sosmed, gue jadi belajar lebih banyak tentang demokrasi Indonesia dan apa yang terjadi sebenarnya. I think kenapa banyak orang jadi ngga santai belakangan ini, karena, mereka cuma ngeliat satu sisi. Jadi kalau orang bilang... kayak media bubble. Mereka cuma liat, apa yang mereka mau liat. I think that's what I'm always trying to do – follow from both sides, then try to understand more about it.”

Guntur, 24 (page 46)

Appendix F: Transcript Sample

March 16, 2017

“Surya”, 28 years old, Male, Indonesian, Strategic Communications Consultant

What are your news habits, and where do you get your sources from?

I think it's primarily online, social media definitely play a key role, because Facebook has practically taken over the role of the media, as the prime aggregator of news sources, because that's the thing that you check the most. I don't post anything on my Facebook anymore, but I use it as a source of information, because I know that my friends would have shared articles from various sources. I follow various news myself, like BBC Indonesia, CNN Indonesia, Kompas, Jakarta Globe, whatever else that might have social media outlets. In both English and Indonesian. My preference is based on the credibility of the news source, how established it is and the brand of news I'm more familiar with. So I've always gravitated more towards Kompas, Tempo, the ones that are known to be reliable, established sources.

What are your thoughts on the use of memes for politics?

Coming from a consultancy point of view, I think memes are an inevitable evolution of the way we communicate. I don't know if it's a positive or negative development, but it's inevitable. That's how the current generation, the future generation, are going to be communicating. Because digitisation prefers simplification, simplicity in communication in the way things are expressed, and to some extent it's a bit funny, because it's almost like we're going full circle. From cave paintings in the wall, simple images of cavemen denoting complex scenes of hunting and gathering, to lots of words and language being used, now we are sort of coming back to the point where it's just, oh, two pictures and four words, saying everything.

And I consume it, I find it entertaining, but the thing is I do worry about whether memes are enough to capture nuances. When you combine these things, like the lack of understanding of history, the collective amnesia, then the future trends of digitisation, movement towards simplification and the memetic communications having such simplified elements—you kind of worry that a lot of nuances are getting lost in the process. And people are not going to be able to tell, the history of 350 years of Dutch colonialism in memes. And that is a challenge. It's a challenge, but it's how I tend to see things. If it's a challenge, then it is also an opportunity, and there is where media practitioner, content creators, of our generation, need to step in. And play a part in shaping the view that is going to come out.

One of the things I follow is this Facebook page called *Kostum (Komik Strip Untuk Umum)*, that actually does a lot of proactive political education about anti-corruption drive, religious extremism, the bizarreness of religious extremism, and yet through comics and simple, shareable visuals, and it goes viral on social media and share it. And I actually find it to be quite an interesting way to educate people; using the meme medium to communicate powerfully with the new generation of media consumers and audiences. Eventually it could be that the formula that we end up settling with, it's one where the memes spark the conversations into a discussion. But the conversation actually gets guided along the way through various other memes. And I do feel that there is still a lot of value in traditional media, in in-person media, conversations and interactions, communities, panel discussions, getting people together in a room to speak to each other and to meet and talk. There's a lot of value with what Najwa is doing with *Mata Najwa*. And now that she has evolved her platform, to also go live on Facebook and all that,

that's amazing. To me, that's true media impresario. Trying to educate the country, through all these various means, and bringing smackable online content, with all sorts of things.

Which is why I only see opportunities. There's this diversity of ideas to tap on. And somebody is bound to come up with something to enrich the discussion and the discourse. And I keep seeing that happen, every time there is a negative, radical meme coming up, I see a counterforce, coming up as well. Either to enrich the discussion, broaden people's perspective, bringing different points of view and information. And that shows a fluid discourse happening, it's not a one-sided conversation. People are actually having this conversation. Just like how when the whole Ahok thing happened, it was not a one-sided conversation. As long as people are able to voice their point of view. But I mean, I also recognise that there are all kinds of voices out there, shouting people to shut up, to tone down, and don't do that, or simplistic points of view, the black and white – those are the gaps, the challenges that need to be plucked, but I tend to be optimistic.

Your take on the Setya Novanto case?

I became aware of it because it was such a trend. I mean, everyone was talking about it, it was hilarious, and to me, it became an example of how people in power in Indonesia, will not get away with just doing things the way they wanted. And that people will call them out for it. Because somebody, among the hundreds of millions of people in Indonesia, will speak up. Will say something about it, and it's going to happen. And obviously, again, there are going to be a camp supporting him. But, that debate is gonna be out in the open. And people are going to have the opportunity to air their perspective and point of view of that. Which is why, I thought it was an example of why Indonesia as a nation won't just bow down to power. And I think we as a nation has gone quite some way, from where we were, during the Soeharto era, when we were afraid to speak to power. So of course, the opposite of it is the vigilantism of it, where people start judging others or start attacking individuals.

I just think of it as, there's always this opposing forces at play, and in Indonesia they are allowed to play out in full. Both of the supporting and the opposing camps would just have the say and day and avenues to do it. And again, that forms the basis of support, hopefully, for the institutions in power, the police force, the judicial forces, to really play their part and to do... and I think that is the missing element actually in our democratic system. The civil society, the people through the facility of social media, through the vibrancy of our press system. I have to say, having the privilege to be able to compare the different press systems in Southeast Asia, I think Indonesia still has the most independent press environment. I think that is the missing puzzle... the judicial institution, our legislative institution, they are probably the weakest link in our entire system. Because we have a vibrant civil society, we have a very strong robust media environment. Of course there is the encroaching threat of the TV stations being owned by conglomerates and all that. But by large, these TV stations don't get away with saying whatever. Because people are actually quite conscious about who own that. Indonesians are aware that there are these dynamics at play, but not everyone of course.

But the executive branch, the judicial branch and legislative branch—the executive branch, when it is in the right hands, it's mended by the right people, when you have people like Sri Mulyani and the best brains the country has to offer, best talent, but our judicial system... I've always had the highest respect for the American supreme court judges, and even some of the Singaporean supreme court justices because they have to apply the most rigorous common laws, system-oriented thinking, which Indonesia is entirely excluded from. You never know who is

pulling the strings behind the scenes and we don't have enough of an oversight there, our legislative branch is totally broken.

What about memes that emerged during *Pilkada DKI*?

Definitely, there were a whole lot coming out, very partisan memes, then people would subscribe to things they naturally gravitate to. The political views they're comfortable with. They don't necessarily see things from both directions. Because you would naturally follow the communities and the social media pages that support your candidates in that sense. And I think that's natural. But what was also good was that, apart from the memes, while the memes did play a part in shaping all these views, and spreading all sorts of facts—whether verified or not—there was also an opportunity for their candidates to speak for themselves in the traditional media platform during the debates, multiple rounds of debates with avenues for them to do that.

The ultimate effect was that Ahok lost the election. I think it's very difficult to attribute that solely to one thing or another—whether it's the memes, the media, the channels—I think it's a complex mixture of different influences and different aspects at play. I think the memes, throughout the various elements of the debate that need to be checked... so again, the missing part in the ecosystem, is the role of an ombudsman, fact-checker, that is not in place yet. And the level of education of the people has not quite reached that level yet, where they are not necessarily engaging with facts, they're responding more readily to stimuli and provocative things, but not necessarily to facts and questioning, asking questions if this is really true, if this is verified, who came up with the memes, who were the sources, where was this from... I think that culture is not fully established yet.

What was your initial reaction when the memes went viral?

I think most people would digest it as an entertaining media content. But of course I take it with a whole lot of salt, so it might be true but it's probably like 60% of the truth. And that's where I leave it. I guess most people would also consume it the same way. And that's the challenge with memes: they could provoke and initiate the discussion, but there still needs to be a follow up mediation, whether it's true... all these other various platforms. So all aspects of civil society still need to take part, either verifying, contributing, adding to the discussion, challenging, questioning the assumptions, and all these things. I think all those things are still needed in that environment.

How do you see these conversations taking place?

I think [offline] needs to happen more, there is only so much you can do through a keyboard and there's got to be more avenue for people to actually talk, discuss these things in person. And people cannot be afraid to that. That's why after the yellow card incident, I was really happy that *Najwa* invited people face-to-face to talk about it. Otherwise people will just be speculating about why this guy came out of the blue. But the fact that people were able to come together in a forum that allowed the conversation to happen... I think it is critical and still necessary. And maybe it is not happening enough.

There is this sense of anonymity that comes with it, there's this sense of virtualisation, whatever you are saying goes to this mass of aggregation and you can say whatever you want and it doesn't matter. You can be as passionate as you want to become, project whatever sort of identity you want... nearly, without consequences. So that virtualisation of communication and how people interact has always been my research over the years. I've always wanted to more deeply into analogue communications, what is the effect of print media, people's formation of knowledge and understanding... and how they construct knowledge. Cause just learning things

from our own experience... we are so exposed to social media and things just come to our head and they just come out of it, our attention span has become worse, and we no longer want to sit down with a book.

But that's such a vital piece of information as well because memes, are obviously just one symptom of this whole new paradigm of communication, which is virtualised, digital, anonymous, practical, easy, superficial, it doesn't require much contemplation. In fact, it discourages contemplation. It encourages instinctive response, reactivity, it's placed in a mode of our platform where your reactions are limited to 6 laugh, love, or wow, sad face or angry face and that's how it is coded. Where people could have expressed themselves in multiple ways... this is changing the human brain in like fundamental ways. That's a whole other question to understanding how the collective mental state of the democratic nation is going to be. Of course, the universal larger question here is how are all our human brains evolving, because of digital communication and how simplified it has become. It also correlates with the way that democratic citizens are forming their identity and how they relate to their fellow countrymen and their political participation. And that's going to be very interesting to find out... what are the practices that would promote more meaning-making.

I'd like to think that we need to allow all the other elements of civil society, all the other means of communication to also play that part. That they should not be reduced to a digital-only society that communicates only in this manner. But books and paper, face-to-face conversations still have their role to play to complement the discourse and ensure it's a wholly formed discussion. And that is a challenge and it's not guaranteed that it is going to happen... but that is the task for the next generation.

What is your general opinion on the nation's current state of democracy?

I always held the opinion that regardless of the things that are happening, there is so much potential in Indonesia that is going forward. My own observation, especially having followed American politics, having followed political developments around the region as well, knowing what Singapore politics is like as well and having an opinion of them, I do feel that Indonesia is progressing on the right path, that there are all these opportunities that open up for the right principles of governance to emerge, in different respects.

I guess, let me start with the good things. The signals that I say are going well with the country. Things like, Risma in Surabaya, who has resisted any political overturns from PDIP or whatever. She has chosen to stick with Surabaya, and even stay out of the East Java governorship. And she's been accomplishing and slaying like nobody's business. She's implementing all these smart urban initiatives. The provincial governance and the leaders, the mayors of the different cities, have come up with their own initiatives, desires and agenda to improve things and to get things right. Without necessarily having a political background. So, these are some people who emerge out of the grassroots, they were professionals, technocrats, who are just contributing with their point of view, and this is a whole new breed of leaders that Indonesia has not had so far.

People like Risma are a shining example of what true Indonesian politics could evolve to become. And she is not constrained by certain restrictions, she's operating at an environment where her work speaks for itself, people therefore recognise her work and keep voting for her to stay in office. And I think that is when democracy in Indonesia is at its best. And she's using political communication to great effect as well. Like her social media, *Bangga Surabaya*, ... so leaders like her are reasons to be hopeful about Indonesia.

But at the same time, I think the most worrying signs are things like the rising religious extremism, so the opposite example that I would cite is one day when I was scrolling through my Facebook, I came across this super passionate post about... I can't even remember the content, but I remember being so affected by the post because it has such an antagonistic tone, against Jokowi. But specifically because it was painting Jokowi as this pro-Chinese, or pro-whatever, and anti-muslim agent. Which is so outlandish of her, because there's nothing that he's done to suggest that he's anti-Islam in any way. This person was from West Java, so passionate, and it's a lady too, in a hijab. And I went to her profile, and there were many other posts about "*kaum muslimin*", and I look at her life, her family, who seem so innocuous, innocent, and I'm like, how is she so different from me? And what is it, that happened to her life, that could have led to this militant point of view? I just couldn't understand it.

But that gave me this insight into this sort of democracy that we are becoming. I mean, it's obviously chaotic, people are able to contribute their voices. A lot of people are taking part in this democracy with no basis or context of history, with no understanding of where we come from. And there's this labelling of collective amnesia, because of that period of history that was effectively erased from our collective consciousness. And we are all growing up as Indonesians during a period of economic vibrancy, a lot of things happening, a lot of growth coming up, and I think Indonesia, on the whole, is doing economically fine. It's not perfect, but at least there are opportunities, and people at the very least own mobile phones, smartphones, we can spend money on data and Facebook and contribute to all these posts. And upload videos on YouTube, and condemning things. Because people have the means to do so. So the means is there, but the knowledge and the understanding to contribute with substance and meaning, that is the missing element. The education and the understanding of the nation cannot keep up with the economic progress that the country is making. And that is creating this social tension, that could eventually become a problem for the democracy.

So I see, in very early stages of maturity, it is starting to become more mature, a lot of voices are being surfaced, but it has yet to find that position where people are actually coming with informed opinions into a forum, where they can meaningfully contribute. And being able to contrast that with American politics, you kind of see that, even a hundred plus years of democracy has not made people any wiser. People can still elect someone like Donald Trump, and in fact they are now seeing the resurgence of Neo-Nazis, ultra-liberal right-wing white nationals point of view. Which is why you need to moderate your point of view, and which is why, ultimately, despite everything, I still think that Indonesia is on a hopeful trajectory. There is reason to be optimistic about the growth of democracy in the country, reason to be optimistic about opportunities to improve, pluck the gaps. The way I see it is that, in a nation of hundreds of millions of people, I do think that at the very least, there is an equal number of people who are pro-diversity and pro-progressive ideals vs people who are not. And that alone, is a reason to be hopeful about steering the direction of democracy, where enough education and knowledge, that we over time we can grow and mature in the right direction.

Your take on UUD MD3, UU ITE or other media regulations?

Again, I think all those discourses, the very fact that they are out in the open, people are talking about it, people are demonstrating, organising things, for and against those regulations and laws. Whether it is all those things, like the criminalisation of adultery... the fact that people are in both camps, vibrantly heard everywhere, having platforms and avenues to channel their voices, I think it's still a very encouraging sign. The fact that in Indonesia there is still a vigorous debate,

and people are still on both camps still passionately engaged in the debate, I think that's still an encouraging sign that there is room for that discussion to move forward.

It is scary because our legal, our law-making process is far from perfect. It is still so much driven by the hands of the few, people in power. Like as much as there are people, civil society contributing and having the voices, it doesn't necessarily translate into an immediate influence to the lawmakers actually signing and voting for those very laws being discussed. A lot of these things are very much reliant on the people of power, who is the President, speaker of parliament, who is holding court in that period of time. So the scary thing about it is that, if at any time Indonesia were to fall into the regressive camp, and a lot of these things could very easily be reversed, or a lot of things could go wrong, and there is nothing in place to make sure that there's that triangulation of power in place. Which is why the upcoming election is critical. But I do think that in terms of the robustness of the civil society in Indonesia, it is still, I guess, as far as I am aware of, is still growing very strongly. It's just a matter of the educational gaps. And that concern about whether people are contributing to the discourse in a meaningful and informed manner.

What is your perception of the role of the youth in these discourses?

I think it is very hard to say definitively whether... I tend to celebrate the few whom I engage and involve in the discussion in the group. But I also think that there are many of our younger generation of Indonesians who probably switch off. Cause they grow up in a relative economic stability, they have what they need, they have the means to do what they need to do, to just be comfortable within their own surroundings and contexts. And therefore there is no real impetus for them to go beyond that. And I think political activism and awareness usually are driven by a threat to where you are and stand. That may be the scary part.

There is a whole generation of people, especially with the rise of the middle class in Indonesia, who are defined more by their economics, rather than their sense of social awareness, their connectedness to the body politics as a whole. So I'm not so sure, I probably interact with people who are more aware, politically conscious and more interested. But again, that goes back to this whole point, which I have considered to be a mission that needs to be accomplished. This whole idea of education, how do we make sure that people don't forget, that the independence we fought so hard for, needs to be preserved through collective awareness, search and reckoning with where we came from, with where our nation should go, and why we shouldn't ever forget that the progress we have reached is so far. It wasn't just there overnight. It wasn't something that came out of nowhere, there is a lot of conscious organising.

This is the other thing about Indonesia that I believe. It's such a unique country, because it is probably the only country in the world that was diverse by default. The US has always been super proud and the American exceptionalism has always been founded on this idea that they are extremely diverse. But that is because they started as a land of a few native tribes that were then colonised by people from all over Europe, then they became a nation of immigrants. And for many countries in the world, that is often the case. Indonesia as a nation, agreed to become a nation. From a loose collection of Dutch colonies or even little kingdoms and cultures and tribes, that had their own identities, ancient customs and ways of working and doing things... but they, somehow, by force of nature, whatever it is, magically agreed to become a nation. On a language, identity. And that was driven by the youth of that era. And it's a really unique nation. It requires that constant effort, reminder, that we are not here just like that.

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