

# **PERCEPTION OF PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGNS IN THE MEDIA:**

## **A Case Study Among Several High School Students in Bandung**

### **Introduction**

Media, either print or non-print, have become an inseparable part of people's lives today. People depend on the media to know what is going on in our world: from the price of staple food to the latest fashion; from the latest invention in technology to a political change in some parts of the world.

Despite the benefits of media as information agents, without our realizing it, often the media can change and shape people's view to some extent. 'Media' are no longer just medium of information; rather, they have been loaded heavily with their subjective ideology. "Seeing is *not* believing" since every media presentation has been assembled and edited to its purpose. From war coverage in Iraq to advertising fairer skin as a sign of beauty, media try to influence readers and viewers with their point of view.

Vigil (2001) sums up that not only all media are constructions and owned, but also more important, they construct our culture with their ideological and value messages. Media products –advertisement, movie, and news- are carefully constructed to persuade viewers so that instead of thinking critically, the viewers attach themselves emotionally. As media are owned by a handful conglomerates, we cannot be sure as to what purpose they carry: financial or political affiliates. Finally, the bombardment of these constructed and value-added messages cultivate a 'reality' we think is true.

How media can influence people emotionally can be seen in the attitude of young people all over the world, including Indonesia, nowadays. Take Valentine Day's celebration for example. Mass media, such as teen magazines, newspaper, radio, persuade the youngsters to buy and try the valentine's day attributes: spending the day romantically, special offers for chocolate and flowers, or romantic movies to watch. It seems that the young people are ready to believe and swallow every media presentation they receive without bother to ask why should they follow the advice the media given to them. It is proven by the fact that during the day, many restaurants are fully booked for romantic dinner and flower are in great demand.

According to a survey in the U.S.A, the youth see 350,000 advertisements by the time they reach age 18 and watch about 28 hours of television per week according to a (Vigil, 2001). Although there aren't any data available in Indonesia, the trend of youth's consumption of media presentation appears to be similar. These figures show how youngsters are very familiar with media, especially the electronic ones. In spite of the easy and quick access to the latest information which benefits the youngsters, it raises a

question on how the young people perceive the media: do they just swallow what they see and read in the media?

Bearing this in mind, the general question underlying this study is to explore how high school students perceive media presentation. As the nature of qualitative research requires it, the study should start from the phenomenon observed in the field. The object of this study is advertising, more specifically, presidential campaign. The reason behind this was that the subjects of my study were attracted to the issue of presidential election by the time I started this study in 2004. In addition, as one of the purposes of the study is to benefit EFL learning studies, the subjects also read the American presidential campaign, which took place in the same year.

Therefore, this study attempts to answer the general question: How do high school students perceive presidential campaigns, which are taken from Bahasa Indonesia and original English texts. This question is guided by the following questions:

1. What are students' opinions on Indonesian presidential campaigns and American presidential campaigns?
2. Based on Media Literacy questions, do the students' analyses reflect component of critical thinking and media literacy awareness? If so, what are they?
3. What strategies do students who are more critical use to understand a text? Do they apply the same strategy to understand bahasa Indonesia and English text?

## **Theoretical Framework**

Advertising does not always refer to a product or service, more importantly, it refers to a change of behavior. Cook (2001:178) asserts that advertisement manipulate a "dialogic structure of discourse...they assume shared opinions which are not shared. [O]ften this shared information seems so obvious to participants that they are not even aware of the assumptions they are making". Advertisement is shown repeatedly so that viewer gradually accepts its assumptions as true.

Compare to product ads, political campaigns are relatively new. However, the campaign through advertising on television and other mass media seemed to strengthen the belief that it can change people's behavior. These advertisements try to make people vote for the figure they advertised.

In making sense of what advertiser means by sending the message, linguistics approaches advertising from different perspectives. Sells and Gonzalez (2002) state that there are three basic analysis concepts in understanding advertising: concept of signs, presupposition, and relevance. In other words, it deals with semiotics and pragmatics approaches.

Pragmatics concerns with the study of why and how an utterance is intended by the speaker (or writer) and inferred by the hearer (or reader). Grice (in Grundy, 2000) argues that a successful communication takes place when interlocutors are cooperatives so that each gives information as she/he intended to mean. However, in reality, factors such as context, social distance, power, degree of politeness, may hinder a successful communication. Relevance theory proposed by Sperber and Wilson (1987, as cited in Grundy, 2000) claims that hearer/reader sets assumptions, which may derive from

cognitive environment and background knowledge, before interpreting what a speaker/a writer means. The greater the contextual effects, the greater the relevance of the message to the hearer/reader.

Another theory that attends the reader/hearer's interpretative perspective is schema theory. Readers recall their experiences to interpret the text they read. An American philosopher, Charles S. Peirce was the main figure of this theory. Peirce (cited in Langrehr, 2002) believes that logical inferences made by readers could not be limited to word-based theory (i.e. semantics, or linguistics) because logical inferences involved verbal and non-verbal signs as well as the prior sociocultural experiences of the reader.

Furthermore, Chandler (1997) states that in relation to television, there are several kinds of schemas, which are commonly divided into either *knowledge of the world* (social schemas concerning events, places and people) or *knowledge of the medium* (textual schemas including 'formal features' of television such as *cuts*). Chandler also puts forward ideological schemas. Ideological schemas involve inferences about ideological assumptions implicit in media texts. Viewers assess whether or not the texts in the media reflect their own.

It is clear then by now, that there is an active part of the hearer or reader of a text. The hearer/the reader interpret a text/a speech based on their prior knowledge on cognitive and social schemas and make assumptions about that text/speech. A critical reader/hearer does not just involve cognitive activities (e.g. logical reasoning) but also recognizing the assumptions underlying his/her beliefs and behaviour.

In understanding a text comprehensively, readers are also influenced by his analytical and logical reasonings. The degree of these reasonings is determined by the readers' linguistics and knowledge (see Hamied, 1995). Even though Hamied's study on analytical ability does not reveal significant difference between subjects' background and analytical ability, it shows that subjects whose background is science tend to have better analysis. It seems that students who are accustomed to think analytically contribute to his success in comprehending texts.

Dealing with media in general, and advertising, in particular, requires critical viewing as well as critical reading. As the concern of the truth, balance and fair coverage in media grew in late 1970s in England and Canada, media literacy has been acknowledged to help media targets –the audiences, to identify, analyze, evaluate and communicate messages so that they can be the active party in information outburst. It is actually part of critical thinking ability, in which the skill equips learners with the ability to react critically to any media presentation.

*Media Awareness*, a non-profit organization encourages teachers to conduct research on how media influence their students. Critical students should be able to answer these key questions:

- What is the message?
- Who is sending the message?
- Why is it being sent?
- How is the message being sent?
- Who is the intended audience?
- Who benefits from the message?
- Who or what is left out of the message?
- Can I respond to the message?

- Does my opinion matter?
- Do I need the information?

Many studies are concerned about how audience perceives media presentation. One of them is Chang's study (2001) on viewers' perception on advertisement. Using Relevance Theory, he reveals that there is an active communication between what is shown on the screen and the audience. He states that "the audience searches for optimal relevance in the interpretation process, during which a wide array of weak implicatures, based on her greater share of responsibility, could be inferred and derived from those 'scenes' together with the context, depending on the different degrees of involvement and shared cognitive environment."

A study by Langrehr on students' critical comprehension of television advertisement shows that youthful viewers can recognize the construct, purposes, and prevalent values of the television medium. Nevertheless, the study indicates that they may not be capable of detecting and appraising the extensive, subsurface implication in television advertising.

These studies intrigued me to find out what actually high school students, the subjects of the present study, perceive the mediated presidential campaign. Just like Langrehr, I do not propose to determine specific levels of inferencing proficiency; instead, it is to describe what the subjects can achieve.

## **Research Methodology**

This study was a case study attempting to understand the subjects' perception on a certain issue, i.e. presidential campaign. The design of the study was qualitative since qualitative approach provides an insight into what is happening and why it happens. It was concerned more with process rather than with the outcome (Merriam (1998:21, as cited in Darwis, 2004:27).

The subjects of the study were twelve students from four different high schools in Bandung. All of them were in their senior year or third grade. Each school was asked to lend three of their students whom it thought to have high performance academically or non-academically. The subjects turned out to be to above average students in their own school. Two of them were first rank in their school respectively, one from science major, one from social major. The rest is between first to third rank in their own class.

However, finally, only seven students became the major respondents for further analysis. The reasons behind this decision due to manageability and potential of the subjects to produce qualified data.

The profil of the subjects show that all of them engage in media about one to three hours a day by reading newspaper and watching television. However, only one respondent engaged in English media regularly, since she attended an English course. In dealing with media, it is found out that these subjects usually have discussions about what they read and watch from the media with their family or friends.

The decision to take presidential campaigns was made based on the findings of their interest at the time of this study. Although most of them are more interested in music in sport with different taste, the issue of presidential campaign made it something in common of their interest. Naturally, I took this as a starting point of the study.

Since the subjects came from different high schools, there was not one specific place for undertaking response and interview. Instead, the researcher met the subjects at their most convenient time. Sometimes, the response and interview sessions were held at their respective school during break time or after school. Sometimes, they were held at their homes.

The subjects were allowed as much time as possible when they responded the texts. When they were given a text, the response was usually taken shortly after that. However, a few times some subjects were allowed to take the text home due to their hectic schedule. In this case, building rapport was necessary to make sure that they did the response by themselves.

The object of this study is media presentation of presidential campaigns that the subjects engaged in. Since they read *Pikiran Rakyat*, *Kompas*, and watch television, all the materials were taken from those media. The campaigns shown on television were videotaped to ensure their authenticity and validity. However, the English materials for American campaigns were collected from the internet.

The first text, entitled "Megawati Dalam Diam Ia Bekerja Untuk Bangsa Ini", was chosen by eleven subjects. The second text, "Indonesia Sukses: Sayembara Tabungan Pendidikan" was selected based on the answer from the survey. At that time, the case was a hot issue, and many of the subjects mentioned it in the survey. I thought it was a good opportunity to find out the subjects' reaction toward it.

The non-print campaigns were taken from television. Subjects were asked to response it while they were watching television. Then they were interviewed shortly after that or on the following day. However, some others could have the session together at school.

While the Indonesian presidential campaigns responses were carried out as natural as possible, the American presidential campaigns were rather different. Although the subjects were not familiar with it, it served the purpose of seeking the subjects ability to identify and understand context.

The texts from American presidential campaigns were available in the internet. All major subjects chose John Kerry's campaign "Stronger American Families". It was Kerry's program to build America by strengthening family's welfare. For the second campaign, three subjects chose Kerry's campaign "Your Hands", which was Kerry's appeal to American citizens to vote for him, while two others chose another Kerry's campaign "A Safe and Secure Homeland". Another subject chose "Mother", a *MoveOn PAC* campaign, while the other chose "Ashley Story", a campaign from *Progress for America Voter Fund*. The last two campaigns were from grass-root groups, which are either for or against a certain candidate: *MoveOn PAC* is known as anti-Bush, while *Progress for America Voter Fund* is the other way around.

All the transcripts of the texts are available in Appendix A and B.

The instruments of the study were response form, field notes, and interview. Later on, the data findings were analyzed in two ways: by the time the data were gathered, and

after the data collection. In analysing after the data collection, coding and categorizing were carried out, to be followed with interpreting.

## Findings and Discussions

### Findings

There are some findings in the attempt to answer the research question on how high school students perceive media presentation, in this case presidential campaign.

#### 1. The Subjects' Opinions on Presidential Campaigns in the Media

The following table presents the subjects' view on each media campaign. It was based on question "Apa pendapatmu tentang pesan ini?" (What is your opinion about the message?)

**Table 4.1. Students' Opinions on Presidential Campaigns in the Media**

Subject	Case One	Case Two	Case Three	Case Four	Case Five
Dian	Tidak perlu	Menarik	Menarik	Bagus	Bagus
Dita	Tidak menarik	Menarik	Menarik	Bagus	Bagus
Haris	Bagus	Bagus	Bagus	Bagus	Bagus
Dwi	Bermanfaat	Menarik	Bermanfaat	Bermanfaat	Bermanfaat
Kamal	Tidak begitu menarik	Menarik	Bagus	Cukup bagus	Bagus
Tri	Tidak menarik	Tidak menarik	Menarik	Bagus	Bermanfaat
Yanti	Menarik	Bermanfaat	Menarik	Bagus	Mengharukan
Ika	Menarik	-	Menarik		
Andri	Bagus	-	Bermanfaat		
Farah	Biasa saja	Cukup bermanfaat	-		
Reza	Tidak menarik	-	-		
Rahman		Bermanfaat	Bagus		

In case one (*Megawati Dalam Diam Ia Bekerja Untuk Bangsa Ini*; see Appendix A.1), it turned out that five saw the campaign positively, while the rest negatively. Those who viewed it negatively had almost similar comments: 'hanya menceritakan kebaikan Megawati', 'terlalu menggembar-gemborkan...pemerintahan Megawati', 'hanya menonjolkan kelebihan Megawati', 'terlalu dibuat-buat, bisa dilihat dari gaya bahasanya', and 'terlalu mendewikan Megawati'. All seemed to agree that the style was too subjective and hyperbolic. Although they were well aware that advertisement, and campaign in particular, will persuade people to buy a product, they found that it was too exaggerating, focusing only on Megawati's success.

Most respondents had positive views on all the media presentations. Moreover, electronic media presentation seemed to draw respondent's positive views than the printed ones. It should be emphasized here that positive views did not mean the subjects agreed with the content of a campaign. It merely meant that they paid more attention to a certain campaign than to others.

Those who had positive views saw the campaign had the ability to attract audience because it had some attractive elements, such as motion, audio and visual image, and expressions. When it came to the use of expressions, many found them amusing, but not

necessarily believe in it. Only two respondents, Ika and Andri, seemed willing to accept what they read and see as they were.

Exaggerating and imbalance perspective of a candidate would draw more negative view from these subjects, as it is shown in case one. In case one, the candidate was portrayed as a quiet leader who was not appreciated fully despite her success in the nation's development. Examples of her success seemed to backfire the effectiveness of the campaign for some subjects –the subjects were not convinced by them; instead, they became skeptical.

Compared to print media, the electronic media received positive views from all respondents. The respondents found the electronic media presentation more interesting, because it either related to their life as teenagers, its sympathetic approach, or raised question as to its senders.

From those cases presented to them, it could be drawn that for both Indonesian and American campaigns, all respondents placed themselves more as observers, instead only of recipients. Nonetheless, the degree of effective observation differed, as will be discussed further in the following sections.

## **2. The Subjects' Analysis on Presidential Campaigns in the Media**

For each media presentation, the respondents were asked to deconstruct the message of the presentation.

There are at least seven questions to deconstruct media:

1. What is the message about?
2. Who is sending the message?
3. Why is it being sent?
4. How is the message being sent?
5. Who is the intended audience?
6. Who benefits from the message?
7. Who or what is left out of the message?

These questions served as tool of questionnaires to find out their critical thinking and media literacy skills, which will be discussed in section 4.4.

The first case, an advertisement entitled *Megawati, dalam Diam Dia Bekerja untuk Bangsa Ini*, was quite easy to deconstruct. All subjects could answer the questions satisfactorily. The subjects could point out things that the message left out, for example. They said that Megawati's success was exaggerated, meanwhile it didn't attend the issues she failed to achieve, such as poverty or the fuel hike.

The second case, *Indonesia Sukses: Sayembara Tabungan Pendidikan*, got similar result. Even though only one respondent was able to identify it as a campaign in the first glance, the others could do so after second look.

For electronics campaign, the subjects chose any campaign they wanted to talk about. Interestingly, when they were asked question no.7, most of them answered by pointing out the appearance of the candidates. Instead of trying to question themselves, they made comments on how the candidates should look to get more sympathy or didn't think there wasn't anyone or anything left out. Only two major respondents didn't think the campaigns were true enough to convince people. One questioned the credibility of the 'public' in the message of electronic campaign entitled *Bersama Kita Bisa (SBY's campaign-Public opinion version)*. In his opinion, the 'public' was not real; it was paid

by the campaign team. Besides, he thought that the campaign didn't put forward the vision and mission of the candidate, and focused more on persuading that many people from walk of life chose the candidate. The other respondent related the unsolved conflicts unmentioned in the campaign of *Bersama Mempercepat Kebangkitan Bangsa* (Megawati's campaign-public version) as the things left out.

In relation with the English-text campaign of John Kerry and George W. Bush's presidential campaigns, the subjects seemed to be more interested in the clarity of vision and missions the campaigns have. They commented that the clarity of vision and mission is missing issue in the Indonesian presidential campaigns. Nevertheless, all of them could not think of what or who is left out of the message.

## **Discussions**

The discussion part is derived from the findings above.

### **1. The Subjects' Background Knowledge and Inferences**

Based on the findings in previous section, the subjects put themselves more as observers, instead of just receiver. When they engaged in media, in this case mediated campaigns, they related them to what they have had known. As Chandler (2001), Chase and Hynd (1987, as cited in Musthafa, 1994) put it, readers recalled their schemata when responding the media. Similar to Peirce (1991, as cited in Langrehr), readers/viewers derived abductive inferencing to understand a text/message. The abductive inferencing is formed by combining implications provided by the message producer with various schema (including prior knowledge, attitudes, etc.) that may have been socioculturally learned.

Therefore, even though a text implies a meaning, the subjects infer it differently based to their prior knowledge. To different extent, all the subjects have their own preconception when viewing the media presentation. The preconceptions are politics, religion, social awareness and cultural values.

#### Background Knowledge on Politics and Democracy

This background knowledge especially was shown when the subjects responded case one and case two campaigns. In case one (*Megawati Dalam Diam Ia Bekerja Untuk Bangsa Ini*), all subjects seemed to acknowledge that Megawati was thought to be too quiet for a leader, and was suspected as not working hard enough. Therefore, they inferred that this campaign's motive was to show that she quietly worked hard, but not many people appreciated her.

On the other hand, case two derived subjects' inference that it was Megawati's campaign, even though no such name mentioned explicitly in the text. The explanation could be that it was issued by the time of campaign session (as Dwi, Haris, and Tri mentioned it). Moreover, the amount of money for the scholarship was questionable. Dita and Dwi presumed it came from a private institution, which had close relationship with the government;



“Mungkin mereka (IMM and Mega’s campaign team-*ed.*) bekerja sama. Jadi yang itu dipasok dananya dari tim sukses Ibu Mega” –Dian (see Appendix B.1)  
(probably they cooperated. So it (IMM foundation –*ed.*) got its fund from Ms Mega’s campaign team)

Meanwhile, Dian, Dwi, Rahman, and Tri had preconception that promotion using public opinion could strengthen someone’s claim. Nevertheless, it does not mean they would believe the claim.

#### Background Knowledge on Religion

Ika and Kamal’s preconception on Islamic view led them to analyze SBY’s campaigns. Ika chose one simply because it belonged to male candidate, whom she thought more reliable as presidential candidate. Kamal, on the other hand, found another SBY’s campaign as an attempt to reflect Islamic view of not proposing oneself as a leader.

#### Background Knowledge on Social Awareness

It seemed that Dita, Haris, Andri and Yanti (see title 1 in section 4.2.3) found *Pemilu Damai* ad was different from other public service campaign, let alone the presidential campaign. Their preconception of young people’s life helped them to view it positively because they could relate it to their own life.

Dian, Haris, Kamal, Dwi, and Tri always related the annoying or amusing statements or scenes to social reality they observed. In Megawati’s campaign, the *Public Opinion* version, Dian said,

“(kampanye ini) tentang harapan tukang sayur tentang kehidupan yang sudah enak...tapi sebenarnya banyak bidang lain seperti TKI yang belum sukses (about the expectation of a vegetable seller who has got comfortable life...but actually there are other fields like TKI [Indonesian migrant workers] which haven’t been successful [the solution to their problems-*ed.*]).

Haris, Kamal, Dwi, and Tri also mentioned other fields, which haven’t been solved successfully, like education, health service, public transportation, etc. For example, in case one there were statements:

“Jumlah pembelian mobil meningkat tajam. Sepeda motor yang dibeli kelas bawah mencapai 2.500.000 atau lima kali dari tahun 1998. Pemakaian telepon seluler begitu menanjak [...] kenaikan lebih dari 40 kali lipat yang sebagian dipakai kelas bawah sampai ke desa-desa”

(The number of car sale increases rapidly. Motorcycles bought by lower class are 2.5 million or five times as many as in 1998. The use of cellphone goes swiftly [...] there is more than 40 times more cellphone used by the lower class, even in the villages)

There is an implication that the data were to proof that Megawati had been successful economically. However, Haris, Kamal, Dwi, and Tri didn’t think so. As a matter of fact, Tri believed that it made Indonesians more consumptive, while Haris, Dwi, and Kamal

agreed that the use of cell phones was the implication of advanced technology, not because many Indonesian were more prosperous.

### Background Knowledge on Cultural Values

The subjects' preconception of family value drew them to Kerry's *Stronger American Families*. All the main subjects were raised in close-knitted family with awareness of the importance of education. They all agreed that strong family was the basic foundation for strong nation. Therefore, they felt attached to this campaign.

A decent approach, clear campaign without discrediting other candidates led Dwi, Haris, and Kamal to choose Kerry's *Your Hand*. Dwi said that it was a "kampanye dengan bahasa yang sopan dan terpelajar" (campaign with decent and educated language). As a matter of fact, most subjects were attracted to campaigns whose language use was appealing, not patronizing or arrogant. Therefore, they responded the campaign with this characteristic when they were given options to choose. For example, for television ad, Kamal chose SBY's campaign, Dita chose *Ashley's story* and Yanti chose *Mother* because each of them used appealing approach.

Nevertheless, relating to American campaigns, except for clarity of the program, the main subjects did not find them too different from Indonesian ones. The subjects' insufficient knowledge in American culture and political issues is the reason to the subjects' less success in analyzing the American presidential campaigns. For example, in Kerry's *Your Hands* campaign, there is stem cell research issue, which is a sensitive issue for American voters. However, the subjects who responded this campaign failed to comment on it. As schema is culture-specific, it is understandable why the subjects do not relate to certain issues in the American presidential campaigns, because the issues are not familiar to Indonesians.

## **2. The Subjects' Critical Thinking and Media Literacy Awareness**

As part of critical thinking and literacy, media literacy expects critical readers/viewers to recognize "...the author's motives, purpose and point of view, the techniques to attract attention, the use of image, sound and language to convey meaning, and the range of different interpretations" (Thoman, as cited in Hobbs, 2001).

The subjects realized that a campaign should attract public interest and usually use attractive, polished presentation. However, the campaigns did not affect them to change their mind of something. It turned out, that those students had already got who they would choose had they exerted their vote that year. The choice was more likely affected by their family's view and value.

From their responses, it could be drawn that a good campaign should not only present clear and logical programs, but also present honest picture of the candidate. Often they say that the program is not clear or not logic and only suitable for uneducated, uninformed people. They wanted campaigns that served the needs of educated, well informed people, who would not believe easily by promises, but by logical explanation and sensible actions.

When asked further what good campaign was, the seven major subjects eagerly set the criteria. A good campaign should have these elements:

1. Honesty
2. Fairness
3. Clarity
4. Logic

However, neither of them believed that American presidential campaigns were the best model to copy. Their objection on taking American campaigns as the best model was its boldness in attacking other candidates. Although they admitted that we could learn their management of campaigns and course of debating, they argued that in some cases, the American campaigns didn't fit what democracy means. Haris said that just like in Indonesia, in America, a candidate often tarnish another candidate.

This is an interesting point. The subjects were aware of the difference of culture between Americans and Indonesians. They still believed that it is not polite to attack other people in public. Referring to Relevance Theory, these subjects made inference based on their cognitive environment. As a matter of fact, the American presidential campaigns did not mention anything about attacking the other candidate. Instead, it appealed for the sympathy of people based on their programs or the people whom they think shared tragedy from the same perspective. Therefore, the subjects made use of their prior knowledge to infer the message they receive. Since the most relevant one is the stereotyping of political attack which they probably watched on movies, hence came the interpretation.

Kamal, Haris, and Tri seemed to develop media literacy awareness by the end of this study. It means that they could detect the media's profit interest in the campaigns. All of them thought that the media had agenda, i.e., to get profit as much as possible. It is all business for them. This awareness is crucial to media literacy because it's a beginning of searching for connection and patterns, which will lead to habits of mind (Meier, as cited in Hobbs, 2001)

Interestingly, none of them felt influenced by the campaign ads they received. As Haris pointed out, "Tidak [terpengaruh], karena iklan tidak selalu menggambarkan realitas yang terjadi. Kita harus mencari tahu lebih jauh, tidak cukup dari iklan (No, I wasn't [influenced], because ads do not always describe the reality. We should look for more, not only from ads" (interview 01/11/05).

All subjects could identify the purpose of each message, but only Tri, Haris, and Dian extended their effort to find out the reason or motives behind the messages (see answers to Question #3: *Why the message is being sent?* for every case).

Generally, the subjects knew that the campaign was to get support and sympathy from the people so that the people would vote the candidate who sent the message. Except in case one (*Megawati Dalam Diam Ia Bekerja Untuk Bangsa Ini*) and case two (*Indonesia Sukses*), most of the subjects did not try to find out what was the reason or motives behind the other messages. For instance, what was the reason behind the decision to raise an issue of differences in Pemilu Damai?; or what was the reason behind the use of public in Megawati or SBY's campaigns?

As a matter of fact, only Tri consistently seek further to answer the reason behind the campaign. For example, he also put forward why SBY used public in his campaign, why Kerry proposed family and home security issues in his campaigns (see Tri's answer for each case).

In line with critical thinking skills, a critical thinker should recognize the preconception and values of a claim. Moreover, media literacy suggests not only the ability to identify the purpose, but also to make inferences about cause and effect. Relating to Thoman's continuum of media literacy, the subjects had achieved the second phase of the continuum, that is, being critical to some degree. For instance, they were aware of the language bias to influence people, but not all of them aware how image and sound could affect audience. It should be noted that Haris and Tri achieved a more effective readers/viewers than the other subjects did.

### **3. The Subjects' Strategies in understanding particular text/presentation**

Although other respondents also did not take for granted everything they read and see in a mediated presidential campaign presentation, I found that at least three of them, Dian, Haris, and Tri, had employed some strategies of critical readers. Dian came from a modest family. Nevertheless, her academic achievement was quite good. She took science major in her school and ranked at least the big three in her class. Dian had come of age to vote in the last general election. Compared to other respondents, Dian showed more interests in talking about politics. She usually had discussion about politics with her father and her friends in mentoring class -a class of Islamic discussion at her school, where she used to be active.

In engaging with media, Dian had rarely watched television recently unless for news and features. She spent more time on watching news on television than reading newspaper. She would not believe everything she saw or read instantly. She would try to find other sources to get more information about a curious issue.

From the observation, I found that Dian was a diligent reader. If the text was not long, she would read it from beginning to the end. She admitted later that sometimes she read something twice to get the message across. However, if the text was too long (such as Case Two campaign), she would skim it. The title was the first thing she noticed when she read. Then she questioned herself a statement that she thought different from what she knew. If she had time, she usually discussed it with her friends.

When she read English texts, she did not always look up dictionary in finding the words she wasn't familiar with. Instead she guessed the words, and only looked up the dictionary to check whether she had guessed correctly. She preferred English print texts than non-print ones. In her opinion, the printed ones gave her more opportunity to understand better because she could look it up more than once (see her interview in Appendix E.1.).

Haris was the eldest child in his family. As his father had passed away, Haris appeared to be a very responsible person because he had to set example for his siblings. He majored in science and he always got first rank in his class, if not in his school. He used to be active in Islamic studies division in OSIS, and until now, he was active in an Islamic mass organization.

He usually got information from television or radio, of which he spent about 2 hours daily. Haris was also interested in politics, but unlike Dian, he rarely discussed it with family. But like Dian, he would try to find the truth of an issue by looking for more information from different sources.

Haris did not read a whole text/message. The title or the author of a message was the first thing that attracted his attention. He skimmed the message to get the gist of the text/message. However, whenever he found interesting or annoying statement, he seemed amused with what he read. He put himself in other people's shoes. It looked like he thought, "Oh, this is what people are expected to believe; Ok, I understand it, but I don't buy it".

He could accept that a presidential campaign, and advertisement in general, will be subjective, focusing only the good side of the product. He also acknowledged that there were other views besides the view presented in the media. He didn't seem to fret whether a campaign fooled people or not, as long as he wasn't fooled. He stuck to his personal view. He seemed to me what Brookfield (1987:5) asserts as "...gain an awareness that others in the world have the same sense of certainty we do -but ideas, values, and actions that are completely contrary to our own".

Dealing with English texts, Haris also did not always look up the unfamiliar words in the dictionary. He usually guessed them or asked other people, whom he thought reliable, such as English teachers. Haris preferred visual media such as television and the internet to newspaper to engage in English texts. He also thought that visual media gave him more understanding about what the text was.

The last subject, Tri came from fairly highly educated family. His parents were university graduates (bachelor and master's degree), as well as his older brother. His academic achievements were impressive. He often became the school representative to academic competition, such as Mathematics, Physics, debating, and swimming. Not only that, he was active beyond school's activities. He sold books, involved in family catering business, and quite recently, had been developing a radio station with his friends. Just like Dian, Tri had cast his vote in the last general election.

Similar to Dian and Haris, to get information, Tri spent more time on watching television than reading. Nevertheless, Tri read newspaper at least two hours a day so that he knew everyday issue, he said. His family subscribed three different newspapers and two magazines/tabloids. It seemed that Tri had more exposure on print media than the other subjects. He had also wide range of interests in reading.

What interesting is, Tri always questioned almost everything he read and see. From the observation and interview, Tri never failed questioning himself whenever he came across interesting or annoying claim.

It seemed to me that Tri is a critical reader and observer. When I asked him to do the analysis, he asked me what the purpose was and what I expected of him. He then could relate the campaign issue to some issues raised during the election sessions, such as black-branding campaign to one candidate, money politics, etc.

When it came to reading the messages he chose, I observed that he didn't read the whole text, but he was quite fast in understanding it. He employed the skimming and scanning skills. He was quick to find the information in certain place in the text. Even if he was interviewed several days later, he could still recall some statements in the message quite accurately.

In my opinion, Tri had displayed critical as well as strategic reader. According to Axelrod and Cogper (1987), a critical reader employs some strategies. They are previewing, annotating, outlining, summarizing, taking inventory, and analyzing

argument. Tri definitely always analyzed an argument. He would find the answer from different sources. If he could not find it, he would conclude it based on logical aspects.

Tri also always related what he read and saw to other text he previously had read or seen. His expressions of “Saya pernah baca di koran...” or “Saya pernah lihat beritanya di televisi...” often came out as he answer questions. He had a wide range interests of reading, but his favorite was business issues. That’s why he related the media in this study with business interests of media giants.

In engaging English texts, as Haris did, Tri preferred non-print ones. He thought that the non-print gave him more opportunity to understand what was being sent because he could see the expressions and movement of the sender. Nevertheless, print or non-print, Tri rarely opened dictionary to find out the exact meaning of the words or expressions he got.

It can be concluded that these three major subjects employed the following strategies in perceiving mediated campaigns:

- skimming and scanning the text
- if necessary, rereading the text (especially for Dian)
- questioning the statement which is considered bias or errors in logic
- analyzing the statement to make sense of it
- being able to draw alternatives of the bias statement
- not always looking up in the dictionary when reading English texts; instead, looking for help from other reliable people, or guessing. It could be taken into consideration, though, that the English texts in the campaigns were relatively easy for them.

Furthermore, these subjects were skeptical towards the Indonesian presidential texts. They did not take every statement or claim made in each campaign as true. Instead, they questioned them and related to the reality they experienced or observed. Being skeptical is another component of being critical thinker.

It is very likely due to their novelty in analysing media that they had not achieved satisfying response. As a matter of fact, neither of them had ever got media analysis in their language classes, Bahasa Indonesia or English. These subjects might need improvement of their skill in critical thinking and media literacy. Nevertheless, at least three of them had displayed sufficient ability in perceiving media presentation.

Judging from what Tri, Haris, and Dian as well as some others achieved in analysing media, it is very likely that more exposure will increase their understanding of media presentation.

## **Conclusion and Suggestions**

### **Conclusion**

The result of the study indicated that subjects perceived the presidential campaigns differently based on their background knowledge and strategies. Those factors led subjects who are more critical to be more aware of media literacy to some extent. To be more specific, the followings are answers to the research questions:

1. What are students’ opinion of Indonesian and American presidential campaigns in the media?

It turned out that the subjects had different views of the presidential campaigns. Some Indonesian campaigns drew negative opinion because of its exaggeration. Some others gained positive opinion (such as ‘good’ or ‘interesting’) due to their creativity or questioning claims. On the other hand, all subjects had positive opinion of the American mediated campaigns. They thought that the campaigns had more clarity and less exaggeration, which lack in Indonesian campaigns.

Just like schema theory asserts, these subjects retrieved their background knowledge in understanding a text/speech. Further analysis showed that their opinions were affected by their background knowledge on politics, religion, and social awareness. The main subjects’ background knowledge on cultural values helped them understand the American campaign texts. They knew from books and movies that Americans are more straightforward than Indonesians, and had a little different views on democracy from Indonesians, for instance. Nevertheless, infamiliarity to American issues caused them to analyze the campaigns not as deep as they did to Indonesian ones, as shown in the following section.

It can be concluded that the subjects had put themselves as observers, instead of just receiver of a campaign. In this case, they could judge the message according to their personal views on politics, religion, social, and cultural values.

2. Based on their responses to Media Literacy questions, do they reflect components of critical thinking skills and media literacy? If so, what are they?

There are at least three components of critical thinking skills that the subjects could achieve. They were aware of the context of the issue, they could propose alternatives to the present Indonesian campaigns, and they detected bias in the Indonesian campaigns. Moreover, the major respondents seemed to have sharper sense of error and logic behind the campaigns

In relation with media literacy skills, it looked like the subjects in this study fall to the beginning of second phase in media literacy continuum articulated by Elizabeth Thoman (1996, as cited in Hobbs, 2000). In this phase, students were able to make (some) critical analysis of a message by deconstructing it, finding out the author’s purpose and the language to attract attention. Furthermore, the students in this study began to have a sense of awareness of media’s interest in the campaigns.

Despite their achievements, however, the subjects were still far from satisfactory media literate. For example, although some seemed to realize the use of image and sound to attract audience, the others had not been aware of them. In addition, most of them still could not identify successfully the motives behind the author/sender of each message. Only Tri always tried to find out the motives or reasons behind the campaigns. The others were able to see the purpose of the campaign, but not the motives. As a matter of fact, identifying the motives and questioning them is another way to be more critical towards media.

3. What strategies do the more critical students employ in understanding the texts?

Judging from the responses, three subjects –the major respondents, had higher critical thinking and shared similar strategies in understanding texts. Their strategies in

understanding campaign texts, more or less, are similar to critical reading strategies. First, they made inferences from the text; then they skimmed and scanned the text. Afterwards they usually questioned annoying or amusing statements. Then they analyzed the statements based on their cognitive and background knowledge. Finally, they were able to present alternatives to the problematic statements. They didn't have different strategy when reading the English texts due to the simplicity of the texts' language.

Even if these subjects could not detect bias and error in reasoning in the English texts as they could in Bahasa Indonesia texts, the subjects could get information from the English texts. The subjects could derive the information for their answers in producing alternatives to campaigns.

### **Suggestions**

The study showed that critical thinking is important in helping students to understand a text/media presentation better. In efforts to familiarize critical thinking and media literacy skills for teaching learning implications, teachers should try to facilitate students to develop their skills. One way is by giving more media exposure with appropriate media literacy questions to help students aware of the message the media convey. Another is by relating teaching learning to the issues related closely to their life. Any issue can be suitable, provided it is familiar to them.

This study departed from what considered to be unpopular topic among high school students. Nevertheless, the findings showed that the students had potentials to be critical even in the issue they were not really interested in. Accordingly, it would be interesting to see whether more popular topics such as music or sports, will derive the same, more or less critical response.

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