

COMMERCIAL ISLAM IN INDONESIA: HOW TELEVISION PRODUCERS MEDIATE RELIGIOSITY AMONG NATIONAL AUDIENCES

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While Indonesia's burgeoning private television industry has prospered through the country's democratic transition and the rise of popular Islam, it has remained ideologically constrained by many of the content restrictions established during Suharto's New Order era. One area in which producers have broken these norms is in the field of religious imagery, and the adaptation of religiously-themed narratives and tropes. This article – based on a long-term ethnographic study of television producers in Indonesia and the social institutions that influence them – explores the strategies and goals behind the industry's handling of the imagined religious audience. It asserts that the tension of appeasing cultural conservatives has been redirected by the industry into content that appeals to the much larger demographic of moderate Muslims, through the adaptation of narrative conventions and stylistic forms that draw on an array of global media traditions. It examines new genres and conventions invoked by producers in their efforts to both placate and mobilize religious sentiment among Indonesia's culturally heterogeneous population, arguing that these practices promote a successful, commercial Islam that largely comports with neoliberal subjectivity.

Keywords: Islam; media; Indonesia; Neoliberalism; television; religion; Southeast Asia

Kata Berkait was a moderately popular¹ quiz show on which I was lucky enough to be conducting ethnographic research when a special episode was taped for the Muslim holiday Idul Adha (Eid al-Adha in Arabic). The set's decorator brought in a load of brightly colored decorations, including ribbons and streamers that brought to mind a child's birthday party, and arranged them around the set along with a sign making it clear which holiday was being celebrated and displaying the year of the Islamic calendar. Accordingly, the casting director had made sure that only Muslim contestants would be appearing on that particular program (one of six being taped that day). The costume director brought in several

¹ All references to the statistical popularity of programs are based on ratings research conducted by A. C. Nielsen company. Although there are flaws in their data collection methods, including strong urban and Javanese biases, their reports are accepted as the industry standard reference by stations and advertisers, and are invoked in that context.

headscarves (jilbab) for the three female contestants, colored as brightly as the streamers, and three black peci² for the men. The program had been arranged so that a team of women would play against a team of men, which was not the standard format of the program. It was December 2001, early in my research on the culture of national television production in Jakarta and before I had come to focus on Muslim-themed programming.

Back in the dressing room, the female contestants struggled to put the *jilbabs* on one another. One told me that she normally wore a simpler design; another said she did not wear one at all. Donning the *jilbab* is often regarded as a life-long commitment,³ but in this case they were spoken of (and rhetorically designated) as holiday costumes and excluded from the usual semiotics of religious garments. The host was costumed in a long, ascetic white shirt with a strip of woven *kain* draped around his neck. He entered the stage to start the taping of the show and announced conversationally that the reason for the decorations and his unusual costume was in fact the Idul Adha holy day. Then he launched into the quiz, which featured a few Islam-themed rounds, after which it quickly reverted to formula. After the taping, while staff removed the decorations so they could shoot the remaining shows, I found the host eating a plate of spicy dog meat in the small room that Christian employees had set aside for their own meals.⁴ When I later asked several Muslim crew members, including the show's producer, whether they thought it odd that a Christian host would be costumed in such a way as to imply he was Muslim for the sake of the holiday program, I was told that it was just a costume, and not an issue that they would be concerned about, since it “*tidak mungkin menyinggung pemirsa Muslim,*” or there was no way it would offend Muslim viewers.

My experience on *Kata Berkait* was an early lesson in how “television Islam” is compartmentalized, both by producers and the imagined Muslim audiences they cater to, away from the discourse of Islam in daily life. It brought up questions regarding the connections between elite producers of national TV content, the authoritarian New Order government that had recently lost power, and the dramatic rise of popular Islam that the country had been experiencing for the better part of two decades.⁵ Perhaps most important was what I did not realize at the time: that the show also represented a fading era wherein Muslim-themed programming was produced in a perfunctory fashion and largely out of obligation, rather than as a genuine, commercial enterprise. This shift of approach toward Muslim audiences was already in full swing.

In seeking to interrogate such changes, this article describes research conducted over the span of the past decade, beginning in 2001 with twenty months of fieldwork among Jakarta's national television producers and broadcasters, and continuing with regular short-term research trips through 2012. The original project, inspired by the media-globalization discussions of Ien Ang and Arjun Appadurai, investigated ideologies and practices behind

2 A cap generally worn by Muslim men in insular Southeast Asia, most often on formal occasions.

3 Jones 2007.

4 It was a common practice on TV sets for Christians to eat separately, and to bring their own food – most often including pork, dog, and other meats considered haram – even when, as was the case on *Kata Berkait*, the set was fully catered. Often, self-identified Christians would retrieve a plate of rice from the catering buffet, and then bring it back to the Christian area, where the home-cooked plates would be retrieved.

5 Fealy 2008.

the influential models of national culture and lifestyle that TV producers create, how and why they imagine and target particular audience demographics, and particularly how they integrate conflicting and sensitive social issues into commercially successful pop-culture products.⁶ Among these social issues, the handling of religious content and religiously-associated audiences rose to the top of the list in the post-Suharto era, as discussion of sensitive topics and critique of the government no longer appeared to threaten TV stations with closure or disciplinary action.

Because of this, I came to focus on the transformation of religious programming, and the role of prominent religious organizations in influencing and constraining the content of both these programs and of private television more broadly. This research included over thirty ethnographic interviews and meeting attendance at several major Islamic organizations, including Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, as well as MUI, a Suharto-era government-endorsed council of prominent ulama,⁷ and Dewan Dakwah Islamiyah Indonesia (DDII), a highly political group many have characterized as Islamist,⁸ known for organizing protests against television stations.⁹ I also spent time conducting ethnographic research on the set of three Ramadan *sinetron*¹⁰ and several other programs explicitly oriented toward Muslim audiences.

In this article, I discuss the strategies and goals behind the industry's delineation and handling of the Muslim audience. I examine the Muslim-oriented content that private stations have aired since their inception, as well as new genres and conventions that are invoked by producers in their efforts to both placate and leverage religious sentiment among Indonesia's culturally heterogeneous population. I argue that private television stations in the post-Suharto era, no longer burdened by the threat of government sanctions, have encountered a new and more volatile set of constraints in the form of Islamist activists and complicit law enforcement, as well as a public wary of overly secular or anti-Islamic media. Television stations, however, have found the means to avoid many concessions to these groups by taking their case to more moderate general audiences, securing reputational insurance while profiting from a more attractive, consumable representation of Islamic practice than is offered by social conservatives or religious organizations. I further propose that this commercial framing of Islam exemplifies a television culture that stands in opposition to the Islamist revitalization associated with new media such as the Internet, SMS and Bluetooth messaging,¹¹ by appealing to a moderate, commodifiably religious subject-position that comports with extant domestic conventions of the

6 Ang 1991; Ang 1996; Appadurai 1996.

7 Mudzhar 1990.

8 As observed by Yilmaz (2009), current usage of the term "Islamism" is varied and inconsistent, particularly in journalism. Here, I use the term largely as a reference to popular usage, but also seek to address Yilmaz's and others' concerns by distinguishing generally observant and pious Muslims (who are not labeled as Islamist) from politically active groups who regard Islam as a totalizing way of life that ought to guide social and political, as well as personal life.

9 Husin 1998; Liddle 1996.

10 An abbreviation for 'electronic cinema' (*sinema elektronik*), this term may refer to any scripted, narrative television program, but is most often used to indicate a locally produced drama in the general style of a soap opera, but usually broadcast during primetime hours and only once per week.

11 Echchaibi 2011.

medium. Additionally, I detail various strategies that producers employ in their efforts to appease religious conservatives while appealing to ambiguously religious sentiment in national audiences, focusing on the tensions created by these two contrasting goals and the sorts of cultural models that result from producers' efforts to bridge them.

BACKGROUND

Private television in Indonesia is a relatively recent phenomenon. The founding Sukarno government, which established public TV in the form of Televisi Republik Indonesia (TVRI) to broadcast the Asian Games in 1962, prohibited it, taking what was arguably a cultural protectionist stance.¹² More surprisingly, the Western-allied Suharto government perpetuated the state monopoly over the medium, using it to spread the national language and legitimize the state,¹³ but regulations finally changed when Suharto's children became interested in the prospect of developing their own stations.¹⁴ Legalized in 1988, private stations came into their own in the 1990s, broadcasting terrestrially through transmitters across the country,¹⁵ and allowing multinationals a coveted means to advertise to the world's fourth most-populous country. Stations stayed close to the Suharto government's secular tradition, avoiding potentially divisive issues, particularly ethnicity and religion.

Popular Islam was on the rise, however, particularly among the country's burgeoning "middle class,"¹⁶ and after Suharto was forced to resign in 1998, media outlets were largely freed to acknowledge and represent the religious and ethnic struggles that were gripping the country.¹⁷ These freedoms and instabilities were more readily embraced by print media and Internet forms,¹⁸ however, as capital-intensive TV stations maintained largely risk-averse strategies, reflecting investors' concerns during Indonesia's slow recovery from the Asian financial crisis. Perhaps because of this conservatism, private television continued to grow through the economic downturn with the premieres of new stations like MetroTV and TransTV. TVRI, on the other hand, saw its ratings drop to record lows,¹⁹ as more Indonesians became exposed to commercial alternatives. As sectarian and ethnic violence flared across the country in the late 1990s and the first decade of the twenty-first century, Jakarta's producers struggled to succeed in the face of rapidly changing constraints and exigencies.

The industry had long been in the business of appealing to moderate Muslim audiences while concurrently seeking to avoid alienating the country's minority religions,

12 See Kitley 2000 for a detailed discussion of TVRI and the beginnings of the industry.

13 Sen and Hill 2000.

14 Barkin 2005.

15 Early private stations including RCTI and TPI come closest to matching TVRI in far-reaching transmitter networks, but later stations, including TransTV, have sought to cut costs by focusing on urban areas. Some stations have also maintained a presence on Indosat's Palapa satellites.

16 Rinaldo 2008; Heryanto 2011.

17 Sidel 2006; Varshney, Panggabean and Tadjoeuddin 2004.

18 Hill 2006.

19 Nielsen 2002.

in the secular tradition of the Suharto government.²⁰ In 1998 however, shortly after the resignation of President Suharto, a new style of TV drama, produced to air during the month of Ramadan, began to change the secular face of Indonesian television. Since then, Indonesian audiences have been offered popular representations of religious doctrine and practice in increasing volume.²¹ The Ramadan *sinetron* genre, variations on which are now widely produced by most major national stations, transformed the religious TV market in a spectacular fashion during the early 2000s, turning religious programming from an obligatory performance on the part of ideologically practical commercial stations into a major generator of both revenue and perceived public good will. Arguably, it has also contributed to a more public debate on the role of religion in national media, which has led to an increasingly complex set of socially-themed broadcast regulations in the post-New Order era.²² This transitional period, and its ongoing legacy, offers sharp insight into the discursively powerful ways in which media producers in Indonesia negotiate with “religious audiences.” The methods and content used by entertainment media producers to target the religious predilections of general audiences – which were carved along different social cleavages during the other eleven months of the year – offer insight into globally influenced shifts in the commodification and marketing of religious imagery and narrative.²³ Abu-Lughod once argued that TV producers’ interests, in the Egyptian context, largely overlapped with those of the country’s then authoritarian government in delegitimizing militant interpretations of Islam.²⁴ One of my goals here is to explore these changes in the context of national broadcasters caught between similar government traditions²⁵ and the recent, vocal rise of more conservative interpretations of Islam and its role in political and popular culture.²⁶

ISLAM AND NEOLIBERALISM

My articulation of commercial Islam seeks to build on many of the approaches earlier scholarship has taken toward the relationship between capitalism, consumerism, and Islam.²⁷ Particularly in Indonesia and Muslim Southeast Asia, there has been a long tradition of examining modernist and political Islam, as well as the ways in which the modernization narratives that arguably dominated the late twentieth century were reconciled with Islamic discourse and practice.²⁸ Bowen, for example, convincingly argued for a discursive understanding of Islam, based on his observations in North Sumatra, claiming local understandings of the religion and its proper practice were the result of quotidian negotiations and

20 Hefner 1993; 1998.

21 Cf. Ishadi 2011.

22 Rakhmani 2009.

23 See Fealy 2008 for a detailed discussion of this trend.

24 Abu-Lughod 2002.

25 Sen and Hill 2000.

26 Bruinessen 2011.

27 Geertz 1971; Hefner 2006; Tripp 2006.

28 Rinaldo 2008; Barth 1993; Boellstorff 2005; Bowen 1993; Geertz 1960; Peacock 1978.

ritual practice that drew variously on “traditionalist” and “modernist” perspectives. My focus on media culture, however, leads me not only to an additional set of theoretical considerations, but also to a corollary literature focused on those concerns unique to broadcasting power and, in particular, the relationships of governments and elites in producing images of Islamic practice.²⁹

Commercial Islam is the term I use to describe media producers’ varying efforts to influence public discourse on Islamic ways of being and redirect it away from clerics, politicians and public intellectuals by transforming it into forms that comport with consumption. I mean this both on a literal level – commercial consumption by way of TV viewing – and also as a reference to the shift from a discursive mode of developing Muslim identity³⁰ to one that is itself rooted in media consumption:³¹ Islam that one negotiates as much through viewing as through discourse. It belongs as part of the larger field of “neoliberal Islam,” an admittedly broad classification that can be argued to include all manner of distinct intersections between market economies and Islamic belief and practice, and which has received increasing scholarly attention of late. For example, Starrett’s discussion of a U.S. mosque community that developed its understandings of Islamic ways of being in dialog with the consumer market for videos, books, and other Islam-inflected products.³² More recently, Rudnyckj has argued that discourses regarding the role of Islam in daily life have influenced the culture of Indonesian factories. He articulates this notion, labeled “market Islam,” by making a Weberian argument linking Islam-inflected discourse in factories to “the kind of ethical dispositions deemed conducive to greater competitiveness in a global economy.”³³ In other words, the leveraging of religious ideologies, along with Geertz’s concepts of shared poverty and work spreading, to develop a workforce compatible with neoliberal economics.³⁴

Many more scholars concerned with neoliberalism’s recent intersections with Islam, however, focus on issues of consumption, global capital flows, and mass-mediation. In fact, most contributors addressing topics related to Islam and popular culture in Weintraub’s recent edited volume (which is dedicated to that subject) go out of their way to address the import of local and global market forces in shaping or influencing Muslim-oriented music, film, and print media in Indonesia.³⁵ If this broad coalition of topics, from wage labor to pop music, can be comfortably labeled “neoliberal Islam,” why bother to distinguish “commercial Islam” at all?

Commercial Islam describes the narratives and practices developed by cultural producers, such as the television executives I study, to render Islam not only compatible with neoliberal subjectivity, but to transform it into a discourse of materiality and consumption. It is distinct from most expressions of “popular Islam” articulated by Weintraub, in that it

29 Abu-Lughod 2002; Abu-Lughod 1995; Khoo and Vedi 2010; Sen 2006.

30 Bowen 1993.

31 E.g. Huq 1999; Starrett 2009.

32 Starrett 2003.

33 Rudnyckj 2009a, especially p. 187.

34 Geertz 1963.

35 Weintraub 2011.

is not “of the people,”³⁶ but rather reflects the top-down relationship of media producer to consumer that is common to capital-intensive broadcasting. So, while it may be “popular,” it is not, strictly speaking, “populist,” and this also distinguishes commercial Islam from recent articulations of “civil Islam.”³⁷ The concept of civil Islam is often deployed in discussions of media (new and old), with regard to their influence on Islamic orthodoxies and hierarchical authority, as the undermining of these institutions is often posited to pave the way for civic pluralism and democratization.³⁸ This case has been made many times over,³⁹ and given recent uprisings in the Middle East, will surely continue to be fertile ground for scholarship. What I find most compelling about Islam on Indonesian TV is not its implications for civic democratization, however, but instead the tectonic shift in power over religious representation that it represents. Commercial Islam, then, refers to the use of religious aesthetics and narratives in ways that cultivate Islam as (1) consumable in itself, but, importantly, (2) associated closely with consumption. Muslim-oriented television programs are made to sell advertisers’ products, ultimately, and their recent proliferation on Indonesian national stations reflects their success at doing just that. Thus, the ways in which Indonesian audiences engage with representations of Islam is, I suggest, shifting from a relatively unmediated, discursive frame, to an increasingly mediated set of practices deeply intertwined with commercial broadcast from the elite, national center.

To turn back to my case study of Indonesian national TV production, there is no unified set of beliefs and practices that the industry could turn to in representing the various cultures of Islam in that diverse state, contrary to the assumption underlying Huntingtonian arguments that presume a broad homogeneity of Muslim practice.⁴⁰ The ways that Islam is actually practiced vary significantly between regions within the country and certainly between Indonesia and other Muslim-majority nations. As noted above, Bowen has argued that the local practice of Islam, and the role it plays in daily life, is continually negotiated in local contexts, and woven through larger discursive patterns.⁴¹ It should then come as no surprise that the public discourse surrounding Islam in Jakarta, and disseminated through the country’s highly centralized mass media, is a fiercely contested cultural field,⁴² particularly between moderates and increasingly powerful Islamist groups that – although they may represent only a small fraction of Indonesians – became an important factor in the country’s politics, even before the fall of Suharto.⁴³ Indeed, it was in this very division that Jakarta’s media elite saw a commercial opportunity, despite (or perhaps because of) the rise in religiosity among wealthy and educated Muslims through the 1990s.⁴⁴

36 Weintraub 2011, p. 3.

37 E.g. Hefner 2000.

38 E.g. Hollander, d’Haenens and Bardoeel 2009.

39 See Eickelman and Anderson 2003a.

40 Huntington 2001.

41 Bowen 1993.

42 Hefner 2000.

43 Bruinessen 2011; Hefner 2002.

44 Effendy 2006.

HISTORY OF TELEVISION ISLAM

Although the private television industry has existed in Indonesia only since 1989,⁴⁵ it has played a curious role in shaping public perceptions of appropriate, Indonesian Islamic practice, but this has been less through its overt content than its cavernous silences. Television representations of Islam, as well as their absence, arguably shape Indonesians' understanding of the role of religion in prestigious, modern lifestyles, which has been the overwhelming focus of the industry since its inception.⁴⁶ It arguably does this by providing viewers with new and broadly consumed cultural tools and narratives that may be deployed in the construction of religious identities (a point eloquently made by Mankekar).⁴⁷ Furthermore, the overlapping of income-based audience targeting and advertiser interests with the more overt focus on religious spectators has arguably led to the development of new, normative models of Indonesian religio-cultural life that emphasize compartmentalization, conventional morality and piety as aesthetic.

The formal and informal rules for broadcasters vis-à-vis religious content on private television used to be more straightforward. Under Suharto's New Order regime, which sought to obscure divisive social cleavages,⁴⁸ the media was all but forbidden from discussing issues of religion, along with ethnic affiliation and 'race,' except in extremely narrow and controlled contexts, such as morning prayer programs with government-approved clerics. This environment led producers of entertainment programs, including *sinetron*, to avoid religious issues almost entirely, even to the extent that *sinetron* characters had no identifiable religion(s) at all. Further, their ethnic and linguistic backgrounds were kept ambiguous through the development of a secular, unevenly pan-Indonesian, élite-modern character type.⁴⁹ As a result, through most of the 1990s, Indonesia boasted some of the most secular domestic television in the Muslim world.

But the fear of appearing too secular, or more specifically of being perceived as disrespectful toward Islam, has haunted the private television industry from its inception as a pay service catering largely to expatriates and élites with a taste for American television series.⁵⁰ In the popular press and my own interviews, representatives of religious organizations regularly dismissed the industry's programming as hedonistic and Western, accusing it of selling dreams of unattainable wealth to the country's poor.⁵¹ The Muslim daily *Republika* regularly includes sharp-tongued editorials attacking the industry for its alleged lack of creativity and moral leadership, as well as its sexual and violent content.⁵² In such publications, commercial television has often been equated to the underground

45 Although the country's first private station, RCTI, opened its doors in 1989, it remained a subscription service requiring a special decoder until 1991, when free-to-air broadcasting began.

46 Barkin 2005.

47 Mankekar 2002.

48 Hill 2006.

49 See Kitley 2000 for a discussion of how TVRI approached these issues.

50 Sen and Hill 2000.

51 Soebagijo 2001.

52 E.g. *Republika* 2001.

pornographic DVD/VCD industry that thrives in Jakarta and throughout urban Indonesia and that has attracted a great deal of negative attention,⁵³ leading to the 2008 ratification of a controversial anti-pornography law.

But the private networks' associations with unpopular business people and interests – including the Suharto family – as well as transnational corporate sponsors, have long led them to take preventative measures designed to maintain what many station executives described to me as an “Islam-friendly” appearance (“citra Islam-friendly”). This is not to say that most executives and station employees are not self-identified Muslims themselves, nor that they would otherwise be disinclined toward religious audiences, but rather that the prevailing discourse at the stations was one of distance and risk-averse handling. As Ratna,⁵⁴ a former SCTV executive told me, “The difference between [conservative] Muslims and other groups is that, with the other groups, our goal is just to attract them, but with the Muslims, our goal is mostly not to offend them.”

In this interest, all stations broadcast the call to prayer five times a day, though they have never been required to do so.⁵⁵ Most have used, since the early 2000s, sweeping computer graphics combined with aerial footage of Islamic holy sites in Saudi Arabia and Arabic text spelling out the prayer as it is called. And all stations have historically featured some variety of Muslim prayer show, usually in the early morning. Traditionally, these programs have been centered on dakwah, or preaching, featuring a Muslim cleric talking directly to the camera or sometimes to an “interviewer” who would ask him prepared questions in a style reminiscent of the “infomercial,” which derives its aspirant legitimacy from the representation of one character as an expert and the other as an open and inquisitive stand-in for the vicarious viewer. But unlike the infomercial, these programs rarely have studio audiences and generally strike a somber tone.

This talking-head format has done little to attract audiences to morning prayer shows, as indeed it was not intended to. As one cleric, who stars on a top-rated morning prayer show, told me, “The people who wake up early in the morning are usually the people who are already good. They wake up to pray. If they were bad people, they would just go on sleeping.” He further explained that he wanted to draw in new audiences to his show, but as he received little support from the station, the manner he used was jokingly to tell the viewers watching to wake up their relatives so they could join in. Although some clerics – and production executives who handled their programs – did voice an interest, there have been very few attempts to overhaul these programs in an effort to make them more appealing to audiences.

Indeed, these programs perform poorly in the ratings, usually garnering less than a single rating point, which, representing less than half a million viewers, is the lowest unit of measurement distinguished by A. C. Nielsen – the U.S.-based company that monitors television viewership in Indonesia and many other countries around the world. The most common talking point that industry executives invoke regarding these shows is

53 See for example MediaWatch 2001.

54 Ratna described herself as Muslim, but said she was not particularly religious. Like many executives who helped to launch the private TV industry, she had an international background and, as the daughter of an ambassador, had grown up in several countries.

55 Republik Indonesia 1997.

that they are broadcast out of a sense of public service and moral responsibility on the part of the stations. Some stations, including SCTV,⁵⁶ have ‘Islamic development teams’ or committees whose responsibility it is to come up with appropriate programming for various Islamic holidays, as well as to oversee the prayer shows.

The basis for these sacrifices of airtime recalls what Tsing termed “the economy of appearances” when discussing confidence games in global capital markets.⁵⁷ Several producers of religious programming explained to me that investors and station management reassure themselves and religious organizations by performing a certain level of religiosity and therewith hope to bring vocal conservatives into a relationship of negotiation rather than opposition. This performance, if sufficiently convincing, can lend the station an air of social responsibility that most executives appeared to covet, if only to the extent that it preempted negative attention. As one such executive told me while walking toward a live taping of an Idul Fitri variety show, “this sort of thing makes us look good.”

THE CONCERN OVER CONSERVATIVES

It is no secret that stations have incentives beyond the sense of moral responsibility often invoked by public relations managers for producing and broadcasting Islam-themed content. Among these, one of the most prominent and publicly discussed is a concern that Islamist groups will compromise a station’s reputation by protesting, demonstrating or even attacking their studios. These are not uncommon events. As recently as September of 2011, SCTV was widely criticized for succumbing to the demands of the Front Pembela Islam (Islamic Defender’s Front (FPI)) by canceling the broadcast of a controversial film titled “?” which apparently investigated the role of Islam in contemporary Indonesian society, and concluded with a pluralist message of peaceful coexistence.⁵⁸ The concession came after the FPI, which has been denounced by mainstream Muslim groups like Nahdlatul Ulama, held a rally in front of the SCTV studios in downtown Jakarta, and informed the Jakarta police they planned to “besiege” their offices the following day.⁵⁹ The police apparently offered little help to the station beyond informing them of the threat.

This phenomenon has been common since the fall of the Suharto government in 1998. Ten years ago, Wardhana had already documented over a dozen cases in which protests organized by one or more religious groups (usually what are labeled Islamist organizations, like the FPI or LPI discussed below) led to private stations canceling the shows or firing the personnel who were the target of demonstrations.⁶⁰ In many cases, it was a seemingly minor issue that sparked protest, such as the name of a *sinetron* character or an offhand comment by a talk show host.

56 Surya Citra Televisi (literally ‘Sun Image Television’) is Indonesia’s second major television station, which opened in 1990 as a regional broadcaster for eastern Java based in Surabaya, but which went semi-nationwide as soon as it was allowed to in 1993. In 1998 it moved its main offices to Jakarta.

57 Tsing 2001.

58 *Jakarta Globe* 2011.

59 *Jakarta Globe* 2011.

60 Wardhana 2002.

For example, one of the most often discussed and arguably trend-setting incidents occurred at SCTV, which broadcast a Brazilian *telenovela*⁶¹ called *Esmeralda* from 1999 to 2000. The program was a relatively typical *telenovela*, focusing on the tempestuous love life of a young, blind woman named *Esmeralda*. On May 3, 2000, a group of protesters from the Laskar Pembela Islam (Islamic Defense Force (LPI)) appeared at the station demanding the program be discontinued immediately because the name of one of the non-lead characters was “Fatima,” a name shared by a daughter of the Prophet Muhammad. LPI’s leaders threatened the station that, unless the program was taken off the air immediately, they would return in greater numbers. According to Wardhana, no effort was made to explain to LPI that the name *Fatima* is not exclusive to the Islamic world, but even more perplexing, the LPI made no effort to shut down a domestically produced *sinetron* that was actually titled *Fatima*, which was running on AnTeVe at the same time, and in which the name *Fatima* belonged to a lead character who was depicted as rather selfish and materialistic.⁶² SCTV canceled the *Esmeralda* program, at significant expense, shortly after the protest.

These demonstrations were part of the resurgence of strident Islamism that has accompanied the middle-class “Islamic turn,” as Liddle described it,⁶³ and which contributed to the New Order’s decline. Boellstorff and Adamson have written eloquently on the cultural destabilization that followed Suharto’s fall and how the resulting anxiety was sometimes transformed into a more conservative and sometimes violent rhetoric surrounding Islam and the obligations of Muslims.⁶⁴ Because militant demonstrations at TV stations can cost them considerable revenue – and, even more important, loss of prestige – and because law enforcement has tended to side with the protesters over the stations, programmers have adopted extremely risk-averse strategies in dealing with anything they imagine as potentially offensive to Muslim groups. Of course, most television executives are themselves from a Muslim background and identify themselves as Muslims. It is one of the more interesting findings of this research, however, that with few exceptions, television producers and station executives speak of Muslims in the third person and as a distinct “other,” rarely identifying themselves as part of the group unless the specific context of the conversation calls for it. Muslims are instead spoken of as a market, a viewing demographic, and a collection of imagined tastes and attitudes.

As a result of this multilayered risk aversion, which tasks producers with anticipating and avoiding even the most indistinct of potential blasphemies, more conservative cultural standards have prevailed across most genres, and the representation of Islam’s place(s) in quotidian life has remained largely absent from mass-mediated models of national culture. At the same time, because there is certainly profit to be had in broadcasting the very kind of programming that is likely to offend conservative groups, programmers employ various strategies to lower the risk of protests and to build enough goodwill with religious audiences that, should disaster strike, they will have a reservoir of social capital to draw on

61 Latin American soap opera.

62 Her materialism is even mentioned in the song that opens the program.

63 Liddle 1996.

64 Boellstorff 2004 and Adamson 2007.

among moderate viewers. The performance of religiosity pays into a sort of insurance policy against the unforeseeable, allowing programmers to occasionally take chances or push boundaries.

Morning prayer shows have been the cornerstone of this performance, but as noted above, the desire to garner higher ratings during morning time slots has not led many stations to make alterations to these programs so that they will appeal to wider audiences. Instead, many stations have pushed them up earlier and earlier in the broadcast schedule – some well before morning prayer time – to make room for news and variety shows. Other ways that station management have performed religiosity include special music and variety programs for major Islamic holy days, and short morality tales of between three and five minutes broadcast between programs during the month of Ramadan. The stations vary in the amount of resources they are willing to dedicate, particularly when most religious programming has historically garnered negligible ratings. SCTV, largely thought of as the most trendy and cosmopolitan station, has become significantly more thorough in its coverage of the Islamic calendar in recent years, reflecting a broader trend in the industry. As one programming executive told me, “for SCTV, it’s not just an obligation, but we must do this, [dedicate] a certain percentage of our air time for religious programs.” These displays of piousness reflect not only a need to appease potentially threatening groups, but are staged for other key publics as well, including jittery advertising agencies and corporate multinationals. On the other hand, the general tenor of Indonesian television content, outside the month of Ramadan, has shifted only marginally,⁶⁵ and station executives expressed no intention of changing the normative images of wealth, ethnicity and sexuality in the industry’s primetime content as the conservative social critics often demand.⁶⁶

ISLAM FOR THE HOLIDAYS

With the exception of occasional holiday-themed quiz and variety programs, there was not much in the way of Muslim-oriented programming throughout the first decade of private television in Indonesia. Producers of *sinetron* and comedies, which dominated (and continue to dominate) the primetime schedules, remained skeptical of integrating religious imagery or even markers of identification into their programs. In the field of imported television, virtually no programming was bought from other Muslim-majority countries, few of which have a significant presence at the international media markets. Holiday versions of existing programs, Ramadan music videos, and short, between-program Qur’anic lectures were the most visible forms of Islamic identification throughout the year. This should be contrasted with nations such as neighboring Malaysia which, despite greater religious diversity, has not shied away from symbols of Islam nor from putting representations of Muslim religious practice into conventional entertainment programs.⁶⁷

In 1998, at the height of Indonesia’s economic and political crises, Jakarta’s most successful television producer – Raam Punjabi, himself a Hindu originally from India – came up with the idea for an Islam-themed *sinetron*. It would be a soap opera in the

65 Ishadi 2011.

66 Soebagijo 2001; *Republika* 2001, 2009, 2011.

67 Zaharon 1996.

style his company was already proficient at making, but with a twist. Instead of being shown weekly, as with most primetime offerings, a new episode would be broadcast every day during the month of Ramadan – a whole year’s worth of shows televised in four weeks. And it would be timed to air just as the day’s fast-breaking meal would likely be ending, to catch the imagined Muslim family at just the right time, with just the right sort of show.

MultiVision’s⁶⁸ Doaku Harapanku (“My Hopes, My Dreams”), heavily promoted by its broadcasting network, RCTI, was a tremendous success in the ratings from its first week. As early as the following year, this pioneering series was followed by an onslaught of copy-cat programs from every major station. Suddenly, Islamic themes in primetime dramas were not only acceptable, but profitable and even trendy. The program’s success called into question the wisdom behind the industry’s long standing avoidance of such themes. Several producers told me this event led many of them to wonder which other unspoken rules were pointlessly constraining producers and when the national stations would begin to break them down.

But what sort of show was this, and what are the characteristics common to this emerging sub-genre? According to Ahmad Useph, the show’s co-creator, engineering the series’ success was a very delicate task. The entire program, from the music to the pacing of edits, was created with the intention of appealing to hungry, tired people, he told me, eager to discuss his capacity to envision the needs of this particular audience. The timing of the show was the crucial component: they wanted to make their *sinetron* an integral part of Ramadan, thematically on target and woven into the fabric of daily life during fasting. One clear avenue was to take advantage of the period after the fast-breaking meal, when – they posited – Muslim viewers keeping the fast would be most likely turning on their televisions and looking for something to watch that would not make them feel guilty during the holiest month on the calendar. Punjabi’s studied diligence at combing over and interpreting the ratings data contributed to the decision to go ahead with the production; he had detected an unfocused increase in overall television viewership at that time in previous years, and thought he knew what religious audiences were looking for.

One of the most pressing issues for Multivision was how Islamic practice could be represented in a *sinetron* while maintaining broad, popular appeal among audiences that were accustomed to Suharto-era secularism. As Uusuf told me, “. . . we had to choose which kind of Islam we wanted to show. Would it be the sort with all the *jilbabs*, or just the way of life? We agreed to go with the Islam that is in the soul. Not the physical . . .”

He confided to me that the period in which they had come up with the concept was actually one of the most dangerous moments in recent Indonesian history to be making an Islamic *sinetron*, because the volatile political situation and lack of effective law enforcement made them very vulnerable if the show was not well received. His solution was to make the program’s representation of Islam so harmonious and non-confrontational that “even Christians would enjoy it.” He spoke often of finding “universal themes” that all of Indonesia’s ethnic groups and religions could relate to, such as charity for the poor, fealty toward parents, and a rejection of cruelty, corruption and other accepted evils. His

68 Punjabi’s production company, which has dominated primetime commercial television since it shifted away from imported programming in the early 1990s. Its full title is P.T. MultiVision Plus.

characters were played by popular sinetron stars, not actors known for their religiosity, and his scripts were not so different from the family-centered dramas that already dominated Indonesia's primetime.

The few differences there were included more explicit discussions of morality, along with more overt and dramatized displays of piety. Characters spoke often of it being Ramadan and of the need to fast and avoid smoking; female stars wore far more conservative costumes than the trendsetting (and boundary-pushing) fashions audiences were accustomed to seeing them in. As a matter of policy, and to defend against potential critics, Punjabi decided they would not cast any non-Muslim actors. None of this may seem to be particularly innovative, but it was a first for the industry and a major step toward finding a national synergy between Islam and popular culture – a connection that was arguably more notable in its long absence than in its advent.

THE MUSLIM AUDIENCE

The Ramadan soap opera was not a new form to global television; similar sorts of programs have been popular in Egypt since the early 1990s. The circumstances surrounding the appearance of these programs in Indonesia, however, provide insight into the perceived structural and discursive boundaries of the commercial public sphere, in the sense developed by Giddens,⁶⁹ and how they were conceived of and acted upon by media producers. The rise of popular, Muslim-oriented television, which has since expanded beyond Ramadan programming, is a (relatively) rare story of innovation by Indonesian media industries, but also a lesson in the deeply risk-averse culture that has historically prevented such experiments from going forward. At the same time, it is more a tale of the industry's constructing and overcoming its own perceived constraints on representations of religiosity than it is of any encounter between commercial media and government or institutional power.

I spoke with a number of producers and writers of Ramadan sinetrons from various production houses and found they shared many goals and techniques for building an Islamic aesthetic, but the most remarkable was the way in which they often personified the "Muslim audience." With Indonesia being approximately 88 percent Muslim, this did not strike me as a particularly elusive demographic to be seeking out. Certainly all Indonesian national television had to appeal to Muslims if it was to enjoy any measure of commercial success. What producers gradually made me aware of is that this 88 percent of the population was not the "Muslim audience" they were referring to. Rather, they were trying to target the religious sentiment within this 88 percent, who were normally conceived of as mainstream Indonesian audiences who happened to be Muslim. Before the model of the Ramadan sinetron had been fleshed out, Indonesians' associations with religious television were a tremendous hindrance to commercial producers, who did not want any association with the familiar image of an Ulama lecturing to the camera for thirty minutes. But producers like Punjabi told me they felt strongly that religious sentiment, particularly the more amorphous sentimentality surrounding a holiday period like Ramadan,

69 Giddens 1984.

could be directed to create an emotional bond between viewers and their programs. It was a new tool, Punjabi claimed, “to win the viewers’ hearts.”

Although producers, including Punjabi and Yusuf, have become much braver in depicting some of the material aspects of being an Indonesian Muslim, such as women wearing headscarves, since Doaku Harapanku aired during Ramadan 1998 to great commercial success, the formula has remained relatively steady. Rather than focusing on romance, which is the most popular central storyline in conventional *sinetron*, the programs tend to revolve around family relationships, including issues of obedience and filial duty. The same themes often come up in standard *sinetron*, but in the Ramadan *sinetron* the issues take on a discursively religious flavor. The programs build to a big finish at Idul Fitri, the holiday celebrating the end of Ramadan, after which point the series ends, perhaps to be revived the following year or replaced with a new title. Generally, an evil character is brought around to the side of piety in a narrative formula that receives heavy rotation during the U.S. holiday season as well. Like nearly all Indonesian *sinetron*, the settings tend toward the opulent and the characters mysteriously wealthy, reflecting inspirations that range from popular Korean dramas to telenovelas. Some producers and writers took their models of religious and holiday programming from American shows they had seen on TVRI in the decades preceding commercial TV. The co-producer of RCTI’s original Ramadan *sinetron* made a point of telling me that he had been inspired by the U.S. programs *Little House on the Prairie* and *Highway to Heaven*, both of which are known for religious and morally conservative themes.

ALTERNATIVE MODELS

In speaking with clerics and media liaisons at the country’s larger Islamic organizations, in 2002 and again in 2009–2010, several themes emerged. Some felt these programs represented a positive step, and they publicly approved of any overt appearance of Islam in the otherwise largely secular television lineup. The Council of Ulama (MUI), an organization of top Muslim clerics created by Suharto, started to evaluate each network’s performance during Ramadan and now gives out awards to those considered most favorable toward Islam in various categories. When I visited a deliberation in 2002, the judging criteria appeared to focus mostly on quantity of Islamic-designated programming. Speaking more closely with clerics, including those serving in MUI, I found most had little respect for the content of Ramadan *sinetron* and newer, Islam-themed magazine shows, but felt unable to offer an alternative. Many considered the Islam represented by these programs to be a thin façade over the same vapid *sinetron* that they critique heavily in the press. However, in my discussions with their media representatives, I found the largest Muslim organizations in the country, Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, had themselves made little organized effort to influence or work with private stations to improve prayer or entertainment shows. Nor had they tried to produce their own programming; several representatives spoke of creating their own stations, but this appeared to be wishful thinking and largely oriented toward political goals. I spent some time with Budi, a prominent member of Muhammadiyah, who had a film and television background himself and had done some private work as a director. He explained to me that he had tried to argue that more funds should be devoted to engagement with popular television and had tried

to start a media training program within the organization, but that he had not gotten very far with the organization's leadership, who did not consider it a priority.

This unwillingness to become involved exists in stark contrast to Christian organizations, which have a history of engagement with popular media in Indonesia. Most stations give time for Christian broadcasts on Sundays under the same aegis of community service that covers the Islamic prayer shows. But the Christian shows share little with the stolid lectures that greet Muslim viewers each morning. Largely evangelical, they borrow heavily from American televangelical aesthetics and traditions. During those rare times they are broadcast by national stations, it is not uncommon to see Indonesian ministers bounding through glittering churches, healing the sick, and summoning viewers to press their hands against the television screens and be saved. They also feature music segments with popular Christian musicians and singers, many of whom have "cross-over" appeal with non-Christian audiences, filmed with high production value on expensive sets. Furthermore, at least one Christian organization (CBN) has a history of blocking time⁷⁰ on major stations to show its own in-house entertainment productions, which blend testimonials and dramatic recreations to illustrate the stories of viewers who converted to Christianity. With financing from Australia, Europe and the United States, these organizations' engagement with private television is limited largely by the stations themselves. Finally, the legalization of regional television in 2002 has largely failed to provide popular, local alternatives to national stations, but there is evidence the industry has flourished in Christian areas like North Sulawesi and predominantly Hindu Bali.⁷¹ This suggests that religious minorities may be looking disproportionately to local broadcasting as national stations focus increasingly on the Muslim audience.

CONCLUSIONS

Like the Idul Adha episode of *Kata Berkait* discussed at the beginning of this article, new television constructions of commercial Islam take steps to retain credibility – making sure to cast Muslim actors and contestants, making broad, thematic references to Muslim history and practice, and labeling their content as Islamic – but in the end look much more like the commercial television they supplanted than the prayer programs, educational segments and other religious media that they have further marginalized. After interviewing a Muslim cleric who had been briefly recruited by SCTV to do a morning prayer show, I showed him some of the photos I had taken while on the set of the Ramadan *sinetron* *Doa Membawa Berkah 2*. "Who's going to come watch me when they can see Tamara⁷² talking this and that about Islam all the time?" he said, exasperated.

This was frustration I found common not just among clergy but also journalists, scholars and many others who professed Islam as an important part of their lives. One could

70 The practice first started during the economic crisis of the late 1990s, when television stations, whose equipment costs were largely in U.S. dollars, sought alternative revenue wherever they could find it, even if that meant substituting infomercial-style paid programming in (or near) primetime hours. In the early to mid-2000s the selling of blocked airtime became less common, and was relegated to less-watched hours by most stations, but has continued sporadically, particularly with newer and less affluent stations.

71 Barkin 2013.

72 Tamara Blezinsky was one of Indonesia's leading *sinetron* stars and models in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

argue their own authority was undermined by these commercially compelling models of Muslim life being proffered by national television, a seeming indication of the “fragmentation of sacred authority” discussed by Eickelman and Piscatori,⁷³ as well as many others examining the role of media among Muslim communities around the world.⁷⁴ Within Indonesia, the Ramadan sinetron genre has been accused of compartmentalizing Islam, emphasizing superficial practice over education, and confining the religion conveniently to a holiday season.⁷⁵ Megawati Soekarnoputri, who was president at the time the genre became entrenched in the domestic mediascape, went out of her way to publicly denounce the industry as failing to represent “kebudayaan Indonesia sendiri” (Indonesia’s own culture) both generally and in religious matters.⁷⁶ Current president Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono has also been a critic of the industry in a less vocal but perhaps more effectual manner, having appointed a conservative Minister of Communications and Information, Tifatul Sembiring, who has sought stricter control of TV, along with the Internet.⁷⁷

In examining the elite condemnation that has accompanied the industry’s shift toward a commercial Islam, one might be forgiven for jumping to a McLuhanian style of reasoning wherein commercial television is conceived as a sort of Trojan horse for neoliberal discourses on religion as consumption.⁷⁸ This interpretation would necessarily subscribe to a model of cultural globalization that frames media products within a set of economic power relations that differentially favor the developed world and its economic interests.⁷⁹ As Lee and Katz observed more than thirty years ago, foreign models for television broadcasting have long been adopted in the developing world, most prominently the advertising-driven structure of the commercial broadcasting schedule.⁸⁰ But this view neglects to account for hybridization with local cultural frames,⁸¹ the history of local religious politics,⁸² and other cross-cutting tensions that guide producers in negotiating content and imagining audiences. More generally, the presumption of Western global, cultural hegemony – pointed out as one of Ferguson’s myths of globalization some twenty years ago⁸³ – creates a myopia toward the “surfeit of cultural materials and ideational possibilities” available to Jakarta’s cosmopolitan media industry.⁸⁴

But the aesthetically derivative qualities of these programs are, by most accounts, closely linked to producers’ concerns not only for ratings, prestige, and revenue, but the reactions of the religious community, or at least its more politically vocal groups. These fears,

73 Eickelman and Piscatori 1996, p. 71.

74 E.g. Eisenlohr 2011; Mandaville 2009; Wiktorowicz 2004.

75 Ishadi 2011.

76 Negara 2002.

77 Liauw 2010.

78 E.g. McLuhan 1964.

79 Collins 1986; Fox 1975; Herman and McChesney 1997.

80 Lee and Katz 1980.

81 Garcia-Canclini 1997; Shohat and Stam 1994.

82 Hefner 2011.

83 Ferguson 1992.

84 Barth 1993, p. 4.

burdening an already risk-averse industry, have contributed to a production environment hostile toward originality and experimentation. In this context, producers are increasingly moving to partake of safe, media-tested narrative and formal conventions, regardless of where they happen to originate. The noteworthy aspect of emerging genres such as the Ramadan *sinetron* is not that they constitute hybrids; this is essentially always the case.⁸⁵ Instead, what I find compelling is the employment of narrative and formal elements from different global media traditions within these specific socio-political production contexts and toward locally particular ends; in this case, media producers have created a new, if highly derivative, formula that allows them to diffuse the risk of offending Islamist groups while generating solid ratings⁸⁶ and building goodwill among national audiences. In so doing, new, neoliberal models of middle-class identity are crafted. These models, which, as Anagnost has observed in Chinese media,⁸⁷ tend to obscure inequality as simple, cultural difference, are synthesized with compatible representations of Muslim citizenship, blending religion and national identity in a manner reminiscent of Mankekar's case study of India.⁸⁸ But unlike that case, the two are continuously blended with images of commercial consumption, both within the programs' narrative and in the course of the overall TV flow. It is not uncommon, for example, to see the same actor who stars in the Ramadan *sinetron* you are watching selling products during the commercial breaks.

Perhaps the greatest success for the television industry, however, is in undermining – or at least sidestepping – the public, moral authority of some Muslim groups and conservative critics by taking their case directly to the moderate, lay public. In creating holiday-bound programs that invoke a passable façade of religiosity, producers have opted out of a binary negotiation with conservatives and therewith avoided concessions on the big issues of provocative content and wealth norms, neither of which have greatly changed in the past decade and a half.⁸⁹ They have instead opted to develop goodwill with audiences by approaching Islam on their own terms, while many Muslim groups such as the MUI have opted to sanction or even reward this sort of programming. This has allowed stations to transform their performance of piousness from the obligatory sacrifices of the Suharto era into a lucrative and prestige-building exercise that additionally facilitates their continuing production of the very content so often attacked by religious groups. As the post-Suharto era has come to be characterized by an increasing rise of popular Islam, new constraints on public speech and expression, and growing conservatism in many areas of the government, this synthesis has been critical to the survival and development of the country's most popular mass medium. In Indonesia's turbulent economy of representation, media producers have won a clear victory through their nuanced appropriation and repackaging of Muslim imagery.

85 Hoesterey 2001.

86 Because these programs are relatively expensive to produce, and include more episodes than conventional *sinetron* series broadcast in an entire year, estimates of their profitability have been varied. It may be that in some cases, stations are willing to accept low profits or even modest losses on these programs in order to reap the peripheral benefits of airing them.

87 Anagnost 2008.

88 Mankekar 2002.

89 Ishadi 2011.

One reason why this discussion remains relevant to Huntington's enduring perspective is that commercial Islam demonstrates not only the clear compatibility of Muslim-oriented media and neoliberal perspectives, but also the effectiveness of private media in commodifying the religion in a way that contravenes those fundamentalist voices he was so focused on.⁹⁰ Though the national discourse may still be characterized by narratives that juxtapose pious Islam against what is represented as the moral laxity of Western influence,⁹¹ the continued popularity of television and its aesthetically compelling models of Islamic practice have given moderates and those with no interest in such dichotomies a new Muslim imaginary on which to draw. Thus, the Huntingtonian focus on civilizational divides, while compelling as a political rhetoric even within Indonesia, fails to reflect the pop-cultural narratives that dominate the country's national mediascape, where a feel-good commercial Islam can exist independent of global conflict.

This difference makes the rise of commercial Islam in Indonesia all the more interesting a phenomenon to observe. It reflects Rudnyckyj's "market Islam" in its association of circumstantially driven values with religious ideology, though the relevant circumstances and corresponding values diverge greatly. In his case: "honesty, self-discipline, accountability, and considering work as a form of worship."⁹² In the case studied here: an apolitical religious morality, compatibility with extant aesthetic tropes, and compartmentalized presentation (both within the narratives themselves and as meta-praxis in the TV schedule and flow).⁹³ What remains a fruitful direction for future research is the character of reception practices and how audiences integrate commercial Islam with other flows of religious knowledge in daily life. Politically-oriented scholars of Islam writing about contemporary media have convincingly chronicled the breakdown of hierarchical authority in knowledge production,⁹⁴ but tend to focus on cases wherein media consumers and producers are intellectually self-motivated interpreters, like themselves. Commercial Islam in this case shows evidence of producers' apparent success in focusing much more on viewers' emotional engagement with the religion, giving them models of Muslim lifestyle that side-step the controversial identity politics and interpretative debates of *Al Jazeera* panel discussions or the Internet message board, while offering them the catharsis of ostensible religious engagement.

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90 Huntington 1997, 2007.

91 Marching 2007; Weintraub 2008.

92 Rudnyckyj 2009a, especially p. 198.

93 Williams 2003 (1975).

94 Echchaibi 2011; Anderson 2003; 2006; Eickelman and Anderson 2003b.

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