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Introduction: Why is Entertainment Television in Indonesia Important?

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This special edition about contemporary entertainment media in Indonesia consists of four articles. Each focuses on different popular genres of entertainment on television and their associated commentaries, primarily in the print media. The authors examine different aspects of television production which has burgeoned since the economic crisis of the late 1990s. The topics range from popular Indonesian music programmes, through imported genres like talent quests, real-life crime and supernatural reality TV, to travel programmes which represent Indonesia to Indonesians through foreign eyes. The articles all give a sense of the energy, vitality and openness of mass television broadcasting formats, although these are usually portrayed in the mass communications and media studies' literature as either effectively determined by multinational corporations or else conventional to the point of sterility. As a collection, these pieces, with their stress on television as complex sets of situated practices, offer new ways of approaching one of Asia's major media industries.

Before going any further, it is perhaps worth pausing for a moment to consider some of the reasons for devoting a special issue of the *Asian Journal of Communication* to Indonesian popular entertainment television. Of the larger Asian countries, Indonesia is among the least represented in English-language publications. Major collections claiming to offer coherent coverage of non-Western or Asian media routinely not only exclude Indonesia—the third most populous Asian country—but they fail even to remark on this omission (for example, Curran & Park, 2000; Erni & Chua, 2005, respectively). The reasons are several. Part pertains to academic fashion, which in turn often rides on the coattails of political and economic priorities. So Asia easily becomes reducible to high-profile countries, usually India, China, Japan or possibly Korea. Part is to do with how many Asian scholars from different countries have received training in the West, and so command the codes for acceptance by international English-language publications. Part is also due to the relative paucity, until recently, of Western scholars working on Indonesian media.¹ Specific historical and cultural considerations also come into play. Indonesia's often rumbustious

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political history and repressive attitude toward intellectuals has not always been clement to research and publication. Perhaps this is why Singapore, the home of the *Asian Journal of Communication*, has long felt uneasy about its vast neighbour and so has often proceeded as if it did not really exist. It is my hope that this collection will help stimulate interest among scholars of Asian media.

There are, of course, also more positive reasons for discussing contemporary Indonesian mass media. Television has been inseparable from the project of national development ever since Indonesia was one of the first countries to launch a civilian satellite, Palapa, in 1976 and to place a television set (car-battery-powered where necessary) in every village. The aim was to reach out across the vast and sprawling archipelago and to address—or *interpellate* in Althusserian terms (1984)—the population, first as the masses or as citizens-in-development and then, with the emergence of terrestrial and satellite commercial television in the 1990s, in various more differentiated ways, including notably as consumers (Kitley, 2000). Television was also vital in the New Order's articulation of political, ethnic and other differences as 'culture', with each geographical region being identified by its distinctive dress styles, performing and plastic arts, and so forth. However, television, together with radio and the Internet, was also key to the downfall of President Suharto in 1998 (Sen & Hill, 2000). The abolition of the Ministry of Information and the relaxation of state censorship under Suharto's successor, Habibie, ushered in a period of dynamism and expansion of media in general, and of television in particular.

Although print media, together with largely decentralized and sometimes radical radio, are important for understanding contemporary Indonesia, it is television which preoccupies the Indonesian political classes and which most viewers consider their main source of information. However, television audiences, reared on the propaganda of the New Order régime, and familiar with the rhetorical devices of local popular theatre and literature, are often remarkably skilled at the critical interpretation of broadcasting.

In order to attract advertising revenue and to fill broadcasting time, most television comprises what one might broadly call entertainment. Accurate figures are not available,² but it is generally assumed that most of the population of some 250 million can access and watch television. So the Indonesian market is potentially large. However, it is differentiated in cross-cutting ways by age, class, ethnicity, political affiliation and religion.³ So the search by the commercial channels for formats which will attract such a heterogeneous viewing population, which now tends quickly to tire of the latest fashion, leads at once to experimentation and adaptation of foreign genres, and to the unabashed imitation of locally successful programmes until audiences get bored. State television, which is still subject to various government guidelines on content, languishes accordingly. For the last 30 years, television has been inextricably intertwined with nation-building and with attempts to create an embracing and hegemonic vision of a single people, sharing a kaleidoscopic culture from Sabang in Aceh to Merauke in West Papua. To study

television is to study how Indonesians have been invited to imagine themselves and others.

Culturalist Approaches to Indonesian Media

As the stress upon how Indonesians engage with television suggests, this collection adopts a broadly culturalist approach. Although they come from different disciplinary backgrounds—cultural anthropology, critical cultural and media studies, ethnomusicology and religious studies—as specialists in different aspects of Indonesia, the contributors all recognize how distinctive cultural understandings affect Indonesian programme production, distribution and reception. Certain processes of broadcasting—as an industry—are obviously similar to other Asian countries. However, the same cannot necessarily be said for its broader social implications and how they are discussed publicly, as well as the inflection of the programming itself and how it is implicated in viewers' lives. The latter are far more distinct to Indonesia. Political-economic or mass communications approaches to television, for instance, would have difficulty addressing the cultural factors which determine programming content (Barkin), how imported talent contests engage audiences (Coutas), the penchant for supernatural reality TV (Hobart), still less the success of local *dangdut* music as a challenge to contemporary pop music (Weintraub).

This collection, however, is not primarily concerned with the long-running debate as to the relative merits of quantitative as against qualitative approaches in media studies. Indeed the terms of this debate may well be misconceived (Hobart, 2006, p. 499). Our concern is more constructive. It is to show how culturally sensitive analyses can enrich media and communications studies. Such an approach has wider ethical and political implications. Political-economic and mass communications schools take it for granted that the theories and methods developed in European and American universities are sufficient effectively to explain relevant media and communications processes without reference to the practices and understandings of producers, audiences and commentators—here Indonesians. As Asians become major world producers of film and television, new styles of production, working practices, aesthetics and commentary by media professionals and intellectuals on film and media themselves have emerged, which require recognition if we are genuinely to address the implications of the postcolonial critique.

Why Entertainment Television?

Entertainment television is often considered frivolous and not worth study except as evidence of global media trends and how ideology is inculcated through popular programming.⁴ If we are to understand the political, social and cultural significance of television, surely we should be looking at serious genres, like news, current affairs, documentaries, political talk shows and development broadcasting. Is it not there that

the nation is on display and opinion is formed and promulgated? This argument however is inadequate, because it rests upon questionable presuppositions about how media work, a consideration of which involves critical media theory.

Several issues are of immediate relevance. Media and communications studies often ignore the fact that production and reception are not timeless activities, but have histories. Most accounts also presume that the meaning intended by the producers approximates what viewers understand. Not only does the evidence from ethnographic studies of viewers suggest otherwise, but the transmission model of communication is theoretically problematic in itself. These accounts involve unacknowledged assumptions about human nature and rationality. They also assume that objective processes are independent of the practices which constitute them and the situations in which they take place. Finally, academics tend to give weight to issues and practices that are central to their own lives. So they focus on 'serious' programming as 'text'—consider the strange metaphor of 'reading' television. And they have difficulty imagining how other people—most notably 'the masses'—might have quite different ideas and practices (Baudrillard, 1983).

Television viewing involves distinctive histories of practices and cultural understandings. After over 20 years of the state broadcasting rigidly controlled, highly conventionalized, anodyne and often evidently counter-factual or manipulated news and documentary (Kitley, 2000)—even by the standards of these highly formalized genres—audiences have become largely sceptical and critical. Current affairs and documentary are not a good route to understanding how people imagine and talk about themselves if they are widely dismissed by viewers.⁵ In the heady days following Suharto's resignation, political talk shows (which were conveniently cheap to broadcast) flourished as different scenarios of reform were aired. Three years later, as the problems of overturning long-entrenched networks of power and collusion became apparent, such programmes had all but disappeared. Indeed 'serious' news was being cut back in favour of more sensational fare like crime and the doings of celebrities.

The assumption that serious or factual broadcasting is received seriously or factually presupposes some kind of equivalence, the preservation of essential meaning, between what the producers imagine programming to be about and how audiences in fact interpret and make use of what they watch. This myth is a necessary fiction of political communication. But it does not follow that media and communications specialists should concur. The conventional argument that underpins the consonance of meaning for producers and receivers is some version of the transmission model. This states that senders transmit messages which are received relatively intact by receivers; and potential miscommunication can be eliminated by repetition. The argument is as beguilingly appealing as it is wrong. For a start, the proponents of the strong version, the mathematical theory of communication, explicitly warned against applying their model to social communication. Referring to the semantic problems of communication, that is the relation of how senders interpret messages as against receivers, Shannon warned that this is a very deep and

involved situation, even when one deals only with the relatively simpler problems of communicating through speech (Shannon & Weaver, 1949).

In one of the founding texts of media studies, Stuart Hall (1980) argued against assuming the isomorphism of encoding and decoding television, on the grounds that to do so ignored the relations of production and reception involved. However, the difficulties of knowing how audiences engage with the mass media are far more intractable than even Hall allowed, as his critique retains aspects of the presuppositions he sets out to question (Hobart, 2006).

Transmission models anticipate how large and heterogeneous populations engage with the mass media and so make all sorts of presuppositions about human nature. The risk is evident that élites, including academics, project onto the viewing public either a vision of how they imagine themselves or else the public as somehow lacking. What distinguishes Indonesian television producers, as Barkin notes, is precisely that their backgrounds are quite different from their viewers'. So either television functions to bridge the gap—to mediate—between inadequate humanity and how they should ideally be, or television gives them what suits the executives. However, the viewing masses are also prone to being misled, which is why entertainment media engender such an equivocal reaction among academics and political élites.⁶

Two other sets of presuppositions are also widely implicated in mass communications approaches. The first takes it as unproblematic that media content is adequately described as texts containing messages which are—or should be—in what Basil Bernstein designated the 'elaborated code' used by the middle classes and ultimately propositional. As television is strongly visual and auditory, quite how images and music, which are so central to entertainment media, are supposed to work is far less clear. The second is about rationality. There is confusion as to whether the notion of reason in analyses of the mass media is descriptive (describes what is the case), prescriptive (states what should be the case) or formal (outlines the conditions of intelligibility). Development media conventionally stress the second. The aim is to communicate the desirability of modernity to be achieved through rational development. It follows neither that how people engage with television can adequately be described using rationality nor that formal conditions are sufficient to delineate how media are understood and used.

By contrast the contributors here are interested in the diversity of both producers and viewers, and in the variety of media-related practices which occur. Their concern is how both producers and viewers are differentiated by class, gender, ethnicity, age and other factors. They do not assume some pre-social homunculus which is the essential transmitter and recipient of the media (Henriquez, Hollway, Urwin, Venn, & Walkerdine, 1984). Instead, the contributors work against a background of the practices of production (designing formats, meeting deadlines, positioning themselves within the industry) and readers' and viewers' practices (watching, reading, interpreting, commenting, and engaging or refusing to engage in different situations).

Another problem involves preconceptions, partly shared it seems, by both the political classes and academics. Put simply, they tend to assume that, because

something is important and serious to them, *ipso facto* it is to the rest of the population. Ideally programme content should inform and instruct. Although they may not be particularly interested, people ought to take politics and current affairs seriously. (What the viewing public actually do tune in and watch is the theme of several contributions here.) It is far from clear though that the realism implicit in such accounts adequately represents how the mass media work. Summing up research on news broadcasts, Fiske (1989, p. 308) noted how news and current affairs are structured according to such highly conventional narrative codes that we are 'justified in thinking of the news as masculine soap opera'.

The key word here is 'serious', the antitheses of which are 'frivolous' or 'entertaining'—the resonances of the dichotomy deriving, as Dyer has noted, from the distinction between labour and leisure. Entertainment rejects the claims of morality, politics and aesthetics in a culture which still accords these high status. It is born of a society that both considers leisure and pleasure to be secondary and even inferior to the businesses of producing and reproducing, work and family, and yet invests much energy, desire and money into promoting them (Dyer, 1992a, p. 2).

In a functional analysis, leisure can be seen either as a way of compensating for the dreariness of work or else as the passivity attendant on industrial labour . . . But the richness and variety of actual forms of leisure suggest that leisure should also be seen as the creation of meaning in a world in which work and the daily round are characterized by drudgery, insistence and meaninglessness. (Dyer, 1992b, p. 13)

Dyer's argument points to how the value-laden dichotomy between serious media and entertainment involves unacknowledged presuppositions about class interests in capitalist societies. It also offers a way out of the commonsensical idea that entertainment for the masses worldwide is adequately explained by recourse to an uncritical appeal to 'escapism'. Morson (1995) has noted an unappreciated alternative to the narrative technique of foreshadowing. This is a device widely used in literature and media, in which future events are anticipated, so giving the narrative a sense of completeness and finality, which stands however in stark antithesis to lived experience. This alternative he designated as 'sideshadowing', which is the recognition that at each point in our lives there are many alternative possibilities, most of which remain unactualized. These sideshadows constitute the repertoire of narrative and, for viewers, the appreciation of other possibilities in human lives and their ineradicable openness. Entertainment—even pop song contests—arguably involves sideshadowing.⁷

The Argument

Taken together, the articles in this collection offer an argument for the critical examination of the cultural practices which constitute Indonesian entertainment television. Gareth Barkin's piece demonstrates the contribution anthropology can make to understanding processes of production. Drawing upon his ethnography of

production houses and channels in Jakarta, he shows how the format, content and style of programming depend on issues of ‘intra-group prestige’ and ‘the internal, aesthetic politics of Jakarta’s “culture of production” and the sorts of forms, narratives and themes that resonate within it.’ Starting with a pilot travel programme for TransTV, he examines how decisions have little to do with anticipating audience demand or interest, but reflect executives’ overseas education and their distinctively élite tastes affected by global media narratives. The result is that, in travel and many other genres, the subject position presented to viewers is often foreign. So Indonesian viewers are invited to adopt a ‘foreignizing gaze’ upon themselves, reified in travel programmes as exotic and commoditized ‘culture’. Barkin’s article suggests the importance of ethnographic analyses of media production to complement political-economic studies.

The other three articles examine issues around the popularity of the highest-rated genres of programmes over the last few years: interactive singer-performer talent quests, crime and supernatural reality TV, and local *dangdut* music. Penny Coutas examines Indonesian imports of global brands, notably the tightly-regulated *Idol* format. She considers whether these support the cultural imperialism thesis, voiced in the Indonesian press, which argues that multinational corporations dominate high-profile media production in developing countries. On audiences, Coutas notes that ‘in many respects . . . the real “consumers” of *Indonesian Idol* are the advertisers themselves, whilst “the audience” . . . constitute the product’. And *Idola Indonesia* presents the West as ‘the “ideal” and participation in a global network of celebrity as being the ultimate accomplishment in the entertainment world’. However, she notes there is much that economic and quantitative analyses cannot explain, from the cultural role of interactivity to the heterogeneity of audiences or how programmes are ‘glocalized’. Coutas distinguishes ordinary viewers, who rarely vote, from supporters (*pendukung*) who participate actively and wield a degree of agency. Whatever the global parameters, Indonesian audiences use such programmes imaginatively to re-think Indonesia, its place in the world and their own lives.

In my article, I examine two genres of reality TV, which have attracted high ratings and extensive criticism in the press from intellectuals and the political élite, namely, real-life crime and supernatural reality programmes. These genres stand opposed to the disproportionate—and largely fantastic—representation of the upper middle classes in being about ‘ordinary people’. An analysis of the broadsheet debates, however, reiterates the gulf that Barkin also highlights between the Indonesian élite and the majority of the population. I consider whether these genres are conservative in that narratively they reassert social order against threats, or might constitute sites of potential resistance. As audiences come to television with cultural pre-understandings from Indonesian popular theatre and literature, I argue that such programmes open up possibilities undreamed of in cultural and media studies.

Andrew Weintraub explores the broadcasting history of popular hybrid music, *dangdut*. *Dangdut* was ‘associated with urban underclass audiences’ and depicted in popular print media as ‘backward, hickish, and unsophisticated’. As new recording

and broadcasting technologies disseminated *dangdut*, intellectuals represented it by contrast to Western pop not only as the music of Indonesians, but also through *dangdut* “‘the people’ could be harnessed for their sheer numbers in imagining a national culture’. In so doing, however, the masses ‘receded even further from representation’. Beyond official enunciations about the masses, ‘however, lies the wild exuberance and pleasure of *dangdut*’, moments where the antagonisms of nostalgia for the past and rampant commercialism, between classes, and of political representation are worked out. So popular music, the raucous epitome of entertainment, emerges as perhaps more revelatory than are the texts of the political and intellectual elite about the intricate discourse in which Indonesians participate about the conditions of their lives and futures through the mass media.

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Notes

- [1] Among the notable exceptions are David Hill, Philip Kitley and Krishna Sen. Fortunately there is now a generation of young scholars working on aspects of Indonesian media, some of whom are represented in this collection.
- [2] An ACNielsen survey of nine major cities in 2005 showed over 92% of people watched television.
- [3] The number of major ‘cultures’ and languages in Indonesia varies depending on how one defines and differentiates between them. Most estimates exceed at least 300.
- [4] Popular culture constitutes an ‘arena of consent and resistance . . . where hegemony arises, and where it is secured . . . [It is] one of the places where socialism might be constituted. That is why “popular culture” matters . . . Otherwise, to tell you the truth, I don’t give a damn about it’ (Hall, 1981, pp. 230–231, 239). However, the arguments about popular culture as an object of study are not immediately relevant here and have been rehearsed elsewhere (for example, Fiske, 1989; McGuigan, 1992).
- [5] The notable exception to this, at least between 2003 and 2005 when I studied local television stations in Java and Bali, was local news, which achieved the highest programme ratings (although television executives privately doubted their accuracy). A key reason seems to be that local news is fairly easily corroborated independently and so viewers learn how to incorporate stations’ biases.
- [6] There is an implicit Christian imagery of humanity as fallen. However, other religions and political doctrines have alternative ways of constituting the masses as lacking.

- [7] Unfortunately, because of publication deadlines, we were not able to include an intriguing piece in preparation by Faruk from Universitas Gadjah Mada on the top-rated sitcom *Bajaj Bajuri*, set among the Jakarta underclass. *Bajaj Bajuri* creates worlds of possibility through a complex play of realism and aspiration. From the analysis of viewers' commentaries, Faruk shows how viewers are reflexively aware that they are watching a genre historically positioned in relation to previous genres. He also explicates how a popular comedy offers a subtle commentary on representations of both class and realism in the Indonesian mass media.

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