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## Religion in the Age of Media [Religion and Television in Indonesia: Ethics Surrounding Dakwahtainment]

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## Religion in the Age of Media

### A Functional Perspective

In the discussion on religion and television, two concepts are relevant: “mediation” and “mediatisation” of religion. While the former concerns how the medium, in this case television, mediates the distance between the object of viewership (religion) and the viewers, the latter relates to how religion is mediatised to the extent of reducing its essence to suit the needs of the viewers as consumers.

Accepting the necessity of a theological starting point, Walter Davis *et al.* (2001) propose a way to examine television “through the lens of faith.” They argue that television acts the same way in society as religion. A religion consists of four elements: a world view composed of a web of mutually reinforcing beliefs and values; a moral code; periodic public rituals; and a community of believers who practice these rituals. Television provides all four (Davis *et al.*, 2001: xii).

The instantaneous live coverage of the crumbling Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York on 11 September 2001 testified to the importance and relevance of religion in the age of media, with live television at the forefront. Sadly, religion here was represented by what Juergensmayer (2001) calls “religious terrorism”. The spectacle

impressed on viewers in real time the immediacy and urgency of the so-called “Islamic menace” and intimated that the United States of America—the primary victim of the terror attack – would rise to the occasion by launching a devastating counter-attack against Afghanistan and Iraq, where the supposed Muslim terrorists were supposedly based.

The tragic 9/11 episode informed television viewers around the world that religion remained to be a force to be reckoned with and that the media (specifically, television) will continually cover any gruesome news. The old adage that “good news is bad news, and bad news is good news” is still engrained in the mind-set of both the producers and to a lesser degree the consumers of news.

Hoover (2002) argues that scholars should no longer treat media and religion as separate spheres or entities that influence one another, as they are intricately and inextricably connected. On *Practicing Religion in the Age of Media*, he writes:

A good deal of what goes on in the multiple relationships between religion and the media involves layered interconnections between religious symbols, interests, and meanings and the modern media sphere within which much of contemporary culture is made known (Hoover 2002: 5).

It is thus conceivable to think that religion and television, being a popular platform for the cultivation of culture, are natural partners. In his book entitled *Television Culture: Popular Pleasures and Politics*, Fiske (1987) argues that television is a “cultural agent” that serves as “a provoker and circulator of meanings”. He explains that:

Culture is concerned with meanings and pleasures: our culture consists of the meanings we make of our social experience and of our social relations, and therefore the sense we have of our “selves”. It also situates those meanings within the social system, for a social system can only be held in place by the meanings that people make of it. Culture is deeply inscribed

in the differential distribution of power within a society, for power relations can only be stabilised or destabilised by the meanings that people make of them. Culture is a struggle for meanings as society is a struggle for power (Fiske 1987: 20).

Here, religion and television are mediated by cultural meaning projected onto the screen and controlled by the gatekeepers, who serve as agents of the “dominant ideology”. Furthermore, Fiske (1987: 21) contends that television is “made to appear as the result of natural rather than cultural processes, it is taken away from the realm of history and culture and moved towards that of universal truth... (In short,) television produces ‘reality’ rather than reflects it.”

The dominant ideological outlook of Indonesia after *reformasi* clearly points to the neo-liberal tendencies of the state, which puts forward the market as the primary mechanism to distribute culture and the values entrenched in it. This logic leads to the functional utilisation of religion in Indonesian television.

It is functional in the sense that religion in Indonesia is seen by and large in a good and positive light and that devout or religious individuals play a strategic role in guiding humanity in matters pertaining to both this world and the hereafter. Such constructive functionality, however, is then used by media owners, executives and producers to boost their programme ratings through mass predilection, which in turn dictates the Indonesian viewers’ market preference. Hence, the functional utilisation of religion in infotainment programmes provides a veneer of morality to what can be considered essentially as glamorising immorality and celebrating socially reprehensible behaviour and misconduct.

The function of religion in television, however, does not stop at infotainment programmes. Many other programmes indicate a perfectly

harmonious relationship between religion and television. They include religiously-oriented films, movies, *sinetrons* (electronic cinema) akin to soap operas elsewhere, reality shows, docu-dramas, game shows and other genres that blatantly propagate religion, namely Islam, in Indonesia. Below we elaborate on some of the genres and programmes that clearly infuse religion into their system of programming.

### Films and Sinetrons



courtesy tabloid bintang.com

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the most glaring development in religion and television in Indonesia post-*reformasi* is the proliferation of Islamic-oriented television movies, films and soap operas. Aside from

Islamic movies adapted from novels such as *Woman with A Turban*, *The Love Verses* and *The Land of Five Towers*, numerous *sinetrons* have inundated Indonesian television. Their titles are extremely suggestive of their nature, orientation and content: *Para Pencari Tuhan* (the God-seekers), *Rahasia Ilahi* (divine secrets), *Hidayah* (Arabic, divine guidance), *Astagfirullah* (Arabic, taking refuge from Allah), *Takdir Ilahi* (divine destiny), *Khadijah* (name of the Prophet Muhammad's wife), *Cinta Fitri* (pure love), *Tukang Bubur Naik Haji* (porridge seller goes on pilgrimage), *Ustadz Foto Copy* (xeroxed religious teacher), *Pesantren & Rock & Roll*,



courtesy showbiz.liputan6.com

*Sampeyan Muslim* (you're Muslims), etc. Many of these *sinetrons* can afford to produce 300 sequels or more. Thematically, they frequently run along the lines of submission or resignation



courtesy You Tube

to God's will, patience and grace under pressure, repentance and salvation from religiously unlawful ways of living, and dilemmas in Islamic-sanctioned love and marriages. One noticeable element in most of these *sinetrons* is an often excessive reliance on displaying the latest fashionable Islamic garb, apparel and accessories by the performing actors and actresses.

### **Mystic Docu-dramas**



courtesy ewepe.wordpress.com

The upsurge of religious content in television includes an intensification of (if not an obsession for) all things mystical and superstitious that takes the viewers on an excursion into the world of the unseen. If such programmes were banned during the

New Order, they have received a new lease of life in the *reformasi* era. They include programmes entitled *Dunia Ghaib* (the world of the unseen), *DuniaLain* (the other world) and most dramatic of all, the *Pemburu Hantu* (ghostbusters). They almost always involve one *ustadz* or *kiyai* or more, who is supposed to know the ways of the mystics and can see, communicate and engage, often very dramatically, with beings from the other world. The dramatisation of the documentary programme

comes from the interpretation of what are purported to be mysterious, unexplained and mystical events.

In the case of *Dunia Lain*, the programme involves an *ustadz* who facilitates intercession with the spirits, which is subsequently followed with a dialogue between a medium – a person possessed by the spirits – and the host or the *ustadz*. The dialogue predictably touches on the past lives of people in haunted buildings or neighbourhoods. *Pemburu Hantu* involves less dialogue but much more acrobatic, martial arts movements on the part of the ghost busters, comprising five *ustadz*s donning all-white garb and turbans. Typically, the scenario concerns



courtesy faizaryna.xtgem.com

*roh-roh pengganggu* (disturbing spirits) that inhabit a house, where the owners or residents have encountered strange, unexplained phenomena such as lost items or moving objects. Complaints from the owners or residents can also take a more subtle or psychological form,

where they complain of extraordinarily high emotions running in the family and causing friction, conflict and discord in the house. The foremost challenge for the *Pemburu Hantu* team is to confront and apprehend the spirits through a mixture of *doa*' (incantations, largely deriving from the Quran) and *Pencak Silat* (Indonesian traditional form of martial arts) that combines dances and breathing exercises to bring out the *tenaga dalam* (literally, inner strength). Once apprehended, these evil spirits are then forced into readily available transparent bottles. Either in the middle of the programme or upon successfully putting all

the spirits into the bottle, the host of the programme then interviews the already sweating members of the *Pemburu Hantu* to provide an interpretation of events. At times, to heighten the dramatisation, one of the *Pemburu Hantu* team members or the crew would be shown to be attacked or temporarily possessed by the spirits, who seek to avenge the intervention made by the ghost busters.<sup>14</sup>

### **Islamic Reality Game Shows**

The television executives have not forgotten to infuse religion into reality game shows on television. One example is the *Pemilihan Da'i Kecil* (abbreviated as *Pildacil*) currently on *ANTV*, a programme that has everything a reality game show can offer. It is setup as a competition among contestants, whose talents are demonstrated before a live audience in real time before a panel of judges, normally comprising rich and famous artists and celebrity preachers, who in turn provide comments, feedback and assessment on each contestant. What makes *Pildacil* unique is that the talent being shown, tested and assessed is the contestant's ability to preach Islam and become an effective religious preacher. To a certain extent, the talent game show is to show off the young contestants' proficiency in reciting and memorising the Quran, *hadist* (Arabic, Prophetic tradition) and prayers in Arabic, with which the panel of judges may or may not be all too familiar. The scoring is therefore standardised to suit the "expertise" of the judges and the SMSs (text messages) that favour one contestant over the other. The scoring system looks mostly at the contestants' linguistic and rhetorical

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<sup>14</sup> Due to viewers' criticisms and the superstitious nature of the programme, *Pemburu Hantu* was banned from being broadcast on Indonesian television after a few years of broadcast.

proficiency, as well as the ability to move the audience or entertain them through well-rehearsed cries, jokes and laughter.

### **Infomercials on Alternative Healing**

Another element of religion in television relates to the proliferation of “health and wealth” programmes, which take the form of infomercials (information and commercials). They are mostly geared towards promoting an alternative way of healing to achieve happiness through health and wealth. The alternative healing is purportedly done through metaphysical means for “patients” who come to the “clinics” or *Padepokan* (Javanese traditional martial art schools), seeking answers to their failure to achieve health and wealth. Patients who come, or call in live, usually complain of tumours, breast cancer, stress, depression, sluggish business, and inability to concentrate in school or work. These infomercials usually involve, again, wise religious persons, acting as spiritual *gurus*, who can heal the masses of their miseries in life. Often, the spiritual *guru* is confronted by patients who either knowingly or unknowingly are possessed by evil spirits. The customary response is to conduct what is called the *ruqyah*, an Islamic form of exorcism, supposedly practised by the Prophet Muhammad. To make this practice seem valid from the Islamic viewpoint, it has recently been called *ruqyah syar'iyah* (exorcism based on the *syariah*). Interestingly, whether confronted with physical, emotional or mental problems, the *guru*'s answer seems to always involve *ruqyah* and traditional herbs. Often, the *ruqyah* is done not by the spiritual *guru* alone, but with the help of other *gurus* or his own students, who recite incantations throughout the session, allegedly inviting more powerful metaphysical powers from

God. Other forms are done through a procession called *dzikir* (remembrance of God), conducted by the students of the spiritual *guru*. One such *guru* is Haji Haryono, who claims to have the ability to transfer illnesses from patients to goats, which must be pre-purchased by the patients, who will in turn witness the dissection of the goat's stomach as proof of the transmission of whatever diseases infiltrated into the patients' bodies.

### **Islam in Commercials**

The commercialisation of products in television or other media in Indonesia has yet to escape the influence of religion. Many of the celebrity *ustadzs* and *ustadzahs* often participate in product endorsement, which typically represents their clearly defined and segmented market. Mamah Dedeh, for instance, is associated with the product *Cap Kaki Tiga* (three legs brand), a transparent and crystal-clear herbal drink, which can supposedly help people suffering from body heatedness, *seriawan* (oral ulceration) and a multitude of other illnesses. The highly animated Ustadz Nur Maulana has been used by Telkomsel to endorse its telecommunication services, while depicting the setting as though he and his congregation were on a pilgrimage in the holy land. The late Ustadz Jeffry al-Buchori (a.k.a. Uje) also became a star in at least two commercials for *Axis*, a telecommunication company, and *GM* motorcycle helmets.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Al-Buchori died in a motorcycle accident on Friday 26, 2013. At the time of the accident, he was heading home after preaching to a congregation at midnight using his powerful 650cc Kawasaki motorcycle. From his own confessions, Al-Buchori was known to be a preacher with a dark past (*sejarah kelam*) throughout his previous career as a model, musician and dancer, prior to becoming a famous preacher. His style of preaching was distinctive from the others, as he often used his eloquent, high-pitched recitation of the Quran. Tens of thousands of mourners prayed for Al-Buchori, and paid respect to the bereaved family.



courtesyYouTube

The same is true of Ustadz Yusuf Mansyur, whose advertisement of *Fatigon Spirit*, a multi-vitamin product, is rampantly broadcast, especially during the fasting month of Ramadhan. So, religion and religious figures are seen as effective tools of branding and marketing, especially if the appeal is targeted towards the largely Muslim body of consumers. As an effective platform for communicating with consumers, television clearly sees religion and religious figures as natural partners for the perpetuation of its own industry through advertisements and the effective functional utilisation of religion.<sup>16</sup>

## Call to Prayer

One of the remnants of the New Order practice of infusing religion in the media, specifically television, is the *adhan* (Islamic call to prayer),

<sup>16</sup> Recent commercials such as Sosis, a sausage snack, and others have produced commercials with the endorsement of a prominent and high profile Kiyai in a Pesantren. The case of Sosis, for instance, had thousands of the Pesantren students singing the catchy phrase of SMS or “Santri Makan Sosis” (religious students eating Sosis), which in and unto itself is a clear evidence of associating religion (read: Islam) and a marketable industrial food product.

which is broadcast in all national channels at least twice a day: during the *subuh* (break of dawn) and *maghrib* (dusk) prayers. Both *adzans* are rendered in the standard Arabic form, complete with the original text and accompanied with an Indonesian translation. This is then transposed into a silent and short docu-drama depicting Muslims, sometimes involving celebrity *ustadzs*, going about their lives, which is then abruptly interrupted by the *adzan*, and the obligation for prayers. An alternative storyline revolves around the depiction of mosques with architectural magnificence, which then typically portrays ordinary Muslims heading towards a mosque, conducting the *wudhu* (ablution) and subsequently the *sholat* (prayers). Apart from the two daily calls to prayer, some television channels inform viewers through the use of running texts of the arrival of the other three prayer times.<sup>17</sup> This is especially true during the month of Ramadhan. The intention underlying the broadcast of the *adzan* is primarily to remind Indonesian Muslims of their obligation to pray, hence supposedly enhancing the level of their religiosity. This is based on the common argument that the higher their level, the less likely they are to engage in evil conduct or misbehaviour. However, even the call to prayer has not been spared religious commodification. Time and again, calls to prayer serve the market, when the silent docu-drama depicts the brand of the cars driven by the religious family heading to the mosque or the laptops used by the supposedly religious Muslim students.

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<sup>17</sup> Muslims are required to pray five times daily: at *subuh* (dawn), *dzuhur* (afternoon), *ashar* (late afternoon), *maghrib* (dusk) and *isya* (night).

## Religion of the Celebrities

The flourishing of the infotainment industry and the ever so popular *Dakwahtainment* programmes on television reveals the trend towards making Islam a celebrity religion. The realm of Islam is filled with spiritual *gurus* and preachers who have effectively become celebrities, with millions of religious congregational fans in support of their often shallow Islamic cause and spiritually driven marketing gimmicks. Some even have *Facebook* and *Twitter* accounts to allow their “friends” and “followers” to shadow their activities.

However, to think that the functional utilisation of religion in Indonesian television has no precedents would be naïve and even disingenuous. During the New Order, aside from the more government-sanctioned *ustadz* such as Qasem Nurseha, the foremost celebrity *ustadz* was Zainuddin M.Z., otherwise known as the *Da'i Sejuta Ummat* (literally, the one million nation preacher), whose fame and fortune skyrocketed in the late 1980s and 1990s. His public career began with *Tabligh Akbars* (mass religious gatherings) in soccer fields, attended by tens, if not hundreds, of thousands of his keen followers. Being an original resident of Jakarta, his Betawi accent and idiosyncratic outlook made others try to imitate him. However, Zainuddin M.Z. was most famous for his ability to mix religious preaching and political witticism at a time when Islam was still seen as a latent threat to the system.<sup>18</sup> One of the things that irked the Suharto government at the time was his

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<sup>18</sup> During the first two decades of Suharto's militarist rule, fear of the 'Islamic menace' was persistently propagandised through the popular political phrase *ekstrem kanan* (the extreme right). The other threat came from the *bahaya laten* (latent danger) of communism, which was labelled *ekstrem kiri* (extreme left). This policy was consistent with the security approach of the New Order.

active participation in the *Partai Persatuan Pembangunan* (Islamic United Development Party), which was a fusion of a number of Muslim-based political parties and a regular contender in general elections under the New Order.

Beyond *Tabligh Akbars*, cassette recordings of his sermons were in high demand in the market, which was hungry for a fresh outlook on Islam originating and operating outside the state system. After successfully spreading his message through *Tabligh Akbars* and cassettes, Zainuddin M.Z. made his debut on television, where he continued on until his passing away in July 2011. A notable distinction between Zainuddin M.Z. and Qasem Nurseha was that the former transformed what used to be serious-minded religious preaching into a gathering filled with routine anecdotes and jokes, effectively resulting in a shift in the way the audience viewed Islamic religion and spirituality.

Following in Zainuddin M.Z.'s footsteps was another young and talented celebrity *ustadz* named Abdullah Gymnastiar, otherwise known as Aa Gym. His meteoric rise came about in the mid-1990s, after he had started out as a preacher in small mosques in and around Bandung and his small town of Cimahi, West Java. Unlike Zainuddin M.Z., Aa Gym is Sundanese, and comes from a military family background. He studied for a diploma in engineering in a secular, militaristic university called Jenderal Achmad Yani in Cimahi, a town located on the outskirts of the city of Bandung. Aa Gym's selling point was his hugely popular notion of *Manajemen Qalbu* (management of the heart), stemming principally from a generic Sufi tradition that revolves around maintaining wholesome and uncontaminated habits of the heart. The ethos and motto of *Manajemen Qalbu* are well represented by the

tagline in a weekly tabloid he publishes: *Indahnya Hidup dengan Bening Hati* (the beauty of living with an untainted heart).

Aa Gym was able to pinpoint intelligently the needs and demands of Muslims after decades of intense politicisation of religion by the regime, which seemed to hinge on a fixed idea about keeping religion and religious development at bay. Aa Gym was able to break the mould by presenting Islam as a manner non-threatening to the regime through the functional utilisation of the pacifist Sufi tradition in the media.<sup>19</sup> Howell (2008) argues that such “electronically-mediated mass predication programmes” effectively promote and project “intense spiritual intimacy with God, which Muslims seek through Sufi devotions”. From the state’s perspective, such a form of Islamic spirituality would not in any way threaten the stability of the regime.

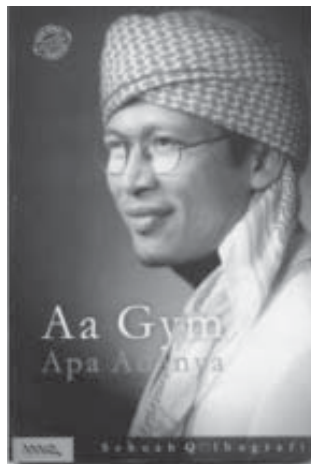
Coming from a secular educational and family background, Aa Gym preached in a basic and simplistic form that nonetheless was evidently appealing to the Muslim masses and, to certain extent, also non-Muslim viewers. When asked what his formula of success was in preaching, Aa Gym said, “I only deliver materials that are uncomplicated (*tidak rumit-rumit*), the simple ones” (Hernowo and Ridwan 2003: 43). Knowing his own limitations in the traditional fields of Islamic sciences and his lack of proficiency in the Arabic language, Aa Gym would often shy away from deploying Quranic recitations, much less the Prophetic sayings of Muhammad. He was also careful not to delve too much into critical and complex discourses on theology or *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence), which could potentially lessen his appeal and create unnecessary polemics and socio-political complications. Instead,

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<sup>19</sup> Sufism is a form of Islam that emphasises the internal struggle of the individual to approach God through mystic methods and transcendental religious experience.

Aa Gym expounded the verses and Prophetic traditions and communicated them to his audience in modest and unpretentious language and deploying moralistic anecdotes with a clear predisposition towards Islamic ethical values as a means to approach God.

His headquarters in Bandung, *Pesantren Daarut Tauhid* (literally, the abode of monotheism),<sup>20</sup> used to be frequented by thousands of students, *ibu-ibu*, activists, public figures and politicians interested in attending the *pengajian* (religious classes) or signing up for the *Pesantren Kilat* (literally, lightning courses) on *Manajemen Qalbu*. The latter required participants to rent board and lodging, enabling various businesses to thrive in the surrounding area where the Pesantren is located.



Aa Gym's distinctive personal traits were his boyish appearance and the white turban wrapped around his head. This appearance seemed somewhat effective, at least in terms of projecting his non-threatening demeanour. In addition to his performative skill set, Aa Gym has been consistent in preaching a peaceful and tolerant form of Islam. Bakti (2006) argues that Aa Gym's approach to *dakwah* is through the promotion of peace, tolerance, civil society and pluralism. His main

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<sup>20</sup> The term Pesantren in the Javanese/Indonesian lexicon usually denotes a traditional Muslim boarding school, which teaches classical Islamic sciences such as Kalam(theology), Fiqh (jurisprudence), Ush al-Fiqh(principles of jurisprudence), Tashawwuf (mysticism), using what is conventionally known as Kitab Kuning (literally, the yellow books), which refer to texts written by scholars. The use of the technical term Pesantren in Daarut Tauhid is somewhat misleading and inaccurate. Yet Aa Gym insisted on using it for various practical and promotional reasons.

talent also resides in the way he manages his media relations and public image. According to Bakti's observation, Aa Gym distrusts the mass media but at the same seeks to seduce and influence them (2006: 9).

Coinciding with his meteoric rise as a public persona, Aa Gym's model of *dakwah* was geared towards motivational, self-help sessions, effectively reducing the message of Islam to a mere instrument for resolving the everyday dilemmas and absurdities confronted by ordinary Muslims. Aa Gym realised that not only do the masses have to train themselves in matters related to the management of the heart, but so do the city-dwellers, professionals and business people. With his growing popularity and reputation, Aa Gym initiated a business venture, the *Manajemen Qalbu* Corporation, which at the peak of his career grew rapidly, covering products from instant noodles, telecommunication, cellular Quran, and Islamic ringtones to human resources and outbound training for professionals. A number of Indonesian state-owned companies have engaged *Manajemen Qalbu* Corporation, namely PT *Telkom*, Bank *Negara* Indonesia (BNI), *Industri Pesawat Terbang Nusantara* (IPTN), PT *Kereta Api* and state-owned as well as private enterprises.

Unfortunately, Aa Gym met with an unexpected and abrupt fall from grace, rapidly downgrading his celebrity status. This came in 2006 when he self-assuredly decided to take a second wife, a widow with three children, raising the sword of Damocles against the *ibu-ibu* throughout Indonesia, who looked up to him as an '*alim* (wise, pious person). Aa Gym's decision to engage in polygamy irritated his first

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<sup>21</sup> In the Javanese context, Kiyai Haji (often abbreviated as "KH") is a revered title given to religious scholar-teachers, whose lineage is often sought after by many who desire to receive barakah (Arabic, Divine blessings) in their lives.

wife, Ninih Muthmainnah Muhsin, whom he married in 1987. A granddaughter of the locally revered Kiyai Haji Muhammad Tasdiki,<sup>21</sup> head of the Pesantren Kalangsari in Ciamis, West Java, *Teh* (sister) Ninih had been an influential figure behind Aa Gym's success. The anger, however, did not come only from his wife. Aa Gym's legion of fans and followers, mostly female congregation members, saw his decision to take a second wife as ungrateful to his first wife Ninih, who not only bore him seven children but also guided him in many ways of the religion, and advised him profusely on the content of his preaching. Adding insult to injury, Aa Gym "divorced" his first wife in 2011, and later re-married her the following year.

It is noteworthy that the term *Dakwahtainment* was first attributed to Aa Gym through his *Manajemen Qalbu* Television (MQTV). Initially established on 22 June 2002 as a production house to supply Islamic content to television stations, MQTV expanded to become a documentation centre to house all television programmes featuring Aa Gym based on "dakwah content that is entertaining", hence the term *Dakwahtainment*.

### **The Problem with Dakwahtainment**

The notion of *Dakwahtainment* may seem alien to English speakers, but is much less so for Indonesians. The reason for this is the nature of the term, which combines Arabic, Islamic lingo and English. The Indonesian term "*dakwah*" is derived from the Arabic root word, comprising three syllables of *dal- 'ain-waw*, which connotes calling or invitation to Islam. In practice, *dakwah* is equivalent to Islamic propagation. From the religious perspective, *dakwah* is an obligation

for all Muslims, as it is considered a noble cause to bring humanity into the fold of Allah's blessings. The latter part, “-tainment”, is from the English word entertainment. In the pedagogical realm, use of such term is found in the term “edutainment”, a concept combining education and entertainment, which connotes a form of education that incorporates play, performance or other pleasurable means normally enjoyed by children. Proponents of edutainment argue that such a pedagogic method can help children to overcome their attention deficit, without sacrificing their need to learn.

Hence, *Dakwahtainment* is defined as a concept amalgamating Islamic propagation and the innumerable forms of entertainment broadcast through the medium of television, allowing millions of home viewers to watch, receive and capture their messages. In its application, the notion of *Dakwahtainment* is guided by a strict principle used by media executives, producers and creative teams, who apply and operationalise it in terms of *tuntunan* (spiritual guidance) and *tontonan* (entertainment viewing). Behind the scenes, such programmes are tightly and directly observed, usually by the producers and creative teams, who follow a certain logic that operates within the supposed preference of the segmented market viewers. They claim to be catering to the demands of the larger body of Indonesian Muslim audience, which they assume prefer a combination of *tuntunan* and *tontonan* to just receiving *tuntunan* without the *tontonan*. In other words, the media industry assumes that Indonesian Muslims would rather get a regular dose of religion without losing any opportunity to do it with pleasure.

As a result, *Dakwahtainment* blatantly suffers from lack of substance. It is woefully thin in imparting religious teachings, normative values and religious ethics. Many programmes in the *Dakwahtainment*

genre tackle issues that are trivial, irrelevant and inconsequential, while habitually deploying over-simplified methods to convey religious messages. What is more, the messages are more often than not repetitive and dreary. Interviewed on the subject, KPI Commissioner Ezky Suyanto lamented:

This is the exact reason why I don't watch *dakwah* programmes on television... because they are *ecek-ecek* (simplistic), and never provide anything substantive to the public. Is it true that the religious knowledge of Indonesian Muslims is *that* low? I look at the programmes during Ramadhan, and I wonder why the questions are always the same. For example, if I unintentionally drink, shall I continue with my fasting? That kind of discussion was over during our primary school days. Can I engage in sexual activity with my spouse during the day while I am fasting? The answer is crystal clear. Or, what if I kiss my wife's cheeks during the holy month of Ramadhan, would that be permissible? Why is it that it is only such questions being posed over and over again, as though our collective religious knowledge has stagnated?<sup>22</sup>

Suyanto argued disparagingly that *Dakwahtainment* programmes – with a few exceptions, including the likes of Professor Quraish Shihab or Professor Nasaruddin Umar – in effect decrease religiosity rather than increase its quality among the faithful viewers.<sup>23</sup> This phenomenon is not new in infotainment or other forms of television programme that involve a systematic “dumbing down” (Stockwell 2004) of the audience, which in many ways affects the way television programmes are produced and marketed.



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<sup>22</sup> Interview on October 13, 2012 at the KPI headquarters.

<sup>23</sup> Interview on October 13, 2012 at the KPI headquarters.

