

# The narration of religion on television, reconstruction of meaning and diversity

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## Abstract

This paper aims to construct the diversity reality of the society that has been presented in the media reality of television. Television presents symbols that need to be interpreted critically. When humans perform critical interpretation consciously, the meaning of diversity will be comprehensively grasped. On the contrary, when television shows cannot be interpreted in a mature frame of mind, it will become a serious problem for society. One of the serious issues deals with the abundant religious shows in the month of Ramadan. Religious television programs are part of religion commodification. Religion became a cheap trade. Ironically, many people enjoyed the show and served it as a guide. In fact, what is shown on television has largely blinded the reality of humanity and distanced human beings from civilization.

Keywords: religion on television, religious discourse, religion for humanity

## Televisions and Religious Signs

Television became a battle of religious discourse. Television is not just an entertainment medium but it encourages a rapidly growing discourse on religion. The messages and meaning of religion are presented in soap operas, television miniseries, television movies (FTV), advertisements, and so on. Ironically, not many people understand that television has shaped the discourse and characteristics of diversity in society.

The diversity is getting more apparent when Ramadan comes. The television shows many religious programs. Artists who used to not wear hijabs, wear head coverings. The soap opera transforms to suit the atmosphere of this blessed month of Ramadan.

Ironically, Islam is like speaking in a hollow dimension. The religious narrative which is presented inevitably further diminishes the function and role of religion in society. So, we can say that Ramadan shows on television do not educate (Setiawan, 2010).

Television has blinded people. It has become a new god in the midst of the rapidly advancing age. Borrowing Baudrillard's (2016) term, humans are now forced to watch television to death. From waking up to sleep, people are always exposed to television shows, especially in the month of Ramadan. When humans are asleep, they are accompanied by a television show that is always alive until they wake up again.

This soothing exposure fills the human soul until they are unconscious. We become asleep human beings, unable to do anything and just accept them.

This is in line with Hoover (2006) that religious discourse and the media continue to move forward and connect in the 21st century. The television introduces many faces of religion and spirituality to society (Hoover, 2006).

Ironically, the introduction of religion and the media is often lame and poor in meaning. Religion on television forms *Islamic televangelism* (Sofjan & Hidayati, 2013). Religion becomes a target of commodification or becomes a trade.

Religious shows on television refer to what is called market-based power (Foltz, 2007). The religious market has great potential to be managed by capital owners. Investors also find great opportunities to get a profit by "selling" religion.

"Selling" the religion in Indonesia is profitable. Based on Geertz's (1976) study, Indonesian both *santri* (pious Muslim) and *abangan* (nominal Muslims) enjoy religious shows on television. Also, Zamroni's (2016) study shows that *abangan* get a touch of religion from television shows. They feel comfortable with lectures/preaching on television to satisfy their needs for religious knowledge. The students did the same, they view that religious (Islam) shows on television as an educational show.

The students consider that what is presented on television is an integral part of the religious values that govern the entire behaviour of society. They

view the religious show on television as one of the ways to spread Islam through media. Moreover, students consider religious shows are more beneficial and valuable than non-educational television programs, such as movies, sexuality, and so on (Zamroni, 2016).

The above ideas clearly show that the relationship between religion and the media are mutually needed— not to mention mutually beneficial. These needs are produced through a series of activities/events and stories shown in soap operas or other television genres. The production of symbols on television is certainly not neutral. In other words, television has a mission embedded in every program. Television can be seen as an exchange of the meaning of reality. Even, television constructs reality and becomes reality itself (Syahputra, 2016).

The research conducted by the Center for Islamic and Society Research, Universitas Islam Negeri Jakarta (2021) shows that preaching and dissemination of religious truth are not the main priority of conventional television. Profit becomes the motivation and production process of religious events on conventional television.

Center for Islamic and Society Research, Universitas Islam Negeri Jakarta (2021) indicates that television shows are currently dominated by the topics of Islamic faith (36.7%), moral (30.4%), worship (17.6%), sharia (15.1%), and Islamic crime (0.2%).

The purpose of this paper is to reconstruct the meaning of religion and diversity presented on television. Through this paper, people can behave in a healthy and enlightening manner within diversity.

## **Literature review**

### **Myths**

Jean Baudrillard (2016) in “The consumer society: Myths & structures”, analogizes consumption in contemporary society with language and sign systems in primitive societies. Humans all the time need symbols to be adored.

In the past, humans adored trees, statues, and cargo myths, but today’s society adored objects such as image, television, and the concept of progress and growth (Sutrisno & Putranto, ed, 2005).

Baudrillard’s anxiety clearly appear in the month of Ramadan. Society is presented with a system of misleading signs, for example religious soap operas and Ramadan quizzes.

The religious soap opera shown during Ramadan, quoting Kuntowijoyo's view, is a glorification of myths. Periodization of society, according to Kuntowijoyo, is a myth, ideology, and science. The Indonesian, who have been independent for 77 years, have not been able to get out of this period of myths.

Kuntowijoyo (2002) states that myths do not need experience. The myth is told subjectively, in the sense that its truth only applies in its society and there is no connection between experience and narration.

### **From Hypodermic Needle Theory to Uses and Gratification Theory**

According to Nwabueze & Okonkwo (2018), in hypodermic needle theory, a stimulus seems to be injected directly into the communicant's self as a mass media audience. When communication uses a credible communicator, a powerful message, and effective media, the communicant can be directed based on the communicator's will (Luhmann, 1992)

Although the hypodermic needle theory has been abandoned by researchers since the 1950s, the assumptions of this theory are still believed to exist. The evidence is that the government is still trying to censor or block negative information flowing from the mass media until now. In addition, there are religious figures who prohibit the distribution of books, and some parents are still worried about the effect of the film on their children (Bineham, 1988).

Criticism of the hypodermic needle theory has given rise to a uses and gratification theory. This theory emerges as a critique of the hypodermic needle theory which assumes the audience as a passive group to media exposure. Based on the uses and gratification theory, individuals actively seek certain media and content to meet certain satisfaction (results). People behave actively because they are able to learn and evaluate the different media accessed to achieve communication goals (Luo, 2002)

Herta Herzog's classic work divides research on the uses & gratification theory into three stages (West & Turner, 2018). The early stage in the uses & gratification theory is the individual's reasons for accessing media such as why a person reads a newspaper, what is the reason for listening to the radio, and what is the underlying desire to watch a movie in the cinema.

The second stage is creating a typology that represents the reasons for using the media. The third stage is to connect the specific reasons in the media with the variables. The variables are reflected in the needs, goals, benefits, consequences of media use, and other individual factors.

Katz et al (1973) formulate some basic assumptions of the uses & gratification theory. First, the audience is an active group in media usage, and their media activities are goal-oriented. Second, the audience relates the satisfaction of media needs to the media they select. Individuals are viewed as active agents, so they can take an initiative in utilizing the media. The third assumption in the uses & gratification theory includes media competition to meet the needs of the audience. The media and the audience both influence each other in the context of media behaviour.

The fourth assumption in the theory of uses & gratification is that individuals have sufficient awareness on their interests and motives in accessing the media. It serves to provide an overview of the media behaviour patterns of each audience. The last assumption of the uses & gratification theory is that media content can only be judged by the audience.

The uses & gratification theory which assumes the audience as an active group explains that there are several types of audience activity in consuming media, namely usability, intentionality, selectivity, and difficulty in influencing (Ruggiero, 2000). In the context of usability, we listen to the radio in the car to get information about traffic jams before going home, we read “WMagazine” to find out the latest fashion in the summer. Then, the intent arises when people’s motivation determines their consumption of media content, for example if they want to be entertained, they will watch cartoons.

Another point that needs to be underlined from the uses & gratification theory deals with activity and the audience’s active behaviour. Activity refers to what a media audience does (Dolan et al., 2016).

## **Results and Discussions**

### **Television and Falsehood, Healing Religion for Humanity**

Ramadan television has many fans. Nielsen Indonesia notes that the number of TV viewers in Ramadan 2019 is 13.4 percent. This number increases by 1.1 percent from the other month, 12.3 percent.

A similar situation was repeated in the Ramadan month of 2020. The number of viewers increased by 0.7 percent compared to other months (4.6 percent from 13.9 percent). The Ramadan month of 2021 is the same, the number of viewers increased 1.4 percent from the previous month (10.4 percent to 11.8 percent during Eid).

On the contrary, the percentage decreased to 11.8 percent in 2022. Nielsen notices that this decline was due to the shift in digital technology (Goodstats.id, 2022).

Despite the decline, television viewers are still quite dominant. The dominance of Ramadan shows cannot be separated from the face of religion. The JakPat survey (katadata.co.id, 2022) explains that television shows during Ramadan are dominated by religious symbols. Shop opera of “Para Pencari Tuhan” (SCTV channel) ranked top followed by “Sahur Lagi” (NET channel) and “Sahur Lebih Segar” (Trans7 channel).

Religious faces on television need to be noted. Religious soap operas inspired by real stories are presented subjectively. No one knows who create those stories except the creator of the story itself. The soap opera is no more than just an entertainment medium. Soap operas are also part of the myth period.

The myth is depicted in symbols of a television artist’s veneration, favorite shows, and content that “hijacks” the meaning of religion. The myth thrives in the public consciousness

Kuntowijoyo offers demythologization (abolition of myth) to end the myth period. Demythologization can be performed in several ways. First, science must be able to explain the truth about the religious soap opera. With knowledge, one can distinguish between what is right and wrong.

Science differentiates a person in receiving information. Using the uses and gratification theory, individuals and or societies are increasingly exposed to television, and they are slightly unable to distinguish between the fictional universe and the real world (Fore, 1987).

With regard to the explanation above, science needs to be an important part of educating the nation’s citizens to see reality more clearly. Society must be critical of the television shows that present fiction. This critical power can be developed through science.

Fore (1987) states that the level of picture-symbol-fantasy communication is much stronger than the cognitive level. We find it more difficult to bring these elements to a level of awareness where we can analyse them and talk about them verbally, linearly, in a controlled way, and in a non-threatening way. So, the study of science must accommodate listening and visualization. The narrative text needs to be translated into the counter narrative as television has constructed public understanding through sound and images. Researchers/

scientists need to be more sophisticated in disseminating ideas so that they can be accepted by the community easily and well.

The second is purifying the teachings of religion (puritanism). With the puritanism movement pioneered by Muhammadiyah, for example, the religious soap opera can be suppressed in such a way that it does not cause new *syirik* (the sin of practicing polytheism in Islam) in society.

Puritanism teaches a critical attitude toward religion. The meaning of religion is not singular. Religion has a thousand faces. Religious interpretation can be interpreted differently by each religious individual (Khisbiyah & Thoyibi, 2018). Therefore, the audience needs to read implicit and explicit messages when watching religious shows on television. It all takes critical power in religion.

Religion is often meant to follow dogma. However, in reality, religion is knowledge. In this case, a religious person needs to perform religious rituals with adequate knowledge. The basis of science is a critical attitude so that science can develop and experience dynamics in the community life development.

The third is history and art. History that is rational and factual will be able to dispel the myths in society. Similarly, art is a concrete form of the abstract. That is in contrast to the myth that is abstract (Setiawan, 2019).

Historians and artists need to be important pillars of enlightenment for society. History as a part of human life needs to speak in a wide and deep dimension. Similarly, art needs to be the humanist face of society in looking at a reality presented in religious symbols on television.

Another issue deals with a talk show that offers various facilities to get prizes through quizzes. The quiz with million-rupiah prizes is a form of human intellect harassment. After all, the various questions on quizzes do not need us to think critically. The questions are often answered by the presenters or hosts.

This is a period of severe intellectual harassment. Indonesian people are considered stupid. By answering trivial questions, a person has already earned millions of rupiahs. They do not need to study, read books, write papers, discuss, and research. So, religion becomes the best-selling commodity during Ramadan. All parties use religious labels and symbols to make as much profit as possible.

In fact, Max Weber (1864-1920) called religion the motor of social change (Weber, 1993). Therefore, religion is very important in human life because, with religion, social change will sustainably occur along with the changes of the times.

However, if religion has become a myth and is traded in a consumerist society, it is difficult to make social change. Instead of making social changes, making society literate about the reality is very difficult.

Television has blinded people. It has become a new god in the midst of the rapidly advancing age. Borrowing Baudrillard's term, humans are now forced to watch television to death. They are greatly exposed to television shows every day, especially in the month of Ramadan. For this reason, the religious nuances of Ramadan seem meaningless. Society is constructed to turn towards the Qibla of television. Today's society is no longer like the society in the past who always visited the mosque and recited Quran until late at night. Society has now been blinded by television.

Moreover, the Ramadan comedy program seems to be far from the spirit of fasting. The spirit of fasting is to sharpen the people's sensitivity to social reality, perform self-reflection to be a better servant, and develop an attitude of generosity. But, they have been displaced by the pseudo-reality portrayed by comedy shows as the comedy spreads violence and indecent language. Of course, it is far from the spirit of fasting as a process of approaching oneself to God.

Comedy shows are a blow to fasting people. Fasting is heavy and tiring, so it needs to be entertained with jokes that are full of violence. In fact, fasting is an act of worship that demands pious people individually and socially (social dimension).

The comedy show at the end of Ramadan also seems to have deliberately hit the Muslims. With a joke, we can perform fasting well. In fact, the Prophet said,

وَلَا تُكْثِرِ الضَّحِكَ، فَإِنَّ كَثْرَةَ الضَّحِكِ تُمِيتُ الْقَلْبَ

“And do not laugh too much, for indeed increased laughter kills the heart.” [HR. Tirmidhi 2/50]

Laughing excessively, especially with violent scenes and human dignity abuse will cover the pure soul. The heart will die and will not be able to distinguish between right and wrong. Of course, this contrasts with the spirit of fasting. When hungry, one is expected to be able to think clearly and become a new human being (humanization) with high social sensitivity.

Humanization refers to the work of civilization that creates more humane living conditions and more prosperous.



The humanization of human social conditions drives each other as wolves towards a coexistence condition where humans treat each other and live together as friends (*homo homini socius*) (Sutrisno, 2009).

Friendly people are those who reinforce each other, rather than laughing each other. Entertaining people by laughing at others is not a civilized human attitude. The reason is that civilized people are always expressing sympathy when others are in less fortunate conditions. They always want to help make human life better.

Friendship on the basis of humanity is a fasting mission. Through fasting, a Muslim is expected to be able to strengthen the bond of friendship. They are also asked to practice God's command that all human beings are essentially the same. The difference lies in the level of piety. Pious deals with the close friendship between human beings with respect and compassion for each other.

This is a portrait of a new human being to be born after Ramadan. They always serve humanity and justice. They always act on the basis of charity in creating a primary society or a prosperous society blessed by the Almighty God.

Moreover, comedy on television is not a good entertainment portrait. It is the face of Indonesian people who like to laugh at the plight of others. The misery of others is a "fertile field" of victory. As if, the victory of fasting can be achieved by joking. In fact, victory is an act of virtue and charity that sharpens the sensitivity of the intellect.

The sensitivity of the intellect can be sharpened by fasting. Through fasting, a bad attitude such as laughing at others can be suppressed. Therefore, comedy shows on television can take away the essence of fasting as an act of suppressing bad attitudes. Comedy shown during the crucial time of fasting will also keep people away from the transcendence process.

Kuntowijoyo (1999) states that the purpose of transcendence is to add a transcendental dimension to culture. We have given into the currents of hedonism, imperialism, and decadent culture.

We believe that we should cleanse ourselves by recalling the transcendental dimension that is a legitimate part of human nature. We want to feel this world as God's grace. We want to live again in an atmosphere separate from space and time, when we come in contact with the greatness of God.

Fasting is an act of cleansing oneself and reminding that human beings have a humanitarian duty. The task of humanity is not to laugh at others but to help, to make themselves independent, and eventually become independent human beings.

If we allow being trapped in the falsehood of television shows, our religion will become weaker. Fasting will only get thirsty and hungry.

The discussion above reinforces what Gerbner (1984) has researched. Two years of research on people who watch television have found some important findings. (1) higher levels of religious behaviour were reported by those who watched more religious television; (2) viewers who frequently watch religious television express greater trust in local church leaders and organized religion than viewers who rarely watch religious shows (Gerbner, 1984).

Watching television can make a person feel more religious. In fact, what is watched is just an entertainment reality. The production of religious value messages on television is part of the entertainment so that the essence and meaning of religion are fading.

The religious meaning presented on television often raises a serious question (Shrum, 2009) since the audience cannot capture the symbolic message presented by television. That symbolic message needs to be constructed in a critical empirical reality and trigger the subconscious of the viewers.

Gerbner's second findings confirm that the Center for Islamic and Society Research, Universitas Islam Negeri Jakarta's research shows that religion depends on who speaks. If the television is filled with religious narratives told by certain figures, people often lose their critical reasoning. Speakers of religious narratives often have a different interpretation from the audience. These differences give rise to space for critical dialogue in building a healthy religion. Religion encourages its citizens to be critical and forbids taqlid (following existing schools). When television dominates the conscious space of religious believers, the dimension of taqlid will become stronger and the critical attitude toward religion will fade.

When television greatly affects a person's activities, society will experience dehumanization. Society forgets to build civilized humanity. Religious activities are only artificial. They seem to practice religion, but they do not do much for the benefit of the people as a religious encouragement/value.

The religious space on television during Ramadan has eliminated the importance of religion. The meaning of religion becomes uncertain in the practice of community life because people are enjoying loneliness in the midst of a complex reality that is constantly turbulent and needs a real solution.

## Conclusion

Finally, turn off your television during Ramadan, go back to reciting the text of the Qur'an and learn its meaning, and awaken the awareness to always share and help others. Let us not be trapped by television symbols that take away the values/meanings of religion in the process of developing just and civilized virtue, welfare, and humanity.

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