‘TV or Not TV’

Spelling the Indonesian Media with Veven Sp. Wardhana

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Abstract

This article focuses on the oeuvre of Indonesian journalist, essayist, and literary author Veven Sp. Wardhana (1959–2013). This oeuvre constitutes a critical and creative documentation of the role of the media, particularly television, in Indonesia’s transition from authoritarianism to democracy. The article will contextualize Wardhana’s work by comparing it with the activities of the independent Indonesian Broadcasting Commission and the broader media watch and media literacy movement. Wardhana’s writings stand out for their identification of the recurring and interrelated issues in Indonesian media history; conceptualization of Indonesia as a televised world; and creative reworking of television in an experimental literary form. Unlike the formal mechanisms of media regulation, his work approaches the media not merely in terms of institutions and content, but rather as socio-cultural environments and ecologies. The author argues that the work of creative actors like Wardhana could constitute an answer to the lack of resources in Indonesian Media and Cultural Studies departments.

Keywords

Indonesia – television criticism – media literacy – literature – popular culture

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It is as if time has stopped, and space does not change. It is as if the thought pattern that emerged a decade ago—and which had already been disputed—is still considered something new, original. So at the very moment it flares up, it will be brought to the foreground again. Therefore, similar to learning to read a series of letters, characters, the alphabet, we will never stop spelling [the media] haltingly.

WARDHANA 2002a:10

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Introduction

How to deal with a corpus of writings that counts thousands of pages? How to deal with a corpus of writings that includes both fiction and non-fiction? How to deal with a corpus of writings that covers seemingly ephemeral phenomena? How to deal with a corpus of writings in a field that is not strongly embedded in institutional structures or academic traditions? How to deal with a corpus of writings by an author who has not yet received much critical attention? The author of this article proposes an approach and context to explain and do justice to these writings, which cover a central part of the oeuvre of journalist, essayist, and literary author Veven Sp. Wardhana (1959–2013). Wardhana's work is important, as it examines a crucial aspect of Indonesian contemporary society: the mass media and the nascent study of it.

Wardhana's oeuvre includes columns, essays, research articles, short stories, and a novel, which share as one of their common themes the social role and impact of television. My strategy to approach the large number of writings and wide diversity of genres is five-fold. Firstly, I will provide a biography of Wardhana, including a short bibliography of his work. Secondly, I will analyse the broader context of the political economy of the media to which Wardhana's work is responding. Thirdly, I will demonstrate the similarities and differences between his work and the initiatives of the Komisi Penyiaran Indonesia (KPI, Indonesian Broadcasting Commission), the main institution for monitoring the broadcast media in Indonesia, and the broader Indonesian media watch and media literacy movement. Fourthly, I will address the importance of not merely the content, but also the style of Wardhana's writings, including his novel. Fifthly, I will discuss his work on various contentious points

and position it in the nascent field of Indonesian Media and Cultural Studies.

Using Neil Postman's (1970) idea of 'media ecology', I will argue that Wardhana's work is an important complement to the activities of the Indonesian Broadcasting Commission and other media watch and media literacy organizations, as it identifies recurring issues in media ownership, journalism, and entertainment; offers a cultural conceptualization of Indonesia as a televised world; and tries to provide alternatives to mainstream television by creatively reworking aspects of the medium. I will also critically examine whether or not Wardhana's own work perpetuates some aspects of the Indonesian media world that it criticizes. To what extent does it go beyond the media and celebrity culture of the Jakartan middle class, with its gender bias and sensationalist accounts of sexuality, and to what extent is it really capable of influencing the Indonesian media world? This article is a first attempt at writing a biography of an influential, but in academic discourse relatively neglected, public figure and author, and providing an analysis of structural problems in the Indonesian media landscape and the study thereof.

Veven Sp. Wardhana

On 17 May 2013, Wardhana passed away after a battle with lung cancer. He was married to Bastiana Thereskova Koraag, with whom he had three daughters. Together with his senior at the *Monitor* tabloid, Arswendo Atmowiloto (1986), author Ashadi Siregar (2006), film maker Garin Nugroho (2005), and cultural analyst Idi Subandy Ibrahim (1997), Wardhana stood out as one of the most productive, creative, and consistent Indonesian television critics. Perhaps because it deals with seemingly ephemeral phenomena, or because of its sheer volume, Wardhana's work is yet to be explored to its full extent.

Wardhana was born Effendy Agus Hariyanto on 21 January 1959 in Malang, East Java.¹ He studied at the Universitas Gadjah Mada in Yogyakarta, from which he graduated in 1984 with a degree in literature. After his studies, he

1 The name 'Veven' is an alternative form of 'Effendy'. The middle initials of his pseudonym refer to the names of his father (Soesanto) and mother (Piani). Wardhana may refer to Wikrama Wardhana, who was king of the historical Madjapahit kingdom from AD 1389 to 1429. The centre of this kingdom was located in today's East Java, the province where Wardhana was born. I wish to thank Wardhana's wife, Thereskova Koraag, and his fellow author and friend Seno Gumira Ajidarma for this information (personal communications, 24-8-14 and 11-9-2014 respectively).

sat on the editorial boards of various print and electronic media, including the tabloids *Hai* (1986–1987), *Monitor* (1987–1990), *Bintang* (1990), *Citra* (1991–1995), and *Tiara* (1995–1999), and the current-affairs magazines *Tempo Interaktif* (1996–1997) and *Gramedia-Majalah Online* (1999–2003).²

In 1999, he was the Media Watch Program coordinator of the Jakarta-based Institut Studi Arus Informasi (ISAI, Institute for the Studies on Free Flow of Information) and one of the coordinators of the Election Media Monitoring Program of the London-based independent organization Article XIX.³ From 2003 to 2012, he was an editor at the Jakarta-based Prima Media Pustaka publishing company. From 2005 to 2012, he worked in various roles for the German NGO Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ), including those of senior advisor for good governance in the Population Administration Programme, senior advisor for reconstruction and development in the Population Administration in Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam (PAS NAD) Programme, and senior advisor for the Strengthening Women's Civil Rights (SWR) Programme. Shortly before his death, he worked as a media advisor for the then coordinating minister for economics, Hatta Rajasa.

Wardhana's writings covered the socio-cultural dimensions of the mass media, gender, ethnicity, politics, and business in Indonesia. His creative work consisted of one novel, *Stamboel selebritas* (The celebrity spectacle, 2004b), and various volumes of short stories, including *Perempuan yang gagal jadi kelelawar* (The woman who failed to become a cave bat, 2013b, published posthumously), *Dari mana datangnya mata* (From where came the eye, 2004a), *Panggil aku Peng Hwa* (Call me Pheng Hwa, 2002d; see Tickell 2009:280–9; Allen 2003:67, 71; Heryanto 2008a:75) and *Centeng: Matahari malam hari* (Watchman: The sun of the night, 2002b). He also wrote the scripts of various television programmes, such as the television film (*telesinema*) *Xiao Qing* (broadcast by the commercial television station RCTI on 22 January 2004), the series *Puan* (Madam, broadcast weekly by TVRI from 2003 to 2004), the miniseries *Nyai Dessy*, *Nyai Imah* (Concubine Dessy, Concubine Imah, broadcast by TVRI in 1999 and 2001), the film review programme *Lintasan sinema Indonesia* (Indonesian cinema flash, broadcast monthly by TVRI from 1997 to 2000), the television bulletin *RCTI-*

2 This short biography is primarily based on 'Penulis Veven Sp. Wardhana', <http://tamanismailmarzuki.co.id/tokoh/veven.html> (accessed 27-8-2014) and the biographical information in Wardhana's published books.

3 Hera Diani, 'In the media glare with observer Veven', *The Jakarta Post*, 24-10-2004, <http://m.thejakartapost.com/news/2004/10/24/media-glare-observer-veven.html> (accessed 27-8-2014).

RCTI (broadcast fortnightly by RCTI from 1996 to 1998) and the *sinetron Sang pengibar, sang pengobar* (The flag waver, the inspirer, broadcast by TVRI in 1997).

He published his investigative essays in various volumes including *Budaya massa, agama, wanita* (Mass culture, religions, women, 2013a, published posthumously), *Dari Barbar sampai Timor Timur: Mengeja budaya massa* (From Barbarians to East Timor: Spelling mass culture, 2002c), *Televisi dan prasangka budaya massa* (Television and the prejudice of mass culture, 2001), *Geger san-tet Banyuwangi* (The tumult of the black magic of Banyuwangi, 2001, with A. Manan and I. Atmaja), *Para superkaya Indonesia: Sebuah dokumentasi gaya hidup* (The superrich of Indonesia: A documentation of life style, 1999, with H. Barus), *Kemelut PDI di layar televisi: Survey jurnalisme Indonesia* (The crisis of the Indonesian Democratic Party on television: A survey of Indonesian journalism, 1997b), *Kapitalisme televisi dan strategi budaya massa* (Television capitalism and the strategy of mass culture, 1997a) and *Budaya massa dan pergeseran masyarakat* (Mass culture and the shift of society, 1995). He also edited and co-edited several books authored by others.

In a 24 October 2004 article in *The Jakarta Post*, journalist Hera Diani characterized Wardhana and his work as follows: 'Amid the grandstanding and clamoring for position in the colorful media jungle, Veven S.P. Wardhana stands out as a voice of understated reason. From the issue of press coverage of the May 1998 riots, to the broadcasting bill, government–press relations and the glut of TV gossip shows, Veven can tell it like it is.'⁴ Arswendo Atmowiloto, his senior at the *Monitor* magazine, also praised Wardhana's sharp, personal, and to-the-point writing style.⁵ *Detik.Com*, one of Indonesia's premier online news sites, referred to Wardhana as 'one of the pioneers of media studies in Indonesia'.⁶

Wardhana's career shows a development from direct involvement in the news and entertainment industry to a more research-focused approach to the media world. Over the years, he also broadened his working experiences from the print and broadcast media to international NGOs, working on gender and ethnicity-related issues. Moreover, he expanded his professional skills and interests from journalistic writing to more creative forms, such as short stories and a novel. A respected member of prestigious organizations like ISA1 and Gra-

4 Hera Diani, 'In the media glare with observer Veven', *The Jakarta Post*, 24-10-2004, <http://m.thejakartapost.com/news/2004/10/24/media-glare-observer-veven.html> (accessed 27-8-2014).

5 Arswendo Atmowiloto, 'Veven: Generasi haus budaya', *Kompas.com*, 20-5-2013, <http://oase.kompas.com/read/2013/05/20/22014665/Veven.Generasi.Haus.Budaya> (accessed 27-8-2014).

6 Is Mujiarso, 'Sastrawan Veven Sp Wardhana meninggal dunia', *Detikcom*, 17-5-2013.

media, he felt increasingly limited in his critical and creative potential within the formal structures of such institutions. In the final years of his life, he decided to become an independent writer. His colleagues from the media characterized him as a modest and diligent person, with clever observation and writing skills.⁷ After receiving the news about his death, a group of famous journalists, literary authors, film makers, activist, and artists—including Seno Gumira Ajidarma, Butet Kertaradjasa, Leila S. Chudori, Ayu Utami, Jajang C. Noer, Mira Lesmana, Rotua Valentina Sagala, Bre Redana, and Arswendo Atmowiloto—organized a spontaneous and respectful tribute of music and readings of his work.⁸

The Indonesian Media Oligopoly

In order to understand the context, content, and style of Wardhana's writings, it is necessary to identify some of the major developments in Indonesian television in recent decades. One of the most notable achievements of Indonesian democratic reform since 1998 has been the increased freedom of expression and freedom of the media. This has been illustrated, among other things, by the abolition of the notorious Departemen Penerangan (Ministry of Information), which was feared for its censorship practices;⁹ the ending of the intricate process of Surat Izin Usaha Penerbitan Pers (SIUPP, Press Publication Business Licences) applications; the legalization of the production of news coverage by commercial radio and television broadcasters; the official recognition of community media as a category in its own right; the formal transformation of Radio Republik Indonesia (RRI, State Radio of the Republic of Indonesia) and Televisi Republik Indonesia (TVRI, Television of the Republic of Indonesia) into public broadcasting organizations; and the establishment of the independent Indonesian Broadcasting Commission to monitor the broadcast media in the public interest. Indonesia now has a booming media industry with hundreds of national and regional public and commercial television stations, thousands of radio stations, and even more print publications.

7 P. Hadriani, 'Sepenggal kenangan bersama Veven Wardhana', *Tempo.co*, 17-5-2013, <http://www.tempo.co/read/news/2013/05/17/219481196/Sepenggal-Kenangan-Bersama-Veven-Wardhana> (accessed 17-10-2013).

8 Ninus D. Andarnuswari, 'Malam kenangan untuk Veven Sp. Wardhana', *Alinea TV*, 24-5-2013, <http://alineatv.com/2013/05/24/malam-kenangan-untuk-veven-sp-wardhana/#sthash.JRNLAHs.dpbs> (accessed 17-10-2013).

9 An example was the 1994 shock banning of the three respected news magazines *Tempo*, *Editor*, and *DeTik*, because of their critical coverage of government-related issues (Hill 1995:41–3).

Threats to the freedom and diversity of expression in Indonesia's new democracy have remained, however. Efforts by the successive democratically elected national governments since 1998 to implement instruments guaranteeing diversity of content and ownership of the print and broadcast media have largely failed. Their policy of regional autonomy has not resulted in the decentralization of the Indonesian media, but in national companies usurping regional media, and some regional media expanding their businesses nationwide (Ida 2011). Another threat is the physical and psychological intimidation of journalists and artists by political and religious hardliners, such as the fundamentalist organization Front Pembela Islam (FPI, Islamic Defenders Front) (Lindsay 2011).

Arguably the most important factor undermining the democratic quality of the contemporary Indonesian media landscape is the strong concentration of ownership. The print, broadcast, and online media are dominated by only twelve media conglomerates (Lim 2012). These are MNC Group, Kompas Gramedia Group, Elang Mahkota Teknologi, Visi Media Asia, Jawa Pos Group, Mahaka Media, CT Group, Beritasatu Media Holdings, Media Group, MRA Media, Femina Group, and Tempo Inti Media (Nugroho, Putri and Laksmi 2012:4). The assets of each of these conglomerates cover a wide range of media and businesses. MNC group, for instance, has three free-to-air television channels, 20 local television networks, and 22 radio networks; Jawa Pos Group controls 171 publishing companies; and KOMPAS owns 90 publishing businesses, 12 radio stations, and a television network (Nugroho, Putri and Laksmi 2012:4).

The current oligopoly that controls the Indonesian media market threatens the post-Soeharto democratic ideal of diversity of ownership and diversity of content (Wardhana 2002c:416; Kristiawan 2013:6, 10; Jurriëns 2009:35). Instead of representing the public cause, the commercial media companies serve the business and political interests of their owners. Two examples are Visi Media Asia's Aburizal Bakrie, who is also chairman of the Golkar political party, and Media Group's Surya Paloh, who is also founder and chairman of the NasDem political party. Both media moguls have used their television stations and other media to give shape to their personal, presidential ambitions (Haryanto 2011:110–4; Tapsell 2012:234–5).

Nugroho, Putri and Laksmi (2012:14) rightly argue that the Indonesian media oligopoly and the entanglement of business and politics impede the civil right of access to the media as formulated by international organizations like UNESCO. This right includes access to information, access to media infrastructure, and access to the means of influencing media regulation. It is precisely the social role and potential of television and other media, the threats to media

freedom, and the rights of media consumers in Indonesia that constitute the core themes of Wardhana's writings.

Identifying Recurring Issues: Media Concentration, 'Spit Journalism', 'The Show Must Bloon'

The merit of Wardhana's critical media essays is that they demonstrate that certain trends in the relatively ephemeral medium of television, such as lack of diversity of ownership and content, are not isolated and one-off phenomena, but interrelated and recurring themes. This critical and historical dimension is often lacking in the initiatives of formal institutions dealing with the monitoring of the broadcast media, as I will show later. Wardhana's essays normally use examples of specific television programmes, or media content, to tell stories about the broader socio-political conditions shaping the Indonesian media industry. They are generally two to four pages in length and take the form of editorials that use a mix of journalistic analysis and personal opinion to invite readers and fellow television viewers to comment on topical, media-related issues. Some of the recurring themes have been problems surrounding TVRI, commercial television, the film industry, television journalism, *sinetron*,¹⁰ infotainment, children's programmes, advertising, censorship, and media representations of gender, nationalism, religion, and ethnicity. I will focus in this section on themes relating to the political economy of the media, particularly media ownership, as well as media content, particularly journalism and entertainment.

In one of his essays, Wardhana (2002c:149–52) used the example of Televisi Pendidikan Indonesia (TPI, Indonesian Education Television) to demonstrate the roots of the unfair competition and lack of diversity in ownership and content in Indonesian television. TPI was established by Soeharto's eldest daughter, Siti Hardiyanti Rukmana, in the early 1990s (Kitley 2000). Because of its supposedly educational purpose, the station received privileges over other commercial stations that were established around the same time. These priv-

10 *Sinetron* is an abbreviation for *sinema elektronik*, or electronic cinema. It should not be equated with Western-style soap opera. *Sinetron* has a rich history, dating back to the 1980s, and initially encompassed films made for television. Although they would sometimes consist of more than one episode, they were not intended as television serials. They included social criticism and displayed variation in genre, ranging from comedy to satire, but rarely had the melodramatic character of the majority of soap operas and more recent *sinetron* (Wardhana 2006:xxiii–iv).

ileges included the right to broadcast nationally and the right to make use of the facilities of state television (TVRI). Within a few years, however, TPI's broadcasting schedule was not any different from that of its competitors (Wardhana 2002c:151, 507–8). Other television stations also breached the conditions of their broadcasting licenses, including the prohibition to broadcast nationally (Wardhana 2002c:193–6, 507). Until today, media owners have managed to escape legal sanctions due to a lack of law enforcement as well as their ingenuity in diversifying and rebranding their businesses (Ida 2011).

Wardhana also observed recurring issues in Indonesian journalism. In spite of the seemingly dramatic political and social changes of 1998, one of the continuities has been the lack of investigative reporting in the print and broadcast media. According to Janet Steele (2011:89), many Indonesian 'investigative' newspaper articles are 'episodic' rather than 'thematic', as they focus on 'specific individuals or occurrences' rather than 'the broader social and political forces behind the news'. According to Wardhana (2002c:226, 438, 440, 446), the news media also continued to publish the statements (*pernyataan*) of high-ranked officials as the facts (*kenyataan*) of a news event, rather than reporting and analysing reality in an objective manner.¹¹

One of the studies in which Wardhana came to this conclusion was his 1997 research project conducted on behalf of the Institute for the Studies on Free Flow of Information (ISAI) in Jakarta. This study was about the events leading up to, during, and after the attacks on the Partai Demokrasi Indonesia (PDI, Indonesian Democratic Party) headquarters in Jakarta on 27 July 1996.¹² Wardhana (1997b:29–31) found that the investigative journalism offered by both TVRI and the four commercial television stations offering news coverage at the time (RCTI, SCTV, TPI, and AN-Teve) was far from ideal. Instead of

11 This lacuna has its roots in state control over the media, including TVRI's monopoly on television journalism from the 1960s until the early 1990s. The TVRI news of the time was dominated by the symbolic gestures of the bureaucracy, such as the official openings of new buildings, and rarely represented the daily reality of ordinary people (Wardhana 2002c:33; see also Kitley 2000).

12 During the late New Order, the PDI and its leader, Megawati Soekarnoputri, were an important part of the growing opposition movement against Soeharto (Vickers 2005:202). From 20 until 22 June 1996, a congress was organized in Medan by government-supported members of the party, who, in an attempt to break with Megawati, declared themselves the only legitimate PDI. On 27 July, supporters of this initiative, protected and assisted by thugs, the military, and police, used physical violence to claim the party head office in Jakarta and oust the party members loyal to Megawati (Wardhana 1997b:18–24; see also Vickers 2005:202).

reporting the empirical facts (*kenyataan*) of the events, they relied on the statements (*pernyataan*) of interviewees, who were generally in favour of the government-supported faction of PDI (Wardhana 1997b:32–7).

Nevertheless, the television coverage marked a new era in Indonesian television broadcasting in which news production was no longer monopolized and sanitized by the state, but had become a field of competition for the domestic commercial television stations (Sen and Hill 2000:128–30). The news broadcasts were even more remarkable for presenting images of political demonstrations and riots to a nationwide audience. They also contained juxtapositions between the statements made by officials, journalists, and television hosts on the one hand, and the television images on the other.¹³ Sen and Hill (2000:130) referred to this phenomenon in terms of the ‘politics of pictures’, which, by informing audiences that mass protests were happening around the country, contributed to the fall of Soeharto in May 1998. Apart from providing his own analysis of the television journalism of the time, Wardhana (1997b:49–67) also included transcripts of his interviews with the editors-in-chief of the television stations that had covered the sequence of PDI-related events. Although the answers to his questions were not particularly enlightening, Wardhana’s effort to conduct and publish these interviews had a pioneering and performative quality in encouraging the development of journalistic accountability in a climate of authoritarianism.

According to Wardhana (2002c:351–5), after the fall of the New Order, television news was still often characterized by bias and irrelevant issues. He also observed the rise of what he called ‘spit journalism’ (*jurnalisme [cipratan] ludah*), in which ‘what was talked about (*yang dilidahkan*), the essential, became marginalized; and what was spat on (*yang terludahkan*), the “sensational”, was continued endlessly’ (Wardhana 2002c:353). An example was the coverage of the controversy about a song by the late Bandung performer Harry Roesli in 2001. In his song, Roesli had criticized the *Pancasila* state ideology for not bringing prosperity and progress to the nation that was built on its five basic principles (Wardhana 2002c:341). Wardhana (2002c:340) criticized the media for lack of depth and objectivity, and for not providing any background to the nature of the parody.¹⁴

13 For instance, the TVRI hosts would mention that protesters were attacking the police, whereas the visuals showed what happened in reality was the reverse (Wardhana 1997b:40).

14 Roesli stirred controversy and was even interrogated by the police after he parodied (*memlesetkan*) the national song *Garuda Pancasila* during an Independence Day celebration in Jakarta, 17 August 2001. Wardhana (2002c:342–3) explained that Roesli wanted to demon-

Although Indonesian commercial television introduced new approaches and styles of news reporting, Wardhana observed that the coverage was still far from the ideal of critical and objective broadcast journalism. For instance, the post-New Order trend of interactive journalism (*jurnalisme interaktif*; see Jurriëns 2009) gave television viewers an opportunity to express their own opinion, but did not provide substantial contributions to investigative journalism (Wardhana 2002c:457–9). Both public and commercial television also rarely presented live coverage of news events, and if they did, their information was not necessarily correct or un-manipulated (Wardhana 2002c:223, 293).

Wardhana elaborated not only on how the commercialization of the media in the post-authoritarian era impacted on Indonesian journalism, but also on how it shaped fictional genres such as *sinetron*. He criticized the majority of Indonesian television comedy for disregarding and dumbing down (*mem-bloankan*) their audiences by presenting 'stupid' (*bloon*) characters and stories (Wardhana 2002c:87–90).¹⁵ He observed that it was difficult to distinguish one *sinetron* from the other, as many of them shared the same actors and storylines (Wardhana 2002c:133). He called these 'me too-products', created by television producers who simply imitated television programmes that had proven to be commercially successful. The television producers used cheap comedy to keep up their television ratings, attract advertisers, and fulfil their requirement to broadcast at least 80 % of Indonesian content and a maximum of 20 % of foreign content (Wardhana 2001:135, 188–9, 411).

I agree with Mark Hobart (2008:56) that television, including its entertainment, is important, because it 'is not just an industry but comprises overlapping cultural conversations, in the details of which viewers recognize or learn about themselves and others'. Hobart (2008:55) also rightly argues that 'ordinary people' are 'working, suffering, thinking, feeling and engaging with the world through the mass media as part of often complex lives with histories' and constitute 'subjects who reflect on, and try to change, the conditions of their lives through various practices, including television-watching'. However, this should not preclude a critical examination of the broader political economy of

strate that only a small minority of people close to Soeharto had enjoyed progress and prosperity, as if the state ideology had only worked for them, and not for the vast majority of people; or, alternatively, as if the privileged few had adhered to a different type of *Pancasila* than the rest of the population.

- 15 Wardhana 2002c:87. This pun ('The show must be stupid') is a play on the expression 'The show must go on', using the Indonesian word for stupid, *bloon* (pronounced as 'blo-on' and rhyming with 'go on'), to refer to the low quality of Indonesian television shows.

the media, and the impact it has on media content and media consumption, including representations of gender.

According to Wardhana (2002c:365–6), one of the results of the increased commercialization of television and the lack of independence for script writers was the stereotypical representation of gender in Indonesian *sinetron*. Script writers depended on television producers, who believed that the perpetuation of stereotypical gender roles was in the best financial interests of their media companies. The title of one of his essays (Wardhana 2002c:125), ‘History, his story: Hiss! Ssst ...’, was intended to illustrate that Indonesian film and television reinforced authoritative male-dominated historiography (‘his story’) and silenced both alternative versions of history (‘Hiss!’) and the representation of historical facts that were considered shameful (‘Ssst ...’). If there were any films and *sinetron* focusing on historical themes, they tended to be of low quality and deal almost exclusively with the epic heroes of official historiography rather than the daily reality of social life (Wardhana 2002c:125–8). Also in his 2004b novel *Stamboel selebritas* (The celebrity spectacle), which will be analysed in the final part of this article, Wardhana critically commented on the production mechanisms and gender dimensions of Indonesian *sinetron*.

The Indonesian Broadcasting Commission

In order to put Wardhana’s work in a critical context, it is necessary not only to identify the political economy of the Indonesian media, but also the broader environment of media watch initiatives to which Wardhana has contributed. The most authoritative institution in charge of monitoring broadcast content is the independent Indonesian Broadcasting Commission or KPI. This commission is a product of the 2002 Undang-Undang Penyiaran (Broadcasting Law). Unlike the first Indonesian Broadcasting Law of 1997, which mentioned that the government was in charge of media regulation, the 2002 Broadcasting Law stated that broadcasting had to be monitored by an independent organization in the public interest.¹⁶

16 Jurriëns 2009:35. The 2002 Broadcasting Law and several of its by-laws, especially the 2005 Peraturan Pemerintah (Government Regulations) 49 to 52, are ambiguous, however, in stating that ‘the state’ (*negara*) is responsible for issuing broadcasting licenses. According to KPI, ‘the state’ here refers to KPI, while the Susilo Bambang Yudhono government (2004–2014) believed that broadcasting licenses were the task of the *menteri komunikasi dan informatika* (minister of communications and informatics) (Jurriëns 2009:34). This ambiguity has restricted the mandate of KPI.

According to the law, KPI's main task is to guarantee that the Indonesian broadcast media adhere to two basic principles: diversity of ownership and diversity of content. In practice, KPI has mainly focused on the latter. This is reflected by the fact that its largest division is the Tim Bidang Isi Siaran (Broadcast Content Division Team). In addition to the 24/7 monitoring of Indonesia's eleven nationwide television networks, the broadcast content team also processes suggestions and complaints by ordinary television viewers (Armando et al. 2012: iii). Viewers can submit their views to KPI by phone, email, SMS, or Twitter (Armando et al. 2012:10–21). Based on the viewers' input, KPI can issue recommendations and warnings to radio and television stations, or take administrative sanctions against them (Armando et al. 2012:iii). There have been cases of up to 29,000 viewers complaining about a single television programme. In order to increase the quality of Indonesian broadcasting, KPI has also inaugurated its own awards system, called Anugerah KPI (KPI Awards), and developed educational programmes for media professionals and consumers (Armando et al. 2012:iv, 1–2).

In 2011, KPI issued 55 sanctions against broadcasting organizations, and in 2012 the number of sanctions even increased to 100 (Armando et al. 2012:4). These measures have proven far from effective, however, as broadcasting organizations tend to ignore the instructions received from KPI. For instance, when TRANS7 was urged to stop broadcasting their controversial talk show *Empat mata* (Face-to-face), they continued the same broadcast content by simply adjusting the programme title to *Bukan empat mata* (Not face-to-face) (Armando et al. 2012:6). In addition to conflicting or limited media legislation and disregard from media producers, KPI has also had problems with safeguarding its image, maintaining neutrality, and warding off threats from disgruntled media consumers (Armando et al. 2012:3–4).

According to Nugroho, Putri and Laksmi (2012:77–8, 102), one of KPI's main weaknesses is that it focuses on media content at the expense of monitoring media ownership. They quote Indonesian media analyst Ignatius Haryanto, who blames the commission for ignoring that undesirable, market-focused media content is a product of the 'structural problem' of the concentration of ownership. According to Haryanto, what is needed to improve the Indonesian broadcasting industry is 'to first fix the structure, then contents will follow' (Nugroho, Putri and Laksmi 2012:77–8). For instance, the 2002 Broadcasting Law promotes regional diversification of television by restricting the broadcasting reach of television stations. Instead of working with regional stations as a network (*berjaringan*), in line with the Broadcasting Law (article 60), Jakarta-based stations have continued to broadcast nationally without sharing income and other resources with the regions.

Gareth Barkin (2013:46) observed that ‘the lack of cooperation from national stations has led regional television to languish in obscurity’. At the same time, the regional stations, because of their lack of resources, ‘depend on information from the same national news organizations to which they are ostensibly the alternative’. Barkin (2013:47) argued that some regional stations, like Pacific TV in Manado, North Sulawesi, did succeed in providing alternative content and securing a certain degree of independence. Probably due to its success, ironically, Pacific TV now has also become part of a conglomerate, namely Kompas TV. Non-commercial community television (*televisi komunitas*) stations were officially acknowledged by the 2002 Broadcasting Law, but have struggled since due to resistance from the commercial sector as well as the bureaucratic hurdles that have to be overcome to receive broadcasting licences and frequencies (Nazaruddin and Hermanto 2009).

Wardhana wondered why KPI had not imposed any financial sanctions on media institutions that ignored the official guidelines, as such sanctions would directly impact on their core business of profit-making.¹⁷ I believe another problem of KPI’s approach to media content is that it is predominantly reactive and case-by-case based. The four most common objections against media content published by KPI on behalf of the public are representations of sex, violence, and superstitious beliefs, and lack of objectivity in news reporting (Jurriëns 2009:37). It is unclear, however, what exactly is covered by these categories, and why or in which circumstances any of these should be objected to.

For instance, in 2012, a ‘kiss on the lips’ (*ciuman bibir*) and ‘sexuality’ (*seksualitas*) were among the most frequent ‘offences’ (Armando et al. 2012:10). The problem is that in the KPI reporting, scenes seem to be targeted in isolation, regardless of their style or visual representation, their function in a narrative or genre, or the classification or broadcasting time of the programmes in which they appeared. This also applies to broadcasts including (non-mainstream) religion, violence, and topical information, which are often rejected on the basis of stereotypical categorizations such as SARA,¹⁸ *horror* (horror), or *mistik*

17 Wardhana, Veven Sp. ‘Kebebasan media’, *Tempo.co*, 10-5-2012, <http://www.tempo.co/read/kolom/2012/05/10/581/Kebebasan-Media-> (accessed 27-08-2014).

18 Cf. Armando et al. 2012:6. SARA stands for restrictions on media representations of *suku* (ethnicity), *agama* (religion), *ras* (race), and *antar-golongan* (intergroup relations, relating to class or ideology). These restrictions are a legacy of the New Order regime, which implemented SARA to ‘limit news reporting of ethno-religious tensions and control the public interpretation of all socio-political conflicts, to exclude (as in the case of the

(mystical [that is, non-mainstream] beliefs). Lack of clear criteria, critical debate, and contextual and conceptual understanding has caused the continuation of stereotypes and leaves the very issue of quality control unsolved or even unaddressed.

Conceptualizing Indonesia as a World of Television

In Wardhana's work, on the other hand, the idea of television is not restricted to media organizations and their programmes, but also refers to Indonesia as a televised society, or Indonesia as a television world in its own right. It addresses the broader Indonesian cultural environment that shapes, and is being shaped by, media production and consumption. Wardhana (2002a) explained this idea in one of his longer essays (16 pages), 'Budaya massa, budaya televisi, (Tele)vision du monde: TV or not TV ...' (Mass media, television culture, *(tele)vision du monde: TV or not TV ...*). The essay puts forward two fundamental questions that underlie Wardhana's corpus of television-related writings: one about the type of television culture that can be found in Indonesia, and the other about the way in which this culture has shaped Indonesian society (Wardhana 2002a:15). By attempting to answer these questions, which are yet to be fully addressed by organizations like KPI, the essay provides a useful entry point to analysing, and potentially improving, the Indonesian television landscape.

Also elsewhere Wardhana (2002c:47) argued that a television culture had taken root in Indonesia, and that the country had been fundamentally influenced and changed by the medium. This television culture would only continue to grow in the future, to the extent that people would be left with no other choice than the neo-Shakespearean '[to be with] TV or not [to be with] TV', the phrase that inspired the title of my article. This existential condition would, unavoidably, determine people's *(tele)vision du monde* or television-shaped world view. According to Wardhana (2002c:105), Indonesians, particularly youth, had become the children of television culture (*anak-anak kebudayaan televisi*), including its celebrity culture. Television did not merely fulfil the role of occasional babysitter or nanny, but had 'taken over the role of parents in educating and developing the character of children' (Wardhana 2002c:105).

Chinese) and to restrict languages used in the media in various ways' (Sen and Hill 2000:12).

Although television had, indeed, become a matter of ‘to be or not to be’, Wardhana (2002c:30) argued that parents should not prevent children from knowing reality (*realitas*) through television. If reality or ‘the facts’ (*fakta*) were considered undesirable, it was the world that had to be changed, not television as such. It was better for parents not to rely on formal institutions like KPI to provide media education to their children, but to actively contribute to monitoring and improving the cultural environment in which their children were watching television (Wardhana 2002c:30, 175). In one of his articles from the mid 1990s, Wardhana (2002c:106–7) agreed with scientific recommendations to limit children’s television consumption to a maximum of one to four hours per day, and to encourage them to also engage in other activities. He believed it was the duty of parents or other caretakers to decide what children watched on television, when, and for how long (Wardhana 2002c:29, 73). This is in line with the message of Indonesian NGOs focusing on media literacy.

Wardhana not only conceptualized the idea of Indonesia as a world of television, but also identified the factors shaping and sustaining this world. His analysis was not limited to a case-by-case approach, like KPI’s, but tried to identify larger issues over a longer period of time. The quote at the beginning of this article confirms why his work of the late 1990s and early 2000s is still relevant today, and why it constitutes more than a series of topical and relatively ephemeral writings on equally ephemeral issues. It reflects Wardhana’s view that the Indonesian television world, in spite of its seemingly dramatic changes, was still struggling with the most substantial issues. This is reiterated in one of his other remarkable statements:

It appears that over the years only the number of broadcasting stations has increased. The television culture perspective—if there is one—and the perception of the public have not apparently changed over time. Even the attitude of the public has remained the same: what has emerged is not a critical, but an over-critical attitude [...]. In the name of ‘the taste of the market’, producers continue to shorten as well as simplify their production, which is in fact something the people (feel free to read: the market) also complain about.

WARDHANA 2002a:9–10

With his writings, Wardhana showed that certain behaviours and practices, such as the discourse used by media producers to justify the commercialization of Indonesian television, or the emotional reactions of Indonesian viewers to television content, were not new but recurring phenomena. In Wardhana’s (2002a:25) view, the lack of interest in in-depth media analysis meant that

even in the early 2000s television was still very much a new phenomenon or 'baby' (*bayi*) to the Indonesian public, television producers, and policy makers. He rightfully saw his own work as an effort to chronicle and analyse developments that would otherwise remain unnoticed and undocumented (Wardhana 2002a:14–5).

The Media Watch and Media Literacy Movement

Both Wardhana (2002a:11) himself and others¹⁹ rightly saw his work as the start of an Indonesian media watch and media literacy movement. This movement consists of NGOs, which, unlike KPI, cannot take any direct administrative action against media companies. At the same time, their smaller scale or grass-roots character may put them in a better position than KPI for interacting with audiences and providing education and creating debate about the quality criteria of television and other media. These organizations deserve some attention here, as they form another relevant context for critically discussing Wardhana's work.

Roughly, media watch organizations focus on media producers, while media literacy organizations deal with media consumers (Rianto 2013b:24, 181). In practice, the first is stronger related to the analysis and regulation of media companies and their products, while the second has a stronger commitment to the education of media audiences. Media literacy organizations seek to train media consumers to actively find, sort, and analyse media information, and use this information in a way that is beneficial to their own lives (Hendriyani and Guntarto 2011:10; Rianto 2013b:15, 2013a:201). Ideally, they base their pedagogical methods on the composition and media needs of the communities they work with (Rianto 2013b:186). Media watch organizations focus on media research rather than pedagogy.

The Yayasan Pengembangan Media Anak (YPMA, The Children Media Development Organization), established in 2004, is one of the pioneering organizations promoting media literacy in Indonesia (Jurriëns 2011). It was founded by people previously involved in Yayasan Kesejahteraan Anak Indonesia (The

19 Siregar 2001:xxiv; Hera Diani, 'In the media glare with observer Veven', *The Jakarta Post*, 24-10-2004, <http://m.thejakartapost.com/news/2004/10/24/media-glare-observer-veven.html> (accessed 27-8-2014); Arswendo Atmowiloto, 'Veven: Generasi haus budaya', *Kompas.com*, 20-5-2013, <http://oase.kompas.com/read/2013/05/20/22014665/Veven.Generasi.Haus.Budaya> (accessed 27-8-2014); Is Mujiarso, 'Sastrawan Veven Sp Wardhana meninggal dunia', *Detikcom*, 17-5-2013.

Indonesian Child Welfare Foundation), which in the early 1990s already had programmes focusing on media and children (Hendriyani and Guntarto 2011:4; Rianto 2013a:193). YPMA's partners include KPI, Komisi Perlindungan Anak Indonesia (KPAI, Indonesian Commission for the Protection of Children), the Kementrian Komunikasi dan Informatika (Department of Communication and Informatics), and several other state departments, NGOs, media organizations, and tertiary-education institutions.²⁰

In recent years, the media literacy movement has considerably expanded. For instance, the Jakarta-based NGO TIFA alone sponsors eight organizations providing media literacy training on three different islands (Java, Sumatra, and Sulawesi), including Kajian Informasi, Pendidikan dan Penerbitan Sumatra (KIPPAS, Sumatran Information, Education and Publishing Studies) in Medan; Yayasan Sahabat Cahaya (The Friends of the Light Foundation) and Remotivi in Jakarta; Lembaga Studi Pers dan Informasi (LeSPI, The Press and Information Study Institute) in Semarang; Jurnal Celebes (Celebes Journal) in Makassar; and Masyarakat Peduli Media (MPM, Media Care Society), Early Childhood Care and Development—Resource Center (ECCD-RC), and Centre for Learning and Advancing Experimental Democracy (LEAD) in Yogyakarta (Poerwaningtias 2013:iii). According to Hendriyani and Guntarto (2011:11–2), the broader field includes at least five different types of actors: NGOs and foundations; schools; universities; community groups; and government and other national and international organizations. To this list I wish to add the often ignored group of creative actors, including media producers, artists, and writers like Wardhana.

One important aspect of the media literacy movement is the exploration of the idea of 'qualitative rating'. YPMA in particular presents itself as an institute that uses qualitative rating (*rating kualitatif*) for the collection and analysis of information about the media (Jurriëns 2011). This qualitative rating is meant as both a complement and an alternative to the activities of organizations such as Nielsen Audience Measurement,²¹ which are mainly concerned with collecting quantitative data about broadcasting institutions, genres, and audience behaviour on behalf of the media industry. YPMA, on the other hand, attempts to raise media awareness in Indonesian society with a specific focus on media

20 Kidia, 'Mitra kerja', <http://www.kidia.org/profile/7/> (accessed 19-4-2010).

21 Nielsen Audience Measurement is an international company that collects quantitative audience data on behalf of the television industry. The Indonesian branch publishes monthly newsletters that contain short opinion pieces on Indonesian television by the company's own data analysts as well as independent academics.

that are directed at, or enjoyed by, children and youth, such as television, magazines, video games, and mobile phones.²²

Since 2004, YPMA has developed its own 'Kritis! Media Untuk Anak' (Critical! Media for children, or 'Kidia') media awareness campaign for children, parents, teachers, government institutions, advertisers, advertising agencies, and media organizations.²³ This campaign is meant to 'raise the critical awareness of children and parents' as well as to 'push for media policy changes that take the interests of children more into account'.²⁴ According to YPMA, a critical media attitude enables people to restrict their hours of media consumption, to better choose and understand media content, and to take personal benefit from media consumption.²⁵ Two of YPMA's main activities to reach the general public and achieve its campaign goals are the publication of the bi-monthly media analysis journal *Kidia*, and the organization of the annual media awareness event 'Hari Tanpa TV' (Day without TV).

According to Puji Rianto (2013a:200–1, 205), director of the Yogyakarta-based Pusat Kajian Media dan Budaya Populer (PKMBP, Centre for Media and Popular Culture Studies), media literacy should not be restricted to the analysis of media content, but also include critical perspectives on the political economy of the media, or the interaction between media, politics, and business. Organizations like Remotivi also acknowledge that both fields are interlinked and should be addressed simultaneously (Rianto 2013b:57). I agree that an approach that separates media watch from media literacy, and focuses on individual categories and cases, is too narrow and rigid. It may lose sight of the broader structures of the Indonesian media industry as well as the dynamic and inter-related nature of media production, distribution, and consumption cultures.

The TIFA research team also identified three practical problems faced by Indonesian media literacy organizations. Firstly, their programmes tend to focus on the transfer of knowledge about the media, but have difficulty in triggering genuine concern about media-related issues, and are even less successful in changing media consumption behaviour. Secondly, they suffer from a lack of resources. Thirdly, their funding depends largely on donor organizations (Rianto 2013b:183–5).

22 Kidia, 'Kegiatan utama', <http://www.kidia.org/profile/4/> (accessed 19-4-2010).

23 Kidia, 'Strategi dan program kerja', <http://www.kidia.org/profile/5/> (accessed 19-4-2010).

24 Kidia, 'Kegiatan utama', <http://www.kidia.org/profile/4/> (accessed 19-4-2010).

25 Kidia, 'Kritis! Media untuk anak ("Kidia")', <http://www.kidia.org/profile/3/> (accessed 19-4-2010).

Creatively Reworking the Medium

The role of creative actors like Wardhana is important to be acknowledged in the context of media quality control, precisely because of their potential to engage with the media and audiences in innovative and alluring ways. Normally, they also take some artistic and critical distance from their funding sources. In addition, some of these actors use a more comprehensive approach to the media, by exploring them as cultural environments rather than merely technological tools, institutional forms, or genre types. Their approach cannot be explained in terms of media watch or media literacy only, but comes closer to what Neil Postman (1970) coined 'media ecology'.

According to Postman (1970:161), media ecology is 'the study of environments'.²⁶ He explains that 'the specifications [of media environments] are more often implicit and informal, half concealed by our assumption that what we are dealing with is not an environment but merely a machine'. Media ecology, therefore, 'tries to make these specifications explicit' (Postman 1970:161). More broadly, media ecology could be seen as the study of, and, where desirable, intervention in, the interaction between media and other environments. In his seminal work 'The three ecologies', for instance, Felix Guattari (1989) urges people to recognize and act on the interrelatedness of, or 'transversal' connections between, mental, social, and environmental ecologies.

Applying specific ecological terminology to the media, Roger Silverstone (2007:176–7, 180) has pleaded for 'environmental standards of media practice' or 'the equivalent of a Kyoto for the media' to tackle problems of cultural pollution and moral degradation. These environmental standards, involving media regulation as well as the promotion of media literacy, should contribute to the strengthening of a 'media civics' and appeal to a sense of moral responsibility of both media producers and media consumers. In the Indonesian case, however, the examples of KPI and the various NGOs show that regulation does not sufficiently cover issues of media ownership, while the promotion of media literacy is not necessarily interlinked with the critical observation of media organizations.

By trying to uncover the underlying structures and recurring issues in the Indonesian media world, Wardhana's work demonstrates a media-ecological desire to 'learn about that which is unknown' (Postman 1970:164). The 'un-

26 This idea of media ecology has been kept alive by scholars like Lance Strate (2006) and the Media Ecology Association. Most debates have a theoretical character, however, with examples derived predominantly from Western contexts.

known' here refers to the effects of the media on past and present life as well as the social challenges of future media environments. This means that media ecology has descriptive and normative aspects, but also gives space to the imagination and acknowledges the necessity of new utopian visions. It also implies that media ecology is about altering and intervening in cultural practices and social constructs, in addition to (merely) describing and deconstructing them.

Postman (1970:168) and others (Brunner, Nigro and Raunig 2013) argue that media ecology not necessarily needs to take the form of a text in order to facilitate the production of imaginative ideas about the present and the future, but may also, and perhaps preferably, be presented in other forms, such as art or eco-art. A good example is how, since the late 1990s, local artists and independent art communities, including video art pioneer Krisna Murti and the video art groups *ruangrupa* (Jakarta) and *Video Lab* (Bandung), have used video and other new forms of media art to promote media literacy in Indonesia (Jurriëns 2010, 2015).

Wardhana's own work is not in the form of conventional texts either, but presents an innovative form of intermediality. His writings were partially inspired by the conventions of television programmes, and reversed the traditional hierarchy of script and visual output as known from the film and television industry. His readers were encouraged not to ignore or be overwhelmed by television, but to creatively use and manipulate the medium to their own benefit. While KPI and the media watch and media literacy NGOs have, each in their own way, delivered important contributions to monitoring and criticizing Indonesian television, Wardhana differed in that he also used experimental writing to creatively engage with, and reflect on, the medium.

Two of Wardhana's signature style devices were the use of wordplay and humour. The titles of his essays often contained a play on existing abbreviations and acronyms, or a humorous combination of Indonesian and English words. Examples include 'TVRI(s) dan TV(s)RI: TVRI Swasta atau Televisi Sangat Rindu Iklan' (Wardhana 1997a:10), 'SCTV atawa Saluran Cerita Telenovela' (Wardhana 1997a:23) and, of course, 'The show must *bloon*' (Wardhana 2002c:87).²⁷ The essays were usually concluded with equally engaging and humorous statements or questions. They were meant to make the readers think for themselves,

27 The first two puns translate as 'TVRI(s) and TV(s)RI: Commercial TVRI or Television That Longs For Advertisements' and 'SCTV or the Telenovela Stories Channel', respectively. The first pun referred to the banning of advertising on state television from the early 1980s until the late 1990s; the second, to the popularity of imported soap operas on commercial television in the 1990s.

and to encourage them to continue reading Wardhana's essays, not unlike cliffhangers in a television series that encourage audiences to continue watching a sequence of episodes.²⁸

It is fruitful to compare Wardhana's approach here with that of his contemporary, colleague, and even more prolific essayist Goenawan Mohamad (b. 1941), who is known for his 'Catatan pinggir' (Sidelines) columns in the *Tempo* magazine. Mohamad and Wardhana were both involved in *Tempo Interaktif* when the print version of the magazine was officially banned. Perhaps Wardhana's reason for writing essays in a climate of authoritarianism was similar to that declared by Mohamad (2002:vii):

This is my way of offering an alternative conversation when book shops survive mainly on school text-books and management manuals, when public libraries are non-existent and the universities let their humanity departments be ruled by fear of censorship and the convenience of clichés. In my view, the essay, as a form, is the best method to circumvent this utilitarian demand for predictability.

However, while Mohamad (2002:viii) sought 'recourse to the realm of images or to poetry and its ambiguities' in his fight 'against the acronym-studded columns of bureaucratese that made New Order Indonesia', Wardhana stretched the New Order language to its limits, thus showing its ridicule while simultaneously making it suitable for humorous, creative, and critical re-use.

One aspect of Indonesian television entertainment in which Wardhana had a special interest was celebrity culture. His main work that addressed how celebrity culture had entered Indonesian life and shaped contemporary Indonesian ways of being, including notions of gender and sexuality, was the novel *Stamboel selebritas* (2004b). This novel can be considered the first Indonesian literary work that had television culture as its main topic. It was also Wardhana's only writing in which he used fiction to discuss the cultural condition of Indonesia as a televised society. The novel reflected on television not only through its content, but also through its structure.

28 For example, in the concluding remarks of one of his essays, he asked readers to speak out about media-related issues, either personally (*sendirian*) or 'via a spokesperson' (*lewat juru bicara*). The last phrase was an ironic reference to politicians who lack in accountability (Wardhana 2002c:220). Elsewhere, he made the ironic confession that he had been overdoing (*terlampau dipaksa-paksakan*) his use of wordplay (*plesetan*) (Wardhana 2002c:386). This 'confession' was meant to urge the readers themselves to reflect on the essence (*esensi*) of television issues.

The Celebrity Spectacle

Stamboel selebritas (2004b) was originally conceived as a novel. However, when Wardhana (2004b:538–9, 542) received an offer to have it published as a serial in *Media Indonesia*, he revised the structure of his manuscript in accordance with the format of the newspaper. In this way, he established a link between his creative work and a long tradition of Indonesian 'newspaper literature' (*sastra koran*; see Lindsay 1998:130–1), which has a degree of accessibility similar to other creative media, including television shows.

Wardhana (2004b:539) tried to give each episode of his story a 'cliffhanger', modelled on the structure of soap operas, to encourage readers to wait for, and continue reading, the next newspaper edition. He approached the time lag between two consecutive episodes as if it was a commercial break in the middle of a television programme. He also compared the newspaper instalments of his story with the individual broadcasts that make up a television serial, while he thought of his novel as a whole in terms of a relatively uninterrupted film on DVD or VCD (Wardhana 2004b:542).

The reworking of the newspaper serial back into a novel forced Wardhana (2004b:543) to make some adjustments to his writing. Similar to soap opera and *sinetron*, this novel of more than 500 pages seems to meander and expand endlessly, without ever reaching closure. That is perhaps the reason the novel never received a literary review. However, the experience of reading the novel should be seen as watching and skipping parts of a soap opera without a strictly defined corpus of episodes. It allows readers to enter and exit the story at relatively random points, or even skip certain parts of it, without losing the main thread of the narrative. In that sense, the novel offers a form of intermediality, reversing the hierarchy of writing and audio-visual communication, as the written script was not the basis, but the outcome of audio-visual culture.

In the title, the neologism *selebritas*²⁹ is combined with an older word, *stamboel*. *Stamboel* was the name of a performing arts genre, in which a travelling troupe of artists told a story over several consecutive nights. This genre was popular in the Dutch East Indies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Cohen 2006). The artists in Wardhana's home region of East Java often performed stories from the *One thousand and one nights* epic in

29 For the title of his novel, Wardhana used *selebritas* instead of the more common Indonesian word *selebriti* in order to refer to 'celebrities' or famous people. He believed *selebritas* was more consistent with Indonesian words of similar English derivation, such as *komunitas* (from 'community'), *komoditas* (commodity) and *seksualitas* (sexuality) (see also Coutas 2008:113).

Malay to the accompaniment of Middle Eastern music (Wardhana 2004b:540). Wardhana (2004b:543) explained that the global glamour of contemporary celebrities shared characteristics with the cosmopolitan character of *stamboel*.³⁰ Similar to many *sinetron* stars, some of the most famous *stamboel* performers had an Indo-European background and were married to foreigners. Wardhana (2004b:543) saw modern film and television celebrities, who stand above the masses and make headlines because of their supposedly promiscuous behaviour, as the successors of these so-called *nyai*. In the way they wander around in society with much fanfare, they could be seen as a modern version of the historical *stamboel* touring theatre troupe. I translate *stamboel* as 'spectacle' here, as this term resonates with what the French philosopher and filmmaker Guy Debord (1994) calls a 'society of the spectacle', or a world where social relations between people are mediated by images.

In his short guide to the novel, Wardhana (2004b:543) explained with typical irony that he wanted to explore the inner world and character of celebrities, without turning them into cult figures. The novel played on the names and lives of real-life celebrities. For instance, Raiyya Rayhan was modelled on the Indonesian female actor Ria Irawan, Harry Harsugitomo Tamtomo on Hutomo Mandala Putra ('Tommy Soeharto'), ex-convict and youngest son of former president Soeharto, and Mintutulun on the female *dangdut* singer Inul. Wardhana (2004b:543) added a list to his novel with the names of the main characters, because he often 'forgot' or 'interchanged' them while writing the story. This was also an ironic reference to the ephemerality and interchangeability of celebrities in contemporary media and consumer society. The novel performs and reiterates the spectacle of a televised society, rather than merely recounting it.

The novel starts with the story of the discovery of the dead body of Ardisoma Sunarkaputra, or Ardy, in the house of his former lover, Raiyya Rayhan. It turns out that Ardy had died because of an overdose of *shabu*, or methamphetamine. This was based on the real-life story of Rivaldi Sukarno, who was found dead because of an overdose of drugs in Ria Irawan's home in Jakarta in 1993.³¹ By tracing the lives of other artists that are directly or indirectly connected to

30 Perhaps to give expression to feelings of *tempo doeloe*, or nostalgia for the time in which *stamboel* was performed, Wardhana (2004b:541) used the spelling conventions as they were prior to the 1972 official Indonesian spelling reform ('oe' instead of modern-day 'u'). The use of mixed spelling in the title may also signal a continuation between past and present social phenomena and refer to the 'otherworldliness' of present-day celebrities.

31 At some point in the novel, the narrator (Wardhana 2004b:89–90) makes an explicit reference to Irawan.

Raiyya, the novel uncovers the politics and mechanisms of the Indonesian news and entertainment industry. In addressing and criticizing aspects of both media production and media consumption, it constitutes an important documentation of a specific, media-dominated time in Indonesia's history.

Some of the most hilarious scenes in the novel centre on the character of Pri. Pri is presented as a prototype celebrity, as someone who is known for being known and not necessarily for being a star (*bintang*) in something.³² Pri uses both her oratorical and sexual talents to convince media personnel to destroy Raiyya and strengthen her own position in show business. One of the central scenes in the novel is about Pri organizing a huge media event for herself, in which numerous television representatives and celebrities participate without prior knowledge about the purpose of the event. Pri is granted a live interview with one of the television stations, which, in a pun on the abundance of hollow talk in Indonesian infotainment shows, goes on for hours but fails to disclose any relevant information about Pri's background or the purpose of her function (Wardhana 2004b:173–97).

Apart from engaging with the production side of television, the novel also addresses the rights and responsibilities of media consumers. Reiterating some of the key points in Wardhana's essays on television, Raiyya mentions that newspaper readers and television viewers do not always realize that what is presented as fact or reality (*kenyataan*) in the media is often merely based on the unchecked, personal statements of informants (Wardhana 2004b:86). According to some of the journalists in the story, media consumers are over-sensitive and tend to react aggressively if they disagree with media content, such as nudity (Wardhana 2004b:35–8). In the novel, mention is made of the real case of Arswendo Atmowiloto, Wardhana's former editor-in-chief of *Monitor*, who received death threats and was imprisoned for five years because of a popularity poll he ran in his tabloid (Wardhana 2004b:39). In the poll, the Prophet Muhammad came out less popular than Indonesian political figures and celebrities, including Soeharto and Atmowiloto himself (Aspinall 2005:134).

The final part of the novel pays attention to the notorious case of *dangdut* performer Inul, who is represented by the character of Mintutuilun. Inul caused a lot of heated debate in Indonesia in the early to mid 2000s because of the supposedly sexually suggestive character of her dance moves. Her case was

32 See Coutas 2008 for a critical discussion of the differences between *bintang*, *selebritas*, and *Idola*. The third concept refers to the contestants ('Idols') in talent shows, who derive their stardom partially from their own qualities as performers and partially from the media marketing mechanisms for producing such celebrities.

used in arguments in favour of and against the introduction of the Indonesian (anti-)Pornography Bill. This bill was eventually ratified in 2008 (Heryanto 2008b; Lindsay 2011:183).

The narrator makes the plausible but rarely publicized point that the debate around Mintutilun (read: Inul) had less to do with issues of religion and morality than with the business interests of commercial television stations.³³ He argues that the success of CSTV (a pun on the Indonesian commercial television station SCTV) in attracting advertisers with programming about Mintutilun was a source of frustration for the other commercial television stations. To destroy the success of their competitor and safeguard their own businesses, these other stations decided to broadcast negative comments about Mintutilun and urge viewers to boycott and protest television programmes and performances in which the controversial artist appeared. Referring to the blurred line between news and entertainment in contemporary Indonesian television, the narrator reports that items about Mintutilun were ideally situated to cross the boundaries between the two genres (Wardhana 2004b:500). He also makes the important observation that the majority of Indonesian television viewers ignored the call by the powerful media to reject Mintutilun.

Putting Wardhana into Critical Perspective

With his writings, media appearances, and other engagement activities, Wardhana delivered an invaluable contribution to teaching Indonesians how their new media environment, dominated by television and increasingly also by other technologies, such as mobile phones and the Internet, functions and shapes their daily lives. His work complements the activities of KPI and related NGOs, which each have their own merits as well as problems. What is offered by creative actors like Wardhana, and often missing in the activities of the organizations mentioned, is a broader conceptualization of the Indonesian television world, the identification of television-related issues recurring throughout history, and creative engagements with and alternatives to the medium of television.

33 Wardhana 2004b:499–507. Heryanto (2008b:20), for instance, gives a detailed and fascinating account of how Inul's controversial performances became a political and symbolic battle field for the antagonistic forces of 'local sentiment and national authority', 'syncretic Javanism and new Islam piety', 'patriarchy and the women's movement', 'lower and upper class cultural tastes', and the 'digital divide and empowerment'. It does not include Wardhana's point about the dynamics of the television industry itself, however.

At the same time, what also needs to be critically examined is whether Wardhana's oeuvre displays or continues some of the same features of the Indonesian media that it criticizes. To what extent has it been able to radically change the television industry, and go beyond the culture of Jakarta-based, middle-class television producers and consumers, including its clichés relating to issues such as sexuality? One way to put his work into perspective is by following the critical distinction between 'media watch' and 'media literacy' made by Indonesian television observers themselves. It is clear that Wardhana did not provide media literacy training to local communities in a direct manner. The audience he had in mind for his writings was also not based on socio-demographic research of its composition or media needs. Because of these circumstances, his analysis may have missed out on important media and social developments in Indonesia's regional areas.³⁴ Wardhana was firmly based in Jakarta, where he monitored national television developments with an imagined middle-class, nationwide audience in mind.

His self-positioning also had clear advantages, however. Being based in Jakarta, and with his background in journalism, he was able to be in direct contact with the centre of Indonesia's media, entertainment, and advertising industry. It enabled him to critically comment on the political economy of the Indonesian television industry, which is an aspect of the Indonesian media that is often left out in media literacy training programmes, as noted earlier. This means that Wardhana's writings and other activities, although closer to the media watch principles, are far from irrelevant to the Indonesian media literacy movement.

Wardhana's novel may also be criticized for exploiting sensationalist elements from the television world, in its representation of numerous and lengthy sex scenes. At the same time, however, these scenes seem to be deliberately and strategically overdone. Wardhana may have included them to make a stand against the proposed pornography bill, and the banning or distorted representations of sexuality on Indonesian television. The scenes are not conventional depictions of sexuality, but full of humorous metaphors and statements that have a provocative quality in Indonesia's legal and social contexts. For instance, they are not restricted to heteronormative sex, but also depict lesbian and gay couples. At one point it is mentioned that Pri, who is portrayed as a woman of unconventional female sexual aggression, 'respects' queer people, because they 'want to be honest about the choices of their heart' (Wardhana 2004b:345).

34 Academic publications that have focused on television programmes on regional culture include Hendrawan 2015, Barkin 2013, Loven 2008, Jurriëns 2004, Mrázek 2002, and Hobart 2002.

In several of his essays, Wardhana (2002c:426, 432, 474) also regretted that in debates about gender and sexuality no clear distinctions were made between (the art of) eroticism (*erotisme/erotikagrafi*) and the representation of obscenity (*cabulisme/cabulografi*). Instead, 'pornografi' was often used by politicians as an argument to exercise censorship and restrict the freedom of the media. According to Wardhana (2002c:426–8), there was no direct connection between media freedom and an increase in pornographic images in the print and broadcast media. Some media with relatively mild content, including his own *Citra* magazine in 1991, had been interrogated or brought to court, while blatantly vulgar and exploitative media had been circulating without any difficulties (Wardhana 2002c:426, 431). Even during the strong repression of the media under the Soeharto regime, magazines, videos, and other media displaying nudity and sexuality were relatively easy to access (Sen 1994:154–5).

This leaves us with the question to what extent creative actors like Wardhana can make real changes to the television industry. The media industry has great economic and political power, and is unlikely to change its behaviour and practices in the short run. The government and, to a lesser extent, KPI have regulatory power, but at the same time are still struggling to effectively implement legal tools like the 2002 Broadcasting Law. Creative actors like Wardhana are void of any regulatory power, but their strength lies in addressing the consumption side of the media, and in teaching television viewers about interconnections between media ownership and media content as well as the wider ecology of the Indonesian media. If television consumers were to follow the example of cultural activists such as television critics, video artists, and community media groups, and were to change their viewing behaviour, or even create their own media products, it would certainly affect the television establishment.

Conclusion: The Need for Media Education

Although Wardhana had a reasonable outreach through his newspaper publications and media appearances, his efforts and those of some of his colleagues could have a much bigger impact on future generations of television viewers and critics if they were to be used as resources in Media and Cultural Studies courses at schools and universities. Unfortunately, the Indonesian education system is confronted with a gap in media and culture courses and departments. Programmes and subjects focusing on the media normally use a practical, communications-oriented method, and often lack theoretical and historical approaches to media and culture (Heryanto 2005:6–7). This is partially due to

the lack of time Indonesian academics have for research, as they are often burdened by many administrative and non-scholarly obligations. Many of them are exemplary in showing great social commitment, including promoting media literacy among local communities, sometimes at the cost of their own academic career.

More than 40 years ago, Postman (1970) argued for media ecology to replace the traditional subject of English in the high-school curriculum, which he believed was the product of a world predominantly formed by print culture, and not in line with the way in which the latest communication and information technology was shaping contemporary life. Postman (1970:168) went as far as projecting that in his revised curriculum and school system, 'the best contemporary art will come from high school students, if art is thought of as inseparable from contemporary technology'. Perhaps this prediction today is less far-fetched than it was then, considering the spectacular growth of all sorts of DIY media for creative production.

Postman's suggestions for the inquiries and projects of the high-school group of the future (in his case, the 1980s) resonate with the ideas and activities of Indonesian creative actors involved in the monitoring of the media and the spreading of media literacy, including Wardhana and various video art and community television practitioners. Considering that the availability of suitable textbooks in Indonesian is an issue teachers and lecturers are struggling with, the work of the creative actors, particularly Wardhana's oeuvre, could constitute an accessible and attractive resource for introducing Indonesian students to critical perspectives in Media and Cultural Studies, and making them rethink and reshape the media environments by which they are surrounded.

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