Changing Horizons of Television in Indonesia

Krishna Sen
Murdoch University, Australia

In November 1988, Indonesia's first private television channel started a period of trial broadcast in Jakarta. By April the following year, its transmission had grown to 18 hours a day. Within months of the establishment of RCTI (the acronym of Rajawali Citra Televisi Indonesia), other private operators had entered the fray. In the next four years every large business conglomerate seemed to be negotiating for a slice of the new market. At the time of finishing this paper (July 1993) there were five private television permit holders for national broadcast (See Suara Karya, 13 February 1993) four of which are broadcasting, and three private regional stations yet to go on the air.

The decision to allow the introduction of private television was a dramatic move after a quarter of a century of complete commitment to keeping television under state control. The commitment started under Sukarno and remained firmly in place under his successor, in contrast to major policy shifts in most areas of Indonesian public life. The decision and indeed the timing of the decision on private television therefore needs some explanation.

The analysis of television in Indonesia is somewhat problematic in that there is quite a mismatch between the conceptual frameworks of 'Indonesian studies' and what might be called 'television studies' (or better, communication studies since the lines of demarcation between particular communication media are increasingly difficult to establish). Analyses of Indonesian culture and politics (at least in the last 25 years) have tended to focus on the indigenous and national specificities (see Anderson, 1972). Much of the work, particularly those dealing with political and cultural policy in the New Order have emphasized the power of the state (see MacIntyre, 1990). The decline of Dependency Theory as an explanatory model for capitalist transformations in the Third World shifted the attention of political economists too, back within the boundaries of the nation state (see Robison, 1986). The paradigmatic position of the nation-state in all of this work dwarfs the regional, and local and marginalizes the global. This is not to argue that interesting and erudite work on the sub-national levels has not been undertaken. But rather that in these works the particular 'local' is always seen in relation to the national rather than to another 'local' within or beyond the Indonesian nation-state. There have been intermittent calls for integrating the overwhelmingly 'area studies' approach to Indonesia into a global framework (see Anderson, 1990 and Scholte, 1993). Nonetheless the national border demarcates 'Indonesian studies' as a discipline (by definition), with the state as its epicentre (that is the point which Indonesianists see as the source of all major transformations shaping and re-shaping their field).
Contemporary communication studies, by contrast, is marked by two analytical trajectories, both of which have tended to play down the importance of the national boundaries. The work on the micro, consumption, reception aspect of communication tends to concentrate on the highly localized, sub-national, subcultural (which may or may not be defined into a national cultural boundary, i.e. they might be transnational) modes of consumption and use of media and communication hardware and software (see for example Skovmand and Schroeder, 1992). The work on the macro, production, technological sites has understandably emphasized the globalizing, trans-nationalizing trends of contemporary communication (see Setstrup, 1990). Academic research on the issue (though not bureaucratic and political accounts) is no longer locked in the 1960s–70s terminology of media imperialism of the United States over other nations. Both macro and micro research on communication now conceptualizes communication (through satellites and digital technology particularly) as being ‘global’ (everywhere) rather than ‘inter-national’ (between nations). Sobered by the comparatively slow take up of transnational television programming by some national audiences (see Collins, 1992) there has been in the 1990s a return to interest in national media policies of particular states, and to a notion of national culture. But, importantly, the nation here does not set the parameters of the research, rather the national specificities are seen as accounting for the mode of integration of populations into the global media circuit.

This paper, which is only the starting point of a larger project, is an attempt to apprehend the changing features of Indonesian television, taking into account global television and Indonesian policy making. Specifically, it gives three accounts of the establishment of private television in Indonesia: first the presidential family’s interest in the industry; secondly, the pressures coming from sections of the Indonesian society to open up the television industry; and finally, the international mediascape which made some opening up of the Indonesian television industry inevitable. It is worth remembering that deregulation and privatization of television industries was an international trend in the 1980s in many countries which had experienced years of complete state monopoly on television, including neighbouring Malaysia (see Quester, 1990). I want to suggest that the privatization and deregulation of television in Indonesia in the final analysis had less to do with what the Indonesian state or its powerful functionaries wanted, than with changes in what Appadurai has called the international ‘mediascape’ — the media hardware and software that circulates globally. From the point of view of any particular state this ‘mediascape’ is, like the landscape, to a large extent already given, to which it can and does respond, but can affect in very limited ways only (Appadurai, 1990). However, the particular policies of the government, which finally established and shaped private television in Indonesia, clearly took into account politically powerful business interests.

Family matters

Whatever formal niceties of company law in Indonesia might entail, in lay person’s terms RCTI belongs to Bambang Trihatmojo, President Suharto’s third child, who is at the helm of the powerful Bimantara business group with extensive interests in