

CHAPTER III

THE INDONESIAN TELEVISION INDUSTRY

Introduction

Globalization has changed the character of television, “in particular the growing organization of television along commercial rather than public service lines”.¹ This chapter explores this transition in the television industry, particularly how globalization has changed the character of Indonesian television from state control to free market, and also has influenced the rise of sinetron in Indonesia. This is the broad context within which the success of *Misteri Gunung Merapi* needs to be analysed.

As television drama, *Misteri Gunung Merapi* is not produced directly by a television station or network; rather it is produced by an independent production house. The television station network makes the decisions about whether or not this program will be broadcast, with its consideration based largely on the ability of the program to appeal to large audiences and to thus to attract advertisements. Yet, television is a commercial industry with both television stations and production companies needing to operate on capitalist principles of profit making in order to survive. How far does this affect the product itself? What other factors influence the product? In the case of the sinetron, we have a significant local product that is immensely popular. How far has this been affected by these factors of globalization and capitalism?

Following the changing character of television organization, ratings have been introduced to evaluate TV program performance. How does the Indonesian television industry understand ratings? What is the significance of ratings in Indonesian sinetron production?

¹ Chris Barker, *Global Television: An Introduction* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), 4.

In the second part of the chapter, I will move from production to consumption: what are the main features of its reception by Indonesian audiences and what is the significance of these audiences for sinetron production? Data about audience responses can be found on websites, especially from forums constructed and provided by the television stations. As *Misteri Gunung Merapi* has been broadcast by the Indosiar TV station, I have limited my general discussion of audiences' comments to the Indosiar forum. But, for discussion of *Misteri Gunung Merapi* itself I looked at all Indonesian websites where I found any comment on 'sinetron kolosal laga' or 'sinetron Misteri Gunung Merapi'.

Part I: From State to Global Institution

Globalization and the Rise of the Local Television Industry in Indonesia

Undoubtedly, television has become a global phenomenon. It has been globalized because television is "an institution of capitalist modernity while at the same time contributing to the globalization of modernity through the world-wide circulation of images and discourses".² The globalization of television can be discussed in three different perspectives; institutional, historical, and intellectual.³ However, I will limit my discussion to within institutional and historical perspectives as my focus is on the way Indonesian television has changed from its previous state purpose of national integration into a free market purpose to compete profitably with global entertainments.

Television is one of the strong media of globalization. Since the New Order era globalization has spread to and become a topic of widespread and serious debate in Indonesia. Under the New Order, the state's goals for television were to promote national unity and integration, national stability, and political

² Ibid.

³ Michael Curtin, "Globalisation," in *Television Studies*, ed. Toby Miller (London: British Film Institute, 2002).

stability.⁴ Additionally, as with television in other developing countries, the purpose of television in that era, as well as providing entertainment, was also to carry part of the state's burden of educating and enculturating the illiterate or poorly literate. That is why many programs produced and broadcast on the state television, TVRI, were funded by particular government departments bringing the special messages of these departments as part of the campaigns of modernity, especially for the majority of the population who were living in rural society. However, with the growth of private television in Indonesia funded through advertising revenue, the insufficient expertise to produce local programs, and the domination of imported programs from the USA, Japan, Hong Kong, India and Brazil it became difficult to resist the penetration of post-modern global culture.⁵

When the first private television network, RCTI (*Rajawali Citra Televisi Indonesia*) went to air in 1989, 90 percent of its programs were imported from the U.S. SCTV (*Surya Citra Televisi*), the second private television channel, mostly screened programs imported from Hong Kong and Taiwan, while TPI (*Televisi Pendidikan Indonesia*, Indonesian Educational Television), whose main initial purpose was to broadcast educational programs, turned to screening Indian films for afternoon entertainment. *Indosiar Visual Mandiri* had even collaborated with Hong Kong's TVB to prepare broadcast materials.⁶ Imported programs from the U.S. are usually left in English and sub-titled but those from India and Hong Kong or Taiwan are dubbed, so Indonesians can understand the dialogue, especially of the dubbed programs.

From the very beginning, especially through the phenomenon of the growth of consumer culture, television attracted criticisms as 'Westoxification' or 'Western cultural domination of Asian nations'⁷ and was often blamed as an agent

⁴ Philip Kitley, *Television, Nation, and Culture in Indonesia*, Research in International Studies. Southeast Asia Series; No. 104. (Athens, OH: Ohio University Center for International Studies, 2000), 3-4.

⁵ Krishna Sen and David T. Hill, *Media, Culture and Politics in Indonesia* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2000), 13.

⁶ Kitley, *Television, Nation, and Culture in Indonesia*, 147; Sen and Hill, *Media, Culture and Politics in Indonesia*, 12.

⁷ Sen and Hill, *Media, Culture and Politics in Indonesia*, 108.

for the flow of western culture which could weaken local culture and identities.⁸ That is why the 1990 Ministerial Decree No. 111 was issued to regulate the operation and programming of the television institutions. Under this Decree:

Television programs were required to support the 1945 constitution and the state ideology *Pancasila* and to ‘avoid issues that might give SARA conflicts’. Further all programs were obliged ‘to support national development plans in accordance with government policy, both domestic and foreign’ and they ‘must be arranged with regard to good manners and in Indonesian language that is true and correct’...Finally, programming must avoid ‘all possibility of becoming a channel for the spread of foreign ideology or culture which could weaken the national character and national defence’.⁹

In 1992 the regulation was updated by Ministerial Decree No. 84 to respond to fears and anxiety about the effects of globalization aiming to “domesticate the global by putting it in the hands of local providers”. The Preamble to this revision declared that:

In accordance with these developments and to *balance* the overseas television broadcast, it is necessary to open up the opportunity to television broadcasts by the private sector, which will broadcast programs particularly in the field of information concerning economic development, [programs] that are compatible with national needs and priorities.¹⁰

⁸ Suryadi, "Identity, Media and the Margins: Radio in Pekanbaru, Riau (Indonesia)," *Journal of Southeast Asia Studies* 36, no. 1 (2005): 133.

⁹ Sen and Hill, *Media, Culture and Politics in Indonesia*, 119. ‘SARA’ is the acronym for ‘Suku, Agama, Ras, Antar-Golongan’ (Ethnicity, Religion, Race, Intergroup relations), the topics officially considered too sensitive to be allowed to be brought up in New Order Indonesia.

¹⁰ Kitley, *Television, Nation, and Culture in Indonesia*, 236.

Controlling commercial television as a local provider of foreign-made product, as argued by Kitley, was a strategy to mediate transnational flows because of its ability to “domesticate the global in two senses”:¹¹

By becoming a player in international television market, commercial broadcasters can bring sought after international programs into their own ground, and screen them as part of their regular programming. Once in the domestic sphere, the programming is then subject to a range of formal and informal regulatory measures, which might involve such matters as the time of screening and the censorship of particular scenes or language. Other mediating process include subtitling or dubbing dialogue into Indonesian, a process which often works as a subtle and sometimes not so subtle form of censorship, and the provision of an introduction or a commentary which serves to frame the program.¹²

Copying the system of film censorship, all entertainment programs, especially all films and film serials, broadcasted on Indonesian television were reviewed through censorship guidelines before broadcasting.¹³ Through censorship, all content which was not compatible with state ideology was cut out. In 1993, the government set up an autonomous body, the *Lembaga Sensor Film* (LSF, Film Censorship Council) whose task was to review “on average, about eighteen hours of broadcast from each private station (not including approximately two hours of TVRI relay) seven days a week”.¹⁴ However, according to Sen and Hill, this attempt of censorship was ineffective.

In 1992 when the Indonesian film industry collapsed, Raam Punjabi, a film producer, produced a trial comedy serial sinetron ‘*Gara-gara*’. This sinetron was successful and was kept in production until 1997. The success of this sinetron led him to build a sinetron production house, PT Tripar Multivision Plus. When the financial crisis attacked Indonesia in 1997 and the exchange rate quadrupled,

¹¹ Philip Kitley, "Fine Tuning Control: Commercial Television in Indonesia," *Continuum* 8, no. 2 (1994), <http://www.mcc.murdoch.edu.au/ReadingRoom/8.2/Kitley.html>.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Sen and Hill, *Media, Culture and Politics in Indonesia*, 122.

¹⁴ Ibid.

buying imported programs became very expensive. At the same time, the sinetron has been flowering to meet the program television requirements. Many film workers migrated to sinetron production houses.¹⁵ The earliest episodes of *Misteri Gunung Merapi* were produced at the time of the financial crisis, when some people said that the producer, Budi Sutrisno, was insane, as he bravely produced a distinctive sinetron¹⁶ which did not follow the established successful formula. Nevertheless, this sinetron has been successful.

The Rise of Sinetron in Indonesia

Sinetron became popular because of the rapid decline of the Indonesian film industry in the 1990s, although the first sinetron had been produced by the television network TVRI in the very early days of Indonesian television. This program was produced in response to the government requirement of 80% domestic programs. According to Sita Aripurnami, the primary aim of these first sinetron was to carry messages from the government about how to live properly in the New Order era.¹⁷ During the 1980s there were a number broadcast on TVRI sponsored by government departments, such as *Serumpun Bambu* (A Clump of Bamboo), produced in collaboration with the Department of Transmigration, *Jendela Rumah Kita* (The Window of Our Home), in cooperation with the Department of Social Affairs, and *Sartika*, for which joined with the Department of Health. When the Indonesian economy collapsed¹⁸ and the exchange rate value between rupiah and dollar deteriorated, buying imported programs became very expensive. As Sen noted, private television stations cut broadcast hours and preferred to buy cheap imported programs or reran programs to shrink their

¹⁵ JB Kristanto, "Sepuluh Tahun Terakhir Perfilman Indonesia," *Kompas*, 2 July 2005, <http://www.kompas.com/kompas-cetak/0507/02/Bentara/1857854.htm>, (accessed 1 December 2006).

¹⁶ Personal conversation with the Production Manager of PT Genta Buana, Sindu Dharma, in October 2003

¹⁷ Sita Aripurnami, "A Feminist Comment on the Sinetron Presentation of Indonesian Women," in *Fantasizing the Feminine in Indonesia*, ed. Laurie J. Sears (Durham: Duke University, 1996), 250.

¹⁸ Well-known in Indonesia as "krisis ekonomi".

expenses.¹⁹ Looking at this situation, some production houses began to produce commercial sinetron which were very different from the ones produced by or for showing on TVRI in the past.

Sinetron produced to be broadcast on TVRI were different from those intended to be broadcast on private television. As public television, TVRI does not provide slots for commercial advertisements (it is funded by the state and by a tax on the profits of private television), while the survival of private television channels depends on attracting paid advertisements. This difference between TVRI and private television has to be considered in producing sinetron. However, most sinetron production team members were formerly film workers and were not trained to produce films with slots for advertisements. Wardhana gave an example of a well-known film director who produced sinetron without counting breaks for advertisements. The flow of the story was cut because of advertisements and after the break the cut dialogues and scenes were continued. This happened to many sinetron.²⁰

Private television has changed sinetron production in Indonesia. Attracting advertising is the main goal of the Indonesian television industry, so television programs, such as sinetron, are only important as “vote getters” to attract advertising. Advertisements are dominant especially in prime-time. The cost of advertising becomes higher when a program gains top ratings. The measure of a ‘successful’ program is the ‘most popular’, and not the ‘best’ program. This leads the sinetron production houses to produce “me too” programs. Wardhana gave an example that when the comedy sinetron was popular then almost all stations broadcasted the same genre at the same time to compete.²¹ Survey Research

¹⁹ Sen and Hill, *Media, Culture and Politics in Indonesia*, 122-24. Philip Kitley, "Closing the Creativity Gap - Renting Intellectual Capital in the Name of Local Content: Indonesia in the Global Television Business," in *Television across Asia*, ed. Albert Moran and Michael Keane (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004), 142-7; Michael Keane and Albert Moran, "(Re)Presenting Local Content: Programme Adaptation in Asia and the Pacific," *Media International Australia*, (2005), <http://eprints.qut.edu.au/archive/00002432>.

²⁰ Veven Sp Wardhana, *Kapitalisme Televisi Dan Strategi Budaya Massa [Television Capitalism and Strategy of Mass Culture]*, Cet. 1. ed. (Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar, 1997), 270.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 271.

Indonesia, AC Nielsen, legitimates the significance of ratings in the life of television.²²

The characteristics of the media industry are “high production costs, low production levels, dependence on advertising, high distribution costs, limited distribution channels, heterogeneous audiences, and dependence on repeat consumption”,²³ and these characteristics apply to sinetron. The cost of sinetron production is around 50-250 million rupiah (about AU\$ 6500-33,000 [28/8/07 exchange rates]) per episode, depending on the popularity of the actors and actresses, the director, and the script writer.²⁴ There are a variety of financing mechanisms which depend on the agreement between the production house and the television station. The production house can sell the program to the television station and the television station has the full right to broadcast the program after the full payment has been accepted by the production house. The program then belongs to the television station and the production house has no further rights to it. Alternatively, it can happen that the television station requests the production of a certain program from the production house. In this case, the television station will pay for the cost of the production with an additional fee. A third possibility is that the production house provides the program to the television station and then the television station offers it to an advertising company. The cost of the program is assessed based on a percentage of the total sales of the program going to the advertising company, where this percentage is based on the agreement between the television station and the production house.²⁵

Every television station has its own criteria and prescriptions, such as requirements about the story, the script writer, the director, the actors and

²² Ibid., 270-5.

²³ Joel Best, "The Social Control of Media Content," *Journal of Popular Culture* 14, no. 4 (1981): 616.

²⁴ Harry Mulyawan, "Film, Antara Budget Dan Kreatifitas [Film, between Budget and Creativity]," ceritanet, <http://www.ceritanet.com/87film.htm>2004, (accessed 27 April 2007).

²⁵ There are differing tax consequences of these mechanisms. See the 2000 Circular from the Director General of Taxation, "PPN Atas Paket Program Acara Di Televisi: Surat Edaran Dirjen Pajak No. Se-11/Pj.532/2000 [Tax for Television Program: A Letter of Taxation Office]," http://www.pajak.go.id/peraturan/view_doc?docid=1671&searchterm=None, (accessed 27 April 2007).

actresses. These criteria are important in predicting whether the sinetron will attract advertisements or not. Besides, the television station still considers the combined implications of the predicted profitability of the story, the number of slots and the price. There are many factors which influence the process of production. For example, if the ratings goes up and the number of advertisements can be increased, although the episodes have ended or are coming to what had originally been planned to be the end, the television station and the producer could ask the director and the script writer to add more episodes. Sometimes the story might swerve away from the initially planned development, or it could happen that the story and the episodes are developed without special planning, directly written and added during the shooting process. This usually happens to a very popular sinetron which is extended over hundreds of episodes. Also, the main actor or actress of popular sinetron could be asked to perform in advertisements.²⁶

Wardhana has also noted that initially the sinetron producer only gets a contract for 6-13 30 minute episodes. If this new sinetron attracts advertisements it continues to run, but it could happen, as with *Sebuah Pintu, Sebuah Kalbu* (A Door, A Heart) produced by Arifin C. Noer, that the network, in this case RCTI, decided not to continue broadcasting it. By contrast, a trial production of *Si Doel Anak Sekolahan* (Educated Doel) produced by Rano Karno, was at first broadcast during Ramadhan (fasting month) with a prediction that in this month not many people watched television but, surprisingly, it was very successful.²⁷

Juliastuti's and Wardhana's accounts of the process of sinetron production demonstrate the ways that the programs' success finally depends on their attractiveness to advertisers with their interest in ratings. In the next section I will discuss the importance of rating in television industry in Indonesia.

²⁶ Nuraini Juliastuti, "Dalam Ruang Pribadi Penonton: Romantisme Dan Ekonomi Politik Sinetron Indonesia [in the Personal Space of Viewers: Romanticism and Politic Economy of Indonesian Sinetron]," KUNCI Cultural Studies Center, http://www.kunci.or.id/esai/misc/juliastuti_sinetron.htm2001, (accessed 13 January 2006).

²⁷ Wardhana, *Kapitalisme Televisi Dan Strategi Budaya Massa* [Television Capitalism and Strategy of Mass Culture], 273.

Ratings

In Indonesia ratings are very powerful. Indonesian television thoroughly applies the western system of ratings without making any adaptation.²⁸ As advertising is a central component of the television industry, ratings give an indication of the popularity of the program, which then determines the number of advertisements in the program. It has been claimed that the orientation of media producers in Indonesia is only for profits.²⁹ As the key word of the television business is ‘advertisement’, ratings are more significant than program substance – the program substance is the means, the ratings are the ends. The central function of a sinetron is obviously to gain ratings. Although many scholars have doubted the validity of TV ratings, most production houses rely on them in their decisions about producing certain programs. The original objective of TV ratings was to provide data on audiences which could be used to better understand them and look for any patterns appearing among them. However, Indonesian production houses rarely analyse the rating data extensively, for example to discern and understand any patterns of gender, age, expenditure or social topography within the audiences who watch their products. Rather, they just take into consideration “the weekly TV audience share and list of top programs”. The advertising industries only take notice of “the proportion of their target audiences’ viewing patterns using figures such as program audience share or target audience rating indexes”. As producing television program is a business, producers keep on producing particular programs or stop them, according to their ratings. Also, for similar reasons, producers tend not to produce alternative programs.³⁰

Producing television programs in Indonesia is not aimed at a target audience based on the classification system. Rather production companies prefer

²⁸ Ant/Eh, "Garin Nugroho: TV Telah Menjadi Mimbar Semua Persoalan [Garin Nugroho: TV Has Been a Podium of All Problems]," *Kompas*, 26 Nopember 2004, <http://kompas.com/gayahidup/news/0411/26/212446.htm>, (accessed 24 November 2005).

²⁹ Ashadi Siregar, "Pengantar [Introduction]," in *Televisi Dan Prasangka Budaya Massa [Television and the Mass Culture Prejudice]*, ed. Veven Sp Wardhana (Jakarta: Diterbitkan [oleh] Media Lintas Inti Nusantara untuk Institut Studi Arus Informasi, 2001), xx.

³⁰ Adwin Wibisono, "Don't Rely Too Much on TV Ratings to Verify Program's Selling Power," <http://www.asiamedia.ucla.edu/article.asp?parentid=640602007>, (accessed 30 April 2007).

to imitate the most successful program which attracts high ratings. The dominant opinion is that “high ratings are the only verification of a program’s selling power”.³¹ Most producers tend to imitate and adapt the most successful programs: as Juliastuti claimed, “*demokratisasi wacana dalam sinetron tidak ada*” (there is no democratization of discourse, or expression, in sinetron). Almost all sinetron, whether drama, comedy, mystery, or action, present similar discourses on romantic love because the producers develop their sinetron from one source: the most successful program or the trend of the society.³² There is a standard joke that if the television station logo in the corner of the screen were deleted, people would not know which station was broadcasting the program because programs with similar themes dominate on all television stations.³³

Because ratings are so powerful, the rule is that a ‘successful’ program is one with top ratings. Local drama, sinetron and television films all attract high ratings. Lowe Indonesia, from its interviews with 2,086 consumers of varied geography, sex and social class, has reported that 74% of Indonesian audiences watch crime news, 66% watch sinetron, 54% watch mystery shows, 53% watch reality shows and infotainment, and 33% watch all of them.³⁴ Indra Yudhistira Ramadhan, executive producer of TransTV network, analysed the list of the 100 top television programs during the third week of April 2002 which were broadcast in prime time, and reported that 41% were local drama, 25% were non-drama, 21% were imported films, and 13 % were news. This shows that drama, either local or imported, attracted the largest audiences.³⁵

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Juliastuti, "Dalam Ruang Pribadi Penonton: Romantisme Dan Ekonomi Politik Sinetron Indonesia [in the Personal Space of Viewers: Romanticism and Politic Economy of Indonesian Sinetron]."

³³ Haryati, "Hak Publik Mengontrol TV [the Right of Public in Controlling TV]," *Pikiran Rakyat*, 5 December 2005, <http://www.pikiran-rakyat.com/cetak/2005/1205/05/0803.htm>, (accessed 1 December 2006).

³⁴ A Mohammad, "Konsumen Menganggap Iklan Membosankan [Consumers Consider the Advertisements Boring]," *Swa*, 4 Maret 2005 2005, <http://www.swa.co.id/primer/pemasaran/advertising/details.php?cid=1&id=2234>, (accessed 30 January 2007).

³⁵ Totot Indrarto, "Ketika Rating Menjadi Tuhan [When Rating Becomes God]," *Kompas*, 2 June 2002 2002, <http://www.pakde.com/Sinetron%20Jiplakan.html>, (accessed 24 March 2006).

In 2002 a single advertising spot of 30 seconds duration in prime time cost 20 million rupiah in all networks. If in a one hour program there are advertising slots for 12 minutes or 24 advertisements, the network's income would be 480 million rupiah (about Au\$62,000 [28/8/07]).³⁶ In prime time it can happen that out of 60 minutes duration, the advertising slots occupy 23 minutes or 38% of the duration time, such as when the sinetron *Bidadari* (The Fairy) was in the top ratings. Even in a mystery program, *Disini ada Setan* (There is a Ghost Here), advertising slots reached 40% of the duration time.³⁷ The use of ratings in being able to sell this amount of expensive advertising time indicates how powerful they can be.

Ratings are the numerical estimate of the direct consumers of a certain television product. They are also a medium of communication between the producer and the audience. Television ratings refer to the estimated size of the television audience. In the television industry ratings are central for planning and scheduling programs. They have the form of a currency in the buying and selling of television airtime. For a television network, television ratings are used to publicize its stations' successes, to indicate the success of the management, to sell air-time for commercial stations, and to schedule programs.

Because ratings are so fundamental to program scheduling and the evaluation of those plans, television programs are scheduled using information on the time of the day or day of the week in which certain groups of people are available to view programs. For examples, programs that appeal to female audiences may be placed in the middle of the day; programs that attract the whole family will be broadcast in the early evening; and sport programs will be located in weekend daytime. Scheduling may also be influenced by consideration of the alternative program offerings on competitive stations.³⁸

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Nina M. Armando, "Iklan TV, Duh Banyaknya [TV Ads, Wow Many]," *Majalah Ummi Online* 2005, <http://www.ummigroup.co.id/?pilih=lihat&id=90>, (accessed 24 March 2006).

³⁸ "TV Programme Performance Evaluation," AC Nielsen, <http://www.acnielsen.co.id/issues.asp?issuesID=29>, (accessed 12 March 2006).

Since the introduction of the measuring devices used in Nielsen Television Rating, in 1991, television audience measurement has been dramatically improved. Nielsen conducts Annual Establishment Surveys to collect extensive details on channel reception, ownership of TV-related equipment and full breakdowns of household and individual demographics. From these results, a panel of households is recruited to represent the markets being measured. People meters, which can record which programs are watched by viewers, are installed in a representative sample of panel homes and provide accurate daily data for a wide range of demographics.³⁹

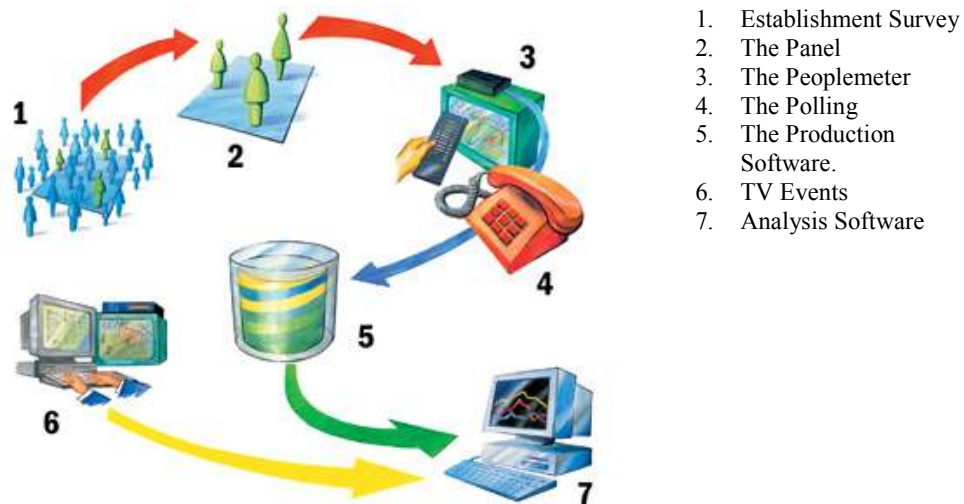


Figure III- 1 : AGB Nielsen Media Research
(Source AC Nielsen Indonesia)

The company AGB Nielsen Media Research has been providing media information and services to the television stations, production houses and advertising industry in Indonesia. Its Television Audience Measurement (TAM) now covers 42 million of the television population among Indonesia's total population of 222 million. The Indonesia TAM panel currently measures 1,804 panel homes with 1,816 people-meters installed over the 9 major cities of Greater

³⁹ "Who We Are," AC Nielsen, http://www.acnielsen.co.id/company_info.asp, (accessed 12 March 2006).

Jakarta, Greater Surabaya, Bandung, Semarang, Medan, Makassar, Greater Yogyakarta, Palembang, and Denpasar. This main panel measures only the terrestrial TV channels. The Nielsen Television Ratings service provides ratings data 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 52 weeks of the year, for ANTV, Bali-TV, Bandung-TV, Cakra-TV, Disney, GTV, Indosiar, JAKTV, JTV, Kabelvision, LATV, Metro-TV, Ochannel, RCTI, SCTV, SpaceToon, TPI, Trans&, TransTV, VOA, and Yogya-TV.⁴⁰

Undoubtedly, sinetron are “the most important programs for many stations” as they are the most watched programs. They are mostly broadcast in prime time, although some channels still broadcast at midnight to compete. The media ratings company reported that in March 2007, “even though its share of broadcast hours is only 10% (about 925 hours/month) of total broadcast hours, sinetron’s audience share is the biggest, 24% (approximately 19 hours/month/viewer) among other programs.⁴¹ In 2003 there were at least 69 sinetron every week. Although there were several dubbed Asian drama and Latin American *telenovela* which were also popular, this number was not comparable with that of Indonesian sinetron broadcast on Indonesian television stations. Looking at the number of sinetron shown every week shows that the competition among the production houses is very tight.⁴²

Misteri Gunung Merapi was originally broadcast on Indosiar every Monday at 8.00-9.00 p.m. Then, the network decided to change it to every Sunday at 7.00-8.00 p.m.⁴³ Sometimes it will be changed to Sunday 9.00-10.00 p.m if, for example, there is another international competitive program such as the World

⁴⁰“TAM Overview,” AGB Nielsen Media Research, <http://www.agbnielsen.net/whereweare/dynPage.asp?lang=english&id=322&country=Indonesia2007>, (accessed 27 April 2007).

⁴¹ “It’s Prime Time! It’s Sinetron Time! Or Is It?,” AGB Nielsen Media Research, <http://www.agbnielsen.net/whereweare/localnews.asp?id=246&country=Indonesia&newstype=L&mode=full&language=english2007>, (accessed 27 April 2007).

⁴² Agus Susanto, “Tiada Hari Tanpa Sinetron [No Day without Sinetron],” *Kompas Cyber Media*, 4 August 2002, 1, <http://www.kompas.com/kompas-cetak/0208/04/Latar/tiad13.htm>, (accessed 20 April 2006).

⁴³ Unfortunately, I could not get any information about when and why Indosiar changed its broadcasting of *Misteri Gunung Merapi* from Monday to Sunday.

Cup or a special program which must be broadcast by all stations at the same time.

Misteri Gunung Merapi was first put to air on November 1, 1998. “The ratings in its first episode stood at 21 percent and its shares were 50 percent meaning 50 percent of all viewers at that particular time tuned in to the program”. Since then, “it has always been among the five top-rated programs”.⁴⁴ *Misteri Gunung Merapi* is the second longest-running sinetron produced in Indonesia (behind *Tersanjung* [Flattered]), reaching episode 261 in November 2005.⁴⁵ This suggests the sinetron has managed to maintain its status as a favourite program. The ratings of *Misteri Gunung Merapi* show that it has almost consistently achieved double digit ratings, often being among the top ten positions. It dropped down to as low as 18th, for example in the 50th week of 2002, but then rose again, up to 8th in the 51st week (see Figure III-2). However, in 2005 it was still consistently gaining double digit ratings, demonstrating its continuing longterm success (see Figure III-3).

Looking at these long-term ratings raises the question of who are this sinetron’s audiences? This is difficult to answer considering that the producer does not do any audience research in its pre-production stages. From the beginning, the producer does not specify his target audiences, rather he only repeats the success of the radio drama with the same title, *Misteri Gunung Merapi*. However Indosiar, the television station, does carefully record audience data to know who is watching this program, as this is important for selling it, or slots in it, to advertising agencies.

⁴⁴ Antariksawan Jusuf, "Action Serials and 'Me Too' Programming in Local TV," *the Jakarta Post*, 6 May 2001 2001, <http://www.thejakartapost.com/Archives/Archives-act2.asp?Search=action+serials+and+me+too+programming&Method=AND&SearchIn=Title§ion=all&range=custom&month1=01&day1=01&year1=1998&month2=05&day2=15&year2=2006&Sorting=DESC>, (accessed 26 March 2006).

⁴⁵ Indosiar irregularly publishes summaries of numbered episodes of *Misteri Gunung Merapi*. The synopsis for the episode shown on 20 November 2005 was published, and numbered as 261.

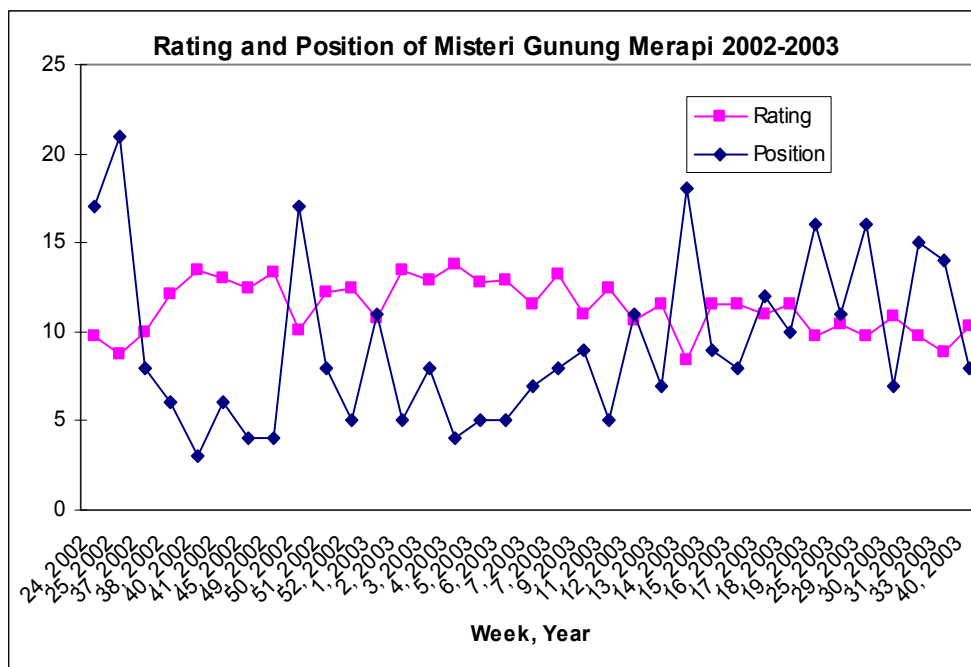


Figure III- 2 : Rating and Position of Misteri Gunung Merapi 2002-2003
(Source the daily newspaper “Suara Karya”)

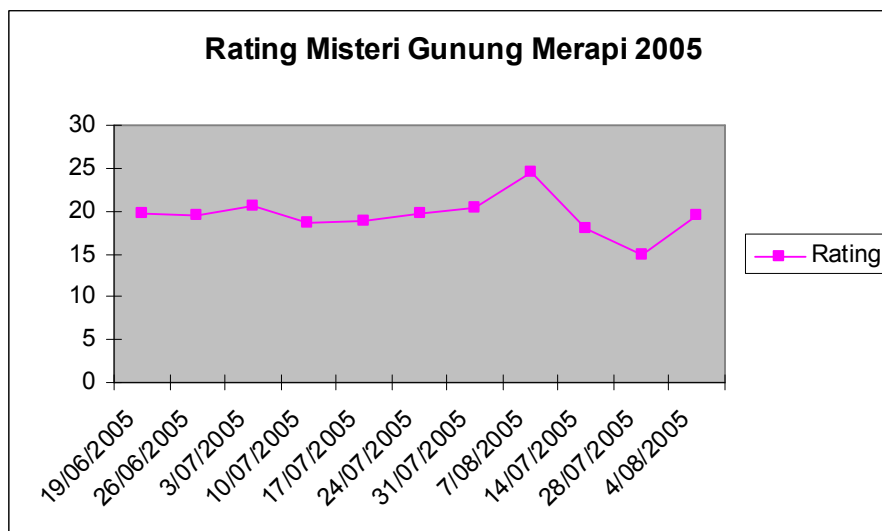


Figure III- 3 : Rating Misteri Gunung Merapi 2005
(Source: AC Nielsen, courtesy of Bintang Group Indonesia)

Part II: Indonesian Audiences

Imagining Indonesian Audiences

Kitley claimed in his book *Television, Nation, and Culture in Indonesia* both that, in Indonesia, private television has the limited motivation of profit making rather than promoting “the ideal of an essentialist Indonesian national culture” which is the burden of government television TVRI, and that “as a broadcasting medium television depends on its audience”.⁴⁶ Indonesian audiences are complex. The total population as estimated in July 2002 was 231,328,092. There are hundreds of different ethnic cultures in Indonesia. The dominant one is Javanese, which accounts for almost 45% of the whole nation, followed by Sundanese 14%, Madurese 7.5%, coastal Malays 7.5%, and others 26%. Religion adds to the complexity of the audiences’ taste. Islam is the dominant religion which accounts for 88%, followed by Protestant 5%, Roman Catholic 3%, Hindu 2%, Buddhist 1%, and others 1%. Although the national language is Indonesian, most adults have their ethnic language as their mother tongue.

As we saw above, television stations pay little attention to identifying target audiences while ratings provide a simple measure of popularity. However there are some tools available for the classification of Indonesian viewers by social class. According to Putu Wijaya, as cited by Widodo, sinetron producers classify Indonesian viewers into ‘Class A’, upper and middle class families, and ‘Class B’, middle and lower class families. Class A, which consists of professionals, university students, high ranking bureaucrats, upper-scale entrepreneurs, and journalists, is considered to be more receptive to “longer discussions on conceptual matters, more critical of logical representation of reality, able to understand complex plotting, tolerant of less clear-cut problem solutions, and appreciative of artistic creations”. Class B, which consists of maids, housewives, drivers, food vendors, low level civil servants, and other blue-collar workers, prefers “straightforwardness at the expense of narrative and reflective

⁴⁶ Kitley, *Television, Nation, and Culture in Indonesia*, 109-10.

aspects”, action, manipulation of emotions, and black and white morality.⁴⁷ It seems that Putu Wijaya was categorising only urban dwellers and did not include the rural population. So far producers most often neglect rural audiences⁴⁸ although actually they are the majority of the population.

AC Nielsen, in carrying out its regular Survey Research Indonesia, classifies viewers according to sex, age, expenditure and occupation, using classifications of: ‘children 5-14 years old’, ‘adults 15-24 years old’ and ‘adults 25+ years old’; and, unlike Putu Wijaya’s assertion about how production houses classify audiences, into expenditure classes of ‘class A’ (with monthly expenditure of more than Rp. 1,000,000), ‘class B’ (Rp. 750-1,000,000), ‘class C’ (Rp. 350-750,000), and ‘class D’ (under Rp. 350,000). The majority of television owners, according to AC Nielsen, are urban dwellers. However, it is not clear what this means as ‘rural’ is normally taken to refer to primarily agricultural areas and many officially ‘urban’ areas are actually outside cities but in areas which are more mixed or at least not primarily agricultural.

On the other hand, IFES (International Foundation for Election System), an international non-profit organization that supports the building of democratic society, classifies Indonesian voters by rural/urban area, as well as age, gender, education level and socio-economic class. Differing from AC Nielsen’s use of four expenditure classes, IFES divides its respondents into five socio-economic classes: ‘SEC A’ for average monthly routine expenditure greater than Rp. 1,750,000, ‘SEC B’ (Rp. 1,250,001-1,750,000), ‘SEC C’ (Rp. 600,001-1,250,000), ‘SEC D’ (Rp. 400,001-600,000), and ‘SEC E’ (under Rp. 400,000). Because the purposes of these organizations are different, the respondents’ classification by

⁴⁷ (Amrih Widodo, "Consuming Passions: Millions of Indonesian Must Watch Soap Operas," *Inside Indonesia* 2002, <http://www.insideindonesia.org/edit72/theme%20-%20Amrih.htm>, (accessed 26 February 2006).

⁴⁸ Sen and Hill have stated that “ there is almost no market research on rural audiences”. Sen and Hill, *Media, Culture and Politics in Indonesia*, 122..

age group in IFES is ‘under 25 years old’, ‘25-34’, ‘35-44’, ‘45-54’, and ‘more than 54 years old’.⁴⁹

In relation to media usage, especially television, IFES reported that most Indonesians, from all major groups, use television as their primary source of information. Urban viewers were reported as claiming to ‘watch television mostly for accessing information’, while those in rural areas were more likely to claim they used television ‘mostly for entertainment’. The most often-watched programs in urban areas are, first, news and, second, sinetron. News program are more watched by viewers among the 45-54 years old age-group while those aged under 25 are more likely to use television for entertainment.⁵⁰

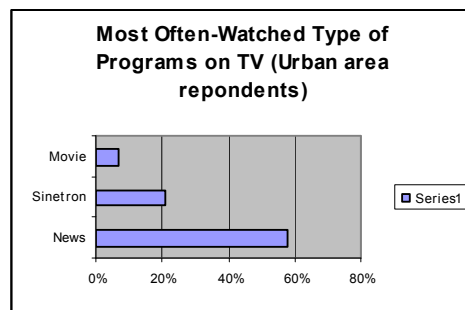


Figure III-4 : Most Often-Watched Type of Programs on TV (Urban area respondents)
(Source: IFES 2005)

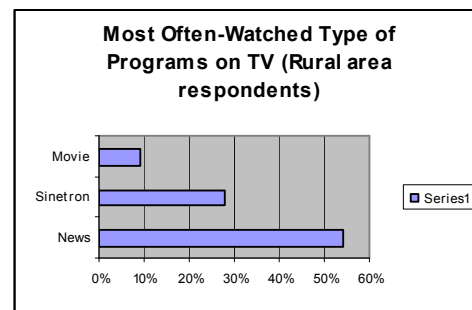


Figure III-5 : Most-Often Type of Programs on TV (Rural area respondents)
(Source: IFES 2005)

According to its Broadcasting Manager, Indosiar differentiates audiences not only between ‘class A’ and ‘class B’ but also according to the geographical location of the viewers, ‘metropolitan’⁵¹ and ‘non-metropolitan’. Although ratings are not the main goal, they determine the measurement of advertising sales, and so Indosiar tries to understand recent trends in society and, because there are many different groups in society, they have to look at the trends of certain social groups. Unlike other private television stations, the target audiences of Indosiar are middle

⁴⁹"Public Opinion Survey," IFES, http://www.ifes.org/publication/c1e0d6e8e9d01f98a84bfe46966b3b4f/2005survey%20report_eng.pdf2005, (accessed 12 March 2006).

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ ‘Metropolitan’ refers to the single urban conglomeration of Jakarta, Bogor, Tangerang and Bekasi, or what could be called the ‘Greater Jakarta Metropolitan Area’

class and lower class (Class B) and non-metropolitan audiences. Because of this, local and traditional entertainment such as *wayang* (puppet shadow shows), *ludrug* (East Javanese traditional stage performances) and *kethoprak plesetan* (modern depictions of Central Javanese traditional stage performances) are considered important programs for Indosiar. For the same reason, sinetrons based on legends, *sinetron kolosal laga*, such as *Misteri Gunung Merapi* and *Angling Dharma*, are of most interest to Indosiar. Indosiar even produced a legend-based sinetron with the title *Dendam Nyi Pelet* (The Revenge of Nyi Pelet) directed by Haryanto.⁵²

Misteri Gunung Merapi was broadcasted on Indosiar, whose target audiences are class B and C and non-metropolitan areas. The data above show that the audience of this sinetron is skewed towards males, children, class C, and student audiences. It can be inferred that although the target audience originally was adult, unexpectedly this sinetron was popular among children. This makes the sinetron classifiable as a family program.

Audiences' Expectations: Evidence from Internet Sites

As I have stated previously, the dominant view among program producers is that ratings measure the success of a program, although ratings cannot say "why people watch a certain program".⁵³ AGB Nielsen Media Research, in surveying 500 respondents in nine large cities, reported that "40.7 percent wanted fewer drama series, 48.6 percent fewer 'mystical religious shows' and 43.3 percent asked for less gossip shows, or infotainment programs".⁵⁴ Katherine Hellen, AGB Nielsen Media Research's associate director for marketing and client services, said that programs with high ratings are not always appreciated by audiences. She explained that "a high rating could just mean that there was nothing better for

⁵² (Personal conversation with the Indosiar Broadcasting Manager in December 2003)

⁵³ Wibisono, "Don't Rely Too Much on TV Ratings to Verify Program's Selling Power."

⁵⁴ Herawati Diani, "Indonesia: Fewer Soaps, More News, Say TV Viewers," Asia Media, <http://www.asiamedia.ucla.edu/article.asp?parentid=528472006>, (accessed 30 April 2007).

viewers to watch since nearly all TV stations air similar programs”.⁵⁵ However, for TV stations ratings are still the only measurement of programs’ success and capacity to attract advertising.

There is a contradictory phenomenon accompanying the success of TV programs such as sinetron. The producers believe that sinetron with high ratings means that this sinetron has attracted large audiences. In contrast, looking at a number of newspaper columns, personal blogs, and forum websites shows a large number of viewers who are not satisfied with sinetron production. Their comments represent the dominant morality of Indonesians, and could lead the producer to avoid challenging social expectations. However most producers also believe that their comments are not representative of most Indonesians, as only a small percentage of the Indonesian population has access to the internet.

Indosiar provides a special website, *Lautan Indosiar* (Indosiar’s Ocean), for all viewers to post their comments on television programs, especially those broadcasted on Indosiar. By May 2007, there had been 75,915 participants in many areas of discussion. In the forum “sinetron Indonesia” viewers tend to criticise sinetron stories and representation.⁵⁶ The criticisms included story, costumes, cinematic effects and characterization.

Most comments in the website are about the illogical stories of drama sinetron, such as intrigue between two friends, the constant suffering of the female characters, and the gap between the higher and the lower class where the upper exploits the lower. Some of them consider that drama sinetron are more like Bollywood and do not represent Indonesian society. They think that sinetron are too black and white in the representation of good versus evil, or the rich and the poor. They object to characters in the stories saying rude words. When a simple thing leads to a big quarrel and then leads to a plot to do evil to their enemy, viewers object that such a phenomenon is not common in Indonesia. They also

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Indosiar, "Lautan Indosiar: Forum Diskusi [Lautan Indosiar: Discussion Forum]," Indosiar <http://www.indosiar.com/2002>, (accessed 3 April 2006).

object to the representation of intrigues between two schoolgirls to attract the most popular boy at school, because school should be the place for education.

In terms of morality, many object to sinetron presentation of the costumes of female characters (the school uniform skirt which is too short or plunging neckline shirt, the heavy make-up as if going to a party, and the extravagant accessories worn by schoolgirls). They are concerned with the representation of teenage girls who seem to challenge Indonesian morality. Their opinion is in line with Wardhana's comment on PT Starvision's sinetron production that this producer constructed women as molested characters, and this molestation was not used in an effort to fight against abuses; instead, it became a commodity.⁵⁷

Most of them say that they are bored with sinetron stories and they want more creative and innovative sinetron. In other words, they feel dissatisfied with sinetron production and they hope that the producer will do some serious research into the theme and the social background of the story before producing a sinetron. They also expect the sinetron producers to learn from Taiwanese or Korean productions.

However, as their criticisms do not accord with the ratings, the producers do not take their criticisms seriously into consideration. As long as the program still achieves top ratings and gains a lot of advertising, the producer will keep producing this program. Some producers have tried to play along with scandalous stories to attract more advertising, however they are still presented in line with the dominant morality to hinder the possibility of social protest, especially from conservative Muslim groups.

As they know that it is only fantasy, most viewers of *sinetron kolosal laga* give different comments from those of drama sinetron. Like other action cinema, the sinetron *Misteri Gunung Merapi* offers escapism, where viewers realize that what they see is not real. But they learn that 'heroes' exercise power over

⁵⁷ Veven Sp Wardhana, *Televisi Dan Prasangka Budaya Massa [Television and Mass Culture Prejudice]* (Jakarta: Diterbitkan [oleh] Media Lintas Inti Nusantara untuk Institut Studi Arus Informasi, 2001), 101.

‘villains’. Undoubtedly, *Misteri Gunung Merapi* is melodramatic: the differentiation between good and evil is easily recognised and that is why it is enjoyable for different levels of audience, children as well.

As predicted by the producer, comments posted on sinetron websites suggest that the sinetron’s achieved audience consists of those who listened to the radio drama version of 1970s and those who favour martial art stories. Most comments found on <http://www.pintunet.com> (*suara konsumen*) and *Lautan Indosiar: Indosiar forum discussion* are about the differences between the radio and television forms, and their disappointment at the poor techniques compared to *wuxia* or *kung fu* serials. Viewers who listened to the radio drama expressed their disappointment at the sinetron version because it lost the horror effect created by sound and the dialogue of the characters. They felt that the story in the radio drama was lively, but when the radio drama was visualised as the sinetron it did not match what they had imagined as listeners. Although the sinetron applied similar sound effects to the radio drama, they found that it was too exaggerated and also that it was repeated in every episode so that the horror effect was lost. The title became irrelevant to the story.

As the concept of sinetron production is quite close to soaps, viewers felt that the sinetron becomes too long and they get bored with the complicated plot. Certainly, in the radio drama the story focuses only on Sembara’s quest to find Farida after she is kidnapped by Mak Lampir, but in the sinetron version it continues with the son of Sembara, Mahesa, and it focuses more on the fight between good (Sembara and *kyai*) versus evil (Mak Lampir and the evil spirits). One of the viewers also commented that the story of the sinetron was different from the radio drama, with the appearance of the element of religion: *kyai* and *pesantren* fighting against the knights.

As the story was originally written for a comic by Asjmadi Sjafar, who has a Padang (West Sumatran) ethnic background, the original characters of the story are Sumatran. However, when it was produced for sinetron, it was rewritten by Abnar Romli and produced by Budi Sutrisno, both Javanese. This has created

some confusion for viewers. One viewer wrote that he felt it was strange that the names of the characters were Sumatran (such as Datuk Larang Tapa, Datuk Panglima Kumbang, Kakek Jabat, Sembara, and Farida) but the setting was Javanese Mataram in the seventeenth century. Viewers also found some new characters in the sinetron such as Jatmiko (a Javanese name) and Si Mata Malaikat, who were not in the radio drama.

Some viewers only enjoyed the first episodes of the sinetron. One viewer preferred to read martial art stories rather than to watch this sinetron because the fighting techniques are still poor. Another said that the title is not appropriate because it is not about the mystery of Mount “Merapi” (mainly thought of as the volcanic mountain in Central Java although there are others in Indonesia); rather it is about the mystery of Mak Lampir.

An audience member’s letter to Indosiar expressed disappointment with the fragmented story and the disappearance of some characters such as Lindu Aji, Mayang Sari, Bagus Sajiwo, or Dewi Sendok without any reason. She questioned also the gap between episodes which made the story lose its sequence. Viewers are confused why suddenly characters appear or disappear. However *kejar tayang* (deadline shooting) is considered characteristic of sinetron production. The episode which is to be broadcast on a Sunday, for example, is still in the shooting process on Wednesday. The producer asks the production manager and the director to shoot additional scenes to insert into this episode. This means that the story of sinetron is often fragmented.

Another viewer objected that the sinetron is deceiving the audience. The sinetron constructed the figure of Mak Lampir as the ruler of Mount Merapi with all of her supernatural power and spiritual ability. He was afraid that some people would believe in Mak Lampir as the ruler of Mount Merapi. He was also afraid that people would believe that the sinetron was a true representation of past reality. As this viewer did not object to the magic represented in the sinetron, this can be read as indicating that the supernatural is still part of every day life for

Indonesians. Other viewers criticised the representation of female characters of the seventeenth century who had heavy make up and fought without any sweat.

Most of them agreed that the animation technique was still poor, compared to imported *wuxia* or *kung fu* TV serials, although they still enjoyed it. The fighting effects were too exaggerated and unrealistic: they criticised fighting scenes which are dominated by twirling, flying and sending supernatural blows. Viewers objected that the knights fight and kick, and are beaten and kicked by a group of people, but they do not get wounded. But they were still proud of, and admired, the ability of the Indonesian producer to produce such technical effects. Most of them considered that the *sinetron* is interesting because it gives the audience a different story about past events.

Comparing the comments on drama and colossal action *sinetron*, *sinetron kolosal laga* such as *Misteri Gunung Merapi* still receive a lot of appreciation from audiences. There is no comment on bad language produced by the characters (a frequent criticism of drama *sinetron*) although this does not mean they are always polite. As it is action *sinetron*, when there is conflict, fighting is the dominant way to solve problems rather than arguing. In this situation, there are few opportunities for violent language, however it is not dominant. That makes the *sinetron* suitable for family viewing.

Conclusion

Globalization, which accompanied the financial crisis, has changed the character of *sinetron* production. *Sinetron*, which were initially produced by TVRI with government funding, have been transformed into popular *sinetron* mainly for entertainment with the purpose of profit making. With this transformation, ratings have become important for the television industry. However, it is problematic for the Indonesian television industry that television is of western origin and also the concepts accompanying the industry. Ratings, for example, are not understood as a tool for program classification. Rather the concept is simplified to measure the

popularity of this program. This creates a gap between producers' imaginings of their audiences and the audiences' expectations of these programs. This leads to questions about how the producer of *Misteri Gunung Merapi* imagines his audiences and what his formula is to produce such successful sinetron. In the next chapter I will discuss the making of *Misteri Gunung Merapi*.