



Submission date: 04/09/2018

Accepted date: 26/10/2018

USTAZ COOL, USTAZAH TRENDY: CHISELLED ISLAMIC CELEBRITY PREACHERS

Ustaz Kool, Ustazah Trendi: Pembentukan Penceramah Selebriti Islam

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Abstract

Islamic televangelism, arguably has become a staple in the Malaysian media environment today. The intensification of this genre has provided rise to personalities known as celebrity preachers. These celebrities are increasingly getting viewers' and online followers' attention which implies that this phenomenon needs a scholarly attention. This study, examines the insights of the production of Islamic televangelism programs to gain details on the 'birth' of celebrity preachers. In depth interviews were conducted with industry professionals and insiders to understand the nature of the production of Islamic televangelism. The discussion with the industry insiders reveals the conceptions of celebrities are wedged between television economy and culture.

Keywords: celebrity preachers, Islamic televangelism, television production, religion, industry professionals.

Abstrak

Penyiaran program keagamaan semakin mendapat tempat dalam media Malaysia hari ini. Perkembangan genre program ini telah membangkitkan satu fenomena dikalangan penceramah program, di mana mereka semakin dikenali sebagai ustaz dan ustazah selebriti. Fenomena ini semakin mendapat perhatian para penonton dan pengguna media sosial yang menunjukkan senario ini memerlukan perhatian ilmiah. Sehubungan dengan ini, kajian ini bertujuan untuk mengenalpasti proses produksi program keagamaan bagi meneliti bagaimana konsep penceramah selebriti ini

dihasilkan. Kaedah penyelidikan yang dijalankan adalah melalui temubual dengan penggiat industri televisyen di Malaysia. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan bahawa fenomena penceramah selebriti terhasil di antara aliran dwi-faktor kepentingan dalam media yakni ekonomi media dan budaya industri tersebut.

Kata kunci: penceramah selebriti, program keagamaan, produksi televisyen, agama, penggiat industri.

INTRODUCTION

Conventional missionary activities have long been conducted in the mosque and through traditional interpersonal communication. With increasing improvement of mass media, radio and newspapers begun to serve as an important medium to further spread the message of Islam. Advances in information technology today makes television as a medium of choice for today's preacher, generating a genre known as televangelism. Malaysians can now view various programs and religious sermons delivered by preachers through mainstream mass media, pay television network and online social network sites.

Traditionally, televangelism refers to the use of television for Christian missionary activities (Hadden & Swan, 1981). Although the academic study of televangelism has long existed in the United States (Robbins, 2017), more studies on the practice of televangelism in the Middle East (Moll, 2010), Indonesia (Muzakki, 2012) and India (James, 2010) have been only carried out in the past few years.

Muzakki (2012) observes that televangelism is gaining interest as a global phenomenon in the Muslim world. This trend had gained momentum so much so had caused a proliferation of Islamic programs in the mass media. In Malaysia, there have been significant amount of Islamic programs featured in the local television industry and subsequently this phenomena had been studied and examined by scholarly researchers (Karim, 2018; Abd Ghani 2010). However, there have been areas that remain under-researched. One of them is the conception of Islamic celebrity preachers.

This study, thus, examines the conception of Islamic celebrity preachers in Malaysia by gaining accounts and insights from industry insiders. The study illuminates the process of producing Islamic televangelism and how this result in the birth of religious celebrity preachers.

ISLAMIC TELEVANGELISM

There have been a number of research on Islamic televangelism. Most of them are discussed from the viewpoint of social capitalism (Van De Bowenkamp, 2015; Adnan, 2010), influence of online media (Musthfaa, 2014), engagement of social media (Eisenlohr, 2016) and audience reception (Karim, 2016). Nevertheless, it were Moll (2010) and Muzakki's (2012) studies which had tapped a specific concern that needed further exploration.

Moll (2010) in her studies asserts that in Egypt, the consumption of televangelism is rather unique. She stressed that audience ratings are not based on the credibility and knowledge on Islamic texts alone, instead it lies on the status of the preacher. Moll (2010) explains that televangelist preachers position themselves as an ordinary person (when preaching) rather than as experts of Islamic knowledge. She cited the biography of one of the young Egyptian televangelists, Moez Masoud, against a backdrop of rich family and loves of Western entertainment. He, however, engaged in missionary career after suffering a personal crisis when three of his closest friends died from drunk driving. Masoud saw himself not as a "preacher", but only to share his story and path to Islam. In this instance, Masoud positions himself as a 'caller to Islam' otherwise known as '*Da'i*' rather than a jurist in Islamic jurisprudence. Moll (2010) also pointed out that the dialect factors play a role in the effectiveness of televangelist preachers in Egypt. She found that the use of dialect in Egypt is a major prerequisite for contemporary Islamic televangelists. The use of dialect plays an important role in popularizing the preacher's television show.

A study conducted by Muzakki (2012) in Indonesia indicates the importance of oral preaching in Islam, through sermons or lectures, among the Muslim community of Indonesia. Like Moll's (2010) study, Muzakki's research also indicated that scholarly credentials are a secondary matter when examining the credibility of the preachers in Indonesia. It is the image and personality of preachers presented both 'on-screen and off-screen' that play a crucial factor in determining the popularity of a televangelism program.

The above studies document that the idea of televangelism relies heavily on the image and personality of the preacher rather than on his or her qualification(s). Such findings raise important questions as to what makes such preachers popular and socially acceptable. Although Moll (2012) provides reasons for why preachers in Egypt gain popularity (e.g. fresh and modern sheikh-in-suits image and appearance, the story telling technique, the sincerity appeal) little is known if such findings yield similar results in other Muslim countries. Furthermore, Moll's study (2012) didn't examine the underlying basis of production of Islamic televangelism and if these preachers were 'tailored for TV' or genuine 'caller of Islam'.

ISLAMIC CELEBRITY PREACHERS

In Malaysia, attempts to understand the phenomena of celebrity preachers is lacking even though such programs have led a proliferation in mass media. One of a well-established local Islamic program is *Forum Perdana Hal Ehwal Islam* which had been broadcasted by the state-funded free air TV 1 since the 1990s. This program has generated over 1 million viewers between 1996 and 1997 (Abd Ghani, 2010). Yet, there have been limited studies on the preachers in this program. Mashudi, Musanif, Aziz and Mohamad (2013) studied the delivery style featured in *Forum Perdana Hal Ehwal Islam*. The research, however, only illuminates the collective communication strategies used by the panels in the program and how it had provided an effective discussion style for TV programs. The research also didn't elaborate whether the panels were treated as celebrity preachers as how the term has become prevalent in contemporary Malaysia.

Recently, there have been an increasing number of programs featuring individuals discussing on Islamic knowledge in mainstream media and pay television network. Adding to this, these religious preachers also use social networking sites like YouTube, Facebook, Instagram and blogs – where their views are liked, retweeted and commented upon, which seem to further enhance and elevate the position and image of the preacher into a celebrity preacher. Yet, studies examining conception of celebrity preacher is scarce.

In contrast, studies on preachers in Indonesia have been conducted for the past decade (Widodo, 2008; Hassan 2009; Howell, 2007). These studies observe the influence of modern cosmopolitan on Islam and how the religion has transformed from a rather classic, subtle 7th century eminence to an “accelerating conditions of global capitalism and worldwide Islamic awakening” (Gade, 2010). The increasingly interest on socio-religious matters creates a rather energetic and vibrant spiritual market otherwise known as “market Islam” (Rudnyckyj, 2009) occupying multiple media platforms to reach Muslims.

Hoesterey (2012) exclusively describes one of Indonesia's celebrity preacher in the contemporary Indonesia as:

Preacher cum self-help guru Abdullah Gymnastiar was among Indonesia's most visible pop icons of public piety and Muslim modernity. Known belovedly throughout Indonesia as “Aa Gym” (elder brother Gym), he promoted his Islamic pop psychology “Manajemen Qolbu” (Heart Management) through televised sermons, social media, best-selling books, and corporate training seminars.

Hoesterey (2012) argues that the preacher uses “a hybrid of Western pop psychology and Sufi ideas of the heart” to appeal to middle class Indonesians. He further highlights Abdullah Gymnastiar’s oratory skills as:

Gymnastiar’s preaching emphasized particular moments of the Prophet Muhammad’s life and career. In Gymnastiar’s account, Muhammad was not just a prophet; he was a professional, an entrepreneur whose piety, trustworthiness, and self- initiative yielded great prosperity. The moral of the story is that Muhammad went from rags to riches. The framing of Muhammad as a professional denotes a certain worldly and entrepreneurial sensibility. In Gymnastiar’s sermons, it is the figure of Muhammad as worldly, ethical trader, who achieved great honor and recognition during business expeditions to foreign lands, that defines him as cosmopolitan.

The modern image and personality of these celebrity preachers are not necessarily all pervasive in media. Said Aqil Siradj, Chairman of Nahdatul Ulama asserts that “Islam Nusantara is a tolerant, civilized, and peaceful Islam” (Burhani, 2017). He, however, exclaims that:

Indonesian Islam is not Arab Islam. No need to wear gamis (Arab garb), no need to wear sorban (turban). No. Indonesian Islam is Islam with Indonesian characteristics,” he notes. Siradj was indirectly referring to Indonesian Muslims, including celebrity preachers, who wear Arab garb to showcase their religiosity. Instead of wearing “traditional dress” (pakaian adat), he said, some celebrity preachers wear gamis and sorban daily, promote celana ngatung (wearing garment above the ankles), or let their beards grow long.

Hoesterey (2012) and Burhani’s (2017) accounts of celebrity preachers illustrates that there are different types of Indonesian celebrity preachers. Each seems to promote Islam in their own way with a specific target group. The target group, which is mainly Muslims, appears to be grouped in the ‘market Islam’ thus creating an increasingly competing religious cosmopolitanism. The target group in the ‘market Islam’ also comprises a variety of religious groups and followers; indicating that the engagement of celebrity preachers seems to be driven by not only global capitalism but also in satisfying the different religious needs of Muslims.

While research and discussions about Islamic preachers are increasing in Malaysia (see Salim, 2018, Aris & Hassan, 2016; Rosli, 2015; and Azzman & Manaf, 2014), the need to further explore the phenomena of celebrity preachers is very important. There is a less clear nature of understanding the mechanism that is employed to create the idea of celebrity preacher in Islamic televangelism. Much of the local

research on Islamic programs up to now has been examined from the macro aspect of socio-economical and socio-religious dynamics; yet no detailed explanation of the creative and production aspect that goes into when producing Islamic programs (Karim & Ahmad, 2018).

A plethora of literature has acknowledged that the producers and creative labourers are key players in the media industry (Lee, 2018; Hesmondhalgh, 2017 and Mills, 2016). These individuals influence and at times play important role in either producing, selecting (Tunstall, 1996) and gatekeeping programs that will be shown in television. It is, therefore, important to understand the role and influence of these individuals in the production of Islamic televangelism. Mayer (2011) points out that the studies on television production aids to recognize the undercurrents and industry insights when producing television programs including acknowledging the works of production workers who identify themselves with the industry.

This study, thus, examines the conception of celebrity preachers by investigating the process of producing Islamic televangelism. The objective of doing this research from the viewpoint of the production aspect is to understand the insights and the decision making that is undertaken in the creation of celebrity preachers of such programs. By doing this, the phenomena of celebrity preachers can be understood even further and provide a critical opportunity to advance the understanding of the ‘birth’ of Muslim celebrity preachers.

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is to investigate the conception of celebrity preachers in Malaysia. In doing so, a qualitative research technique is undertaken in order to study untapped phenomena (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000) whereby a series of interactions with a range of industry professionals and insiders are undertaken. These individuals are selected using purposive sampling, whereby they were interviewed based on their expertise and the centrality of their professional roles in relevant to this research.

Table 1: Respondents Profiles

Organisation	Respondent	Designation and Experiences
University	Academic 1	A senior academic in a public university. This person has researched extensively on religion and local screen studies.
Media	Preacher 2	A popular male preacher who has hosted several religious TV programs.
Media	Producer 3	A TV producer who specializes in producing religious programming.
Media	Marketer 4	A marketing executive of a private television network.
University	Preacher 5	A popular female preacher who has hosted several religious TV programs. This person also works in a public university.
Media	TV Executive 6	A media executive who had worked for a religious section in a private television network.

In total, in depth interviews were conducted with six industry experts and insiders. To protect their anonymity, they were labelled generically, according to their profession. These participants are referred to as Academic 1, Preacher 2, Producer 3, Marketer 4, Preacher 5 and TV Executive 6 as illustrated in Table 1. The selection of these individuals illuminates the insights of television industry and its forces on the construction of celebrity preachers.

FINDINGS

The findings of this research are organized around two themes: Television Economy and Television Culture. These themes were extracted through thematic analysis; whereby interactions with the professionals are analysed based on their accounts on the forces and dynamism inside the television industry.

Throughout this research, some precautionary measures have been undertaken to protect the real identity and names of popular television presenters and television programs. They are replaced with pseudonyms.

TELEVISION ECONOMY

Thematic analysis identified two notions of television economy that were raised by interviewees when discussing the conception of celebrity preachers. They are program creation and target audiences.

Program Creation

The accounts of some respondents indicate that there are demands of Islamic programs despite that television viewing habits in Malaysia have significantly declined. Academic 1 opines that:

There are many people who aren't interested in watching television but the good thing is that, there have been increasing demand for Islamic programs. Meaning, there are demands for Islamic programs. (Academic 1)

Academic 1 further explained the reason for such demands are because the contents of the programs are fresh and unique particularly for Muslim youngsters. She asserts that Islamic program in Malaysia will continue to flourish:

Although we have social media and other resources, but there will be still demands for Islamic creative content similar to demands for Islamic schools. The demands are there and we want suppliers for that.

Academic 1 believes that the demand for Islamic programs in television is akin to the demand for Islamic schools in Malaysia. She feels that there is a co-relation between these two demands and that will continue to pressure local television to produce more Islamic contents; seeing that there is a growing religious market in Malaysia.

Adding to this, another respondent observes that her superiors are aware of this market. She however believes it takes a combination of her superiors' personal intrinsic value in creating such programs. She explains:

One of the pay tv subsidiary is the *Wahah* network. With *Wahah*, they come out with an Islamic program called *Young Cleric*. That was the first one. And according to the manager, at that time, he felt that it's the time for pay tv to have one channel that focuses on Muslims. So that's how the birth of *Wahah* is but he doesn't have the religious background.

His intention of having such network was based on his internal awareness, but his background is in Marketing. So, you can tell now how sometime people, marketing and money can go in hand in term, at the same time we want to serve the Muslim community and at the same time bring money. (TV Executive 6)

Marketer 4 elaborates that it is important to understand marketing essentials when developing a television program:

If you've learned principle of marketing, there are primary and secondary target audiences. The primary target is usually of those with higher purchasing power.

For Marketer 4, creating a program that is intended to a primary target will ensure a return of investment in terms of consumer's purchasing power. She explains the urban audience holds a big purchasing power and therefore Islamic programs are intentionally designed to attract them:

I want urbanites; because of their purchasing power. So that advertisers are willing to spend their money and I can produce more Islamic content. If I don't have funds, how am I to produce Islamic content?!

Marketer 4 clarifies that it is essential to identify the right target audience because it is intertwined with the relevant marketing forces.

Targeted Audiences

The subsequent theme that emerged out of the discussion refers to targeted audience. However, the discussion of this aspect of targeted audience seems to be specifically about the needs and the likings of the viewers and the benefits to the television network. For instance, Producer 3 claims:

Whatever we do. We always think about audience. What would people say if we ignore them. That's the challenge.

Producer 3 explains that the current approach of television is not to preach per say. But rather to understand the targeted audience and produce programs that will appeal to them:

We want to be a medium to be closer to people, first. And change the perception on Islam. Not getting mad about people aren't dressed Islamically. Not about people aren't praying. Nope. We have so many criteria which makes Islam as a way of life. We want to discuss about '*akhlak*'. We want to talk about cleanliness. We want to talk about doing good. We want to talk about race, patriotism and courage.

Marketer 4 elucidates that it is important to appeal to audience in an attempt to attract viewership for the program. The primary goal is to boost ratings and subsequently attracts advertisers to advertise their products or services during the airing of Islamic programs. In doing so, the advertising revenue is generated and it becomes a source of investment for the television network to produce more television programs. The economy aspect in creating Islamic programs is seen as a

complex interplay between television network, audience and advertisers whereby all three forces play equally important roles when it comes to television economy.

TELEVISION CULTURE

Television culture is another aspect that was discussed by participants of this study. This theme is extracted based on experts' views on preacher's image and personality, delivery and oratory skills and content credibility.

Image And Personality

For Marketer 4, the creation of Islamic programs is about the audience, and thus some form of branding strategy is needed to appeal and attract the targeted audience:

We must brand it lah. We have to see who our audience are. What do young people want? You put yourself as consumer.

She further elaborated that the image and personality of preachers is essential particularly in the television industry:

For TV, one must be handsome. If not, no one wants to look at you. For us too – if not handsome, I would turn back. Even Ustaz Qatib looks quite handsome. We are happy about this. If [the preacher] looks ordinary. Then? (sighs!) Television is like that. The nature of television is that if you want to sell, you must seek such criteria. But with Islamic background (Marketer 4)

The explanation by Marketer 4 highlights that, in addition to the economy aspect in creating Islamic televangelism, the culture of TV demands for good looking preachers. The image and personality of the host appears to be important criteria when targeting young Muslim audience. She further points out:

I don't want those who wear *kurta* [a collarless casual clothing]. They are allowed to wear jeans and such [for audition]. Be yourself actually. There is one person who came with Arab garbs and headgear to project an Islamic feel but that was so tasteless and square and I crossed [rejected] him right away (Marketer 4)

Marketer 4's views on image and personality is elucidated by Preacher 5. Preacher 5 who is an expert in the field of law, and also had hosted Islamic programs, reveals that she has enquired about the absence of mufti as a television preacher:

I have questioned on why the mufti(s) aren't invited for these programs. Mufti's sayings are considered lawful and valid especially if its topic is governed within the

fatwa and ijthad. We can't follow the discussion of such topics by normal preachers but it is authorised and permitted if the Mufti says so.

Preacher 5 points out that the preaching of mufti or Islamic clerics is authorised and allowed to be followed as they are expert in Islamic laws. By showcasing these Islamic clerics will provide an enriching understanding of Islam to the audience. The reply from television executives of Preacher 5's enquiries, however, illuminate the culture of TV industry:

I did asked the producers to invite the mufti such as Mufti Adam, Mufti Basith, Mufti Daud for example. But they [producers] feel that these mufti(s) are old and unappealing to the targeted audiences. That's the reason I got.

Preacher 5's revelation was affirmed by Producer 3, whereby she claims:

We don't want Ustaz who are *kuno* [archaic]. It won't be good. Such character can't gel with the rest of the team. (Producer 3)

Producer 3 asserts that the nature the television culture is such a way that any form of genre featured in television must have an appealing factor:

For TV, one must dress beautifully. Audiences likes that. Lengthy hijabs which worn by school students are not fashionable. Now, they have trendy longs hijabs. The one you can have styled it up. For TV appearance, we would advise what and what not to wear and not to; so that they won't look dull.

Appealing factor in this context appears a branding strategy. Marketer 4 says that each Islamic program must have its own brand. She claims one can wear Arab garbs as part of the program strategy but it depends on the audience as well as how the host or the preacher carries himself. Marketer 4 reveals:

For Program *Buruj*, we have set it up that the dressing is such a way because the target audience loves it. It is an Arab garb. Why it has to be garb? Because the preacher wanted it; because it's his 'appearance'. [It's a] branding.

Marketer 4 further highlights that television networks gain higher audience ratings when engaging in strategic branding exercise. She provides example on how the branding of Program *Buruj* was gained a profitable outcome:

Program *Buruj* was very successful for the network: *Al Safar*. It put *Al Safar* in another level. *Al Safar* hasn't got 100 000 viewers before and for this Program

Buruj, it gained 100 000 viewers. And later the preacher has established his branding with such dressing style with this program.

The preacher of Program *Buruj* himself acknowledges that:

I am the only who wears Arabs garbs in *Qadaya fi Al Islam*. Others are not allowed. But I was adamant. If you want me; I will come with my Arab garbs. Otherwise, I won't appear. This is important because it's the phase where I am building my character and reputation. A phase that mustn't be meddled.

Preacher 2 further explains that the branding of his image is important for the purpose of brand recognition and brand visibility:

The preacher of Program *Buruj* must wear an Arab garb. Otherwise people will question if I wear other clothing other than my Arab garb. The public knows me such away. So if you want me to appear; accept the whole persona. Otherwise don't invite me.

The revelation of the preacher himself about his dressing style confirms to Marketer 4's explanation of branding strategy. Marketer 4 insists that each program must have its own brand and it's not about the host exclusively but it's about how the preacher uses the image and personality to attract the targeted audience.

Delivery and Oratory Skills

Another theme that was discussed by industry professional is on the delivery and oratory skills of the preacher. Producer 3 says:

They cannot be too serious. Too strict. Too square. It's a light-hearted program, where you just have casual chats.

TV Executive 6 adds that television presenters must have good delivery and oratory skills. She claims that Malaysian audiences are a unique form of targeted group because majority of them years for television contents that emphasize on emotional appeal:

People want to watch, you know Malays, they have sentimentality.

On Hari Raya, you watch sad movie.

My husband asked me: Why Malaysians watch sad movie on Raya eve?

Hari Raya is meant to be happy.

But they keep showing Tikar Buruk lah, [Kitab] Buruk lah.

[Because] it is something to bring back your feelings. To feel remorse.

[And project] how you feel your relationship with God, with human.

Marketer 4's view confirms TV Executive 6's explanation. She provides a comparison of two Islamic programs:

Salahiah's program did not provide the ratings because the program is too intellectual. [But] Program *Buruji*, everyone likes him because he plays with emotion. Malays love emotional stuff. Likes to cry and feel sad. Too Bollywood. (Marketer 4)

Preacher 2 corroborate with Marketer 4's accounts and explain further of having a style of delivery and oratory skills that appeal to the targeted audience.

You must have the 'Wow' factor. For example, if producing a talk show; it must be different from other programs. And highlight what makes it different and standout. Some people appears to be charismatic but when shown in television, the Wow factor isn't there. So, such programs are not shown anymore (Preacher 2)

Preacher 2 explains that the appeal factor is important for television industry to be able to continue to produce Islamic programs. Without the appealing factor, there will be loss of confidence on the host for not being able to attract audiences.

Preacher 5 agrees with Preacher 2 and further elaborates:

First, we need to make sure audience choose us; and that's why promos and montage are shown to highlight when we are on air, what day, date. Even with time blocks. If the show runs for 1 hour, the first 15 minutes are important. The first 15 minutes aren't the same as the second 15 minutes.

So, it's important in the first 15 minutes that we provoke the audience so that they are hooked and will stay the host. Then, we can inform what are we going to discuss; who is the special guest set to appear in the program and continue to keep watching the program. If there is no provocation, then audience will channel after the first blocks (the first minute) ends.

Preacher 5 points out that the host holds a big responsibility to capture audience's attention. She clarifies that it's important to appeal to intended audience so that the audience will continue to stay and prevent them from changing channels.

Content Credibility

The interaction with industry insiders also reveals an important theme surrounding Islamic televangelism. Content credibility is an important element when producing Islamic televangelism as it's not a fictional genre like soaps and drama. Fundamentally, Islamic programs must be based on the Quran and Hadith only; by which the genre must showcase authentic and legitimate content of the religion. Preacher 5 describes her experiences on how she was sought as a host of an Islamic program:

I usually attend conference on human rights; on women issues and family laws. And so, I have been presenting on these conferences and there are some journalists and reporters at some of these conferences. They are from TV, radio, magazine, newspapers. So, from there, they saw me; my presentation and the topic of my presentation seems to be answering the questions that the public sought and pursued. So, there were a number of reporters calling me to seek my opinion for magazine and newspaper publication.

From there on, I started to receive invitation from TV, radio but mostly from TV3 and events organised at Ministerial level. They have invited me to speak about topic that didn't have any specialist on it at that time.

Preacher 5 explains that it was due to her expertise that she was asked to appear in television programs and events to provide relevant information and explanation to laymen audience. She asserts that the production team doesn't interfere in terms of the content and her speech has been always of her own, derived from her expertise in the subject matter:

Frankly, it has been years that I have involved in TV and radio and newspaper including as a columnist, I was never stopped or controlled in delivering the contents. It has been my own words based on my expertise 100%.

Academic 1 stresses that it is important to supervise the content of Islamic programs so that it doesn't propagate slander. She further points out example of Islamic contents that are confusing:

There are times I feel some contents are unrealistic. For example, the program on 'Tale from the Cemetery'. I know it has very high ratings but at times I can't accept how the content is created to brand the program such away.

Initially it was Ok. But looking back, I started to question if there were such deaths although it appears that shock and horror appeal seems to be an essential feature to

educate Malays. I mean, lets count how many good people had died [but wasn't shown]. This program shows corpse turning black and burnt (shakes head as sign of disapproval)

Producer 3 concurs with Academic 1's views about slander. Thus, explains that her role as a producer is to work closely with the preacher or host in terms of content of an Islamic program. She describes the work practice of producing Islamic televangelism as:

We identify the topic for each episode. Once we establish that, we will discuss on the content. Ustaz Ghani will prepare the basic content and then we will discuss about it later.

Producer 3 further clarifies that the content must be monitored so that it will comply with the regulations. The Film Censorship Board, the authorize body that governs the film and television program and content, carefully examines the content of television programs which are set to be broadcasted by local television:

Each TV station must go through it. Anything that is featured in television must go through the Censorship Board.

For Islamic televangelism, Producer 3 mentions that such genres too must comply with the Film Censorship Board requirement where a report will be furnished upon content assessment:

Censorship Board provides a report. In that report, there will be an indication if they find something peculiar. And we need to edit the scenes then. They will mark or comment: "Please, omit between this time code or this dialogue isn't appropriate. That's just an example of how the Censorship Board comments.

Producer 3 claims that there have been incidents where the Film Censorship Board also rectifies mistakes in Islamic programs:

There are times where the Censorship Board amends it.

There are Quran verses which we may have written mistakenly. So, we have to edit that out. It is tricky when it's a religious program. Because we are not the expert. Our intention is to do good. But most of the time we depend on Ustaz Ghani.

THE ISLAMIC TELEVANGELISM MILIEU

The role of the Film Censorship Board is discussed as to safeguard the sensitivity of Malaysian audiences be it culturally or religiously. The responsibility of this institution, however, is confined to the content only and not the creative aspect or reception of the program. The selection of host or preacher is based on the decision of the television network and the production team as exemplified above.

Thus, despite of close monitoring by the Film Censorship Board, the aspect of image and personality as well as delivery and oratory skills are central and foremost element in Islamic televangelism. Producer 3 points out:

Well, the host may be an expert but if he could not appeal to audience. Then, we don't reach our target.

Producer 3 further elucidates:

For audience - if the host is not popular; not a good looking; no fashion sense, and then gives a dull delivery, coupled with Quranic verses and Hadith that the audience doesn't understand (then the program won't make it).

Likewise, Preacher 5 also highlighted how a program known "*Mufti Speaks*" had gained low ratings which is claimed due to age factor of the presenters. Producer 3's concern on not achieving target and Preacher 5's account on ratings can be related to ideas mooted by TV Executive 6. The latter highlights an example of a reality-TV program that was initially successful but didn't receive adequate ratings. TV Executive 6 explains the reason behind the low ratings as below:

According to post mortem, it was because of Azlan. The host-effect. I think they not so creative like previous one.

Marketer 4 concurs TV Executive 6 articulation of host effect. She highlights how the ratings of a comedy TV program has decelerated due to unappealing presenters. Adding to this, Producer 3 explains that it is important to select host or preacher for an Islamic program based on the popularity and the expertise in Islamic matters. When enquired further on how "popularity" is classified for host and preachers. She explains:

We categorized the person is popular when there are frequent appearances in TV. That means the person has TV experience. And then the person is also popular in forum, seminar or actively involved in local communities, or frequently invited as judge [for local contest and competition] (Producer 3)

By which, Producer 3 describes that an ideal host or a preacher is one who has the complete package for television. She claims:

First is popularity. Second is the knowledge. By right, it should be knowledge first but for audience, popularity is the prime criteria. So, you need to balance popularity and knowledge.

The term popularity as opined by Producer 3 is noteworthy. Academic 1 expressed concerns when Islamic host or preacher becomes a celebrity preacher. She conveys:

Religious celebrity when they become popular, for me, the fame is a test from Allah. Allah may test one either for his sustenance, status, position, wealth, popularity etc. They [preachers] may raise their fees to market price; probably to pay their personal assistance, consultancy. I mean if singers are paid RM 15000 for 3 songs; then why such fees are disputed for Islamic preachers? It is important to be fair in payments. And for me, this goes back to the intention of the preacher on how he marks his fee. As long as within the reasonable limit.

Academic 1 stresses that Islamic host and preacher must be cautious when dealing with fame. She believes that such reputation comes with a price and potentially distracts the original intention of the preacher. She asserts that the payment that the host or preacher receives must be within the means of the work and services provided.

Producer 3 explains that payment for popular Islamic host is based on the budget of the production team. She explains that sometimes the team strategies by packaging the appearance of the host with the amount of episodes planned for the programs. She details:

If an Ustaz is popular for example. If he requests fees per appearance, he may ask for RM1 000 for usual programs. But if you are on budget production, you may negotiate with him and request to pay RM1500 for 2 episodes. You need to package the price.

Producer 3 further elucidates the price rate of celebrity for television program as such:

Popular ustaz requests RM 1000.

Ordinary ustaz are paid RM 600 or RM 500. Same goes to the guest.

‘Ustaz Rocky’ seeks RM 3000. He is a big name in the industry.

When we call Romie Sahar. He requested a package costing about RM17000 because he performs with his own band of musician. That’s usually for big names in the industry.

And then for solo performance, we paid a high price for Mahiz. He asks for RM7000. One show at Putrajaya. Special Islamic program for Awal Muharam. It runs for over one hour. Then we didn’t call him. Too expensive.

The different pricing between the popular host for Islamic televangelism reveals how fame is categorised between one host to another although each of them are experts in their field. Fame, in the context of Islamic televangelism, appears akin to popularity of other celebrities who consist of actors, musicians – individuals who frequently appears in the mass media. Thus, it appears that the television programs are built with specified criteria and design, i.e. the combination of television economy and culture; and for this reason, any form of genre that are featured in the television is expected to comply with this requirement.

CONCLUSION

The analysis in the previous sections reveals a rather noteworthy conception of celebrity preachers in Malaysia; whereby the findings reveal an intersection between television economy and culture. The complex interplay between these forces is deeply interconnected and appears to be crucial in the birth of Islamic celebrity preachers.

On the surface, the proliferation of Islamic programs in local television industry delivers a strong emergence of Islamic televangelism in Malaysia. Yet, in practice, the informants interviewed in this study rather fascinating insights into the local television industry; in particular of Islamic televangelism. The central point here is that how Islamic celebrity preachers are conceived.

The conception of Islamic celebrity preachers is a result of unification of television economy and culture. Islamic television preachers, host and presenters in this context appear to be individuals who are carefully selected, moulded, shaped to appeal to a variety of targeted Muslim audience; thus, creating a bubble akin to “market Islam” as described by Rudnyckj (2009). The ‘market Islam’ although seems to be catering to a variety of Muslim needs and requirement; the excessive emphasis on the preacher in Islamic televangelism is noteworthy.

Detailed analysis reveals that the casting of a presenter for Islamic televangelism is centred on the appealing factors of the individual. The combination of age factor,

good looks and sophisticated presentation are considered to be ideal criteria to appear in television productions. It appears that such combination has a profound influence on attracting audience and subsequently guaranteeing a good rating for the television network.

The analysis also reveals that these Islamic programs constitute a brand-building exercise for not only the celebrity preachers but also television network. The benefits that these networks gained in promoting the programs include a greater network's brand visibility among Muslim audience in Malaysia. In this sense, the Islamic televangelism has become an establishment for both celebrity preachers and the television network; creating a rather unique form of commodity in Malaysia. Fealy (2008) observes such commodity as how:

Muslims selectively consume "Islamic" products from an expanding spiritual marketplace rather than following the settled patterns of behaviour of their parents and grandparents (2008:16).

The foregoing discussion reveals that the conception of celebrity preachers is a deeply rooted process in the production of Islamic televangelism. The engagement of celebrity preachers seems to be wedged in between the forces of television economy and culture. The creation of Islamic celebrity preachers may provide an assortment of choices for audiences to fulfil their religious and spiritual awakening. Such phenomena, however, must be further explored if it is engaged for good or abused for harm.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This article is part of a research project funded by the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education RAGS Grant no: USIM/RAGS/FKP/36/51314.

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