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How can TV stations respond to a more conservative Indonesia?

To state the obvious, most Indonesians have always cherished traditional values. But there's enough evidence to show that more people are also embracing more conservative views on social issues today. If the number of people who believe that "democracy is working" simultaneously continues to decline, all freedom-loving people will have something to worry about. These observations are based on trends continuously measured by Roy Morgan Single Source, Indonesia's largest syndicated survey. That study is now expanding to include over 27,000 respondents annually, projected to reflect 90% of the population over the age of 14.

If fundamental rights are to be preserved in a secular state, if they are to flourish, everybody in society has a role to play especially people in a position to influence others. That includes Big Business and Big Media, their owners, stakeholders and associates alike. For city-folk to assume that the rise of conservative thinking is a Rural phenomenon is firstly misguided and secondly, ignores the fact that all voters have equal power at the ballot box. In a context where almost everybody watches television everyday, the power of the small screen cannot be underestimated. But the medium is largely understood within the confines of Nine Major Cities only, that too within the limited perspective of bald demographics.

As an industry tool, Television Audience Measurement (TAM) has a vital role to play in measuring the number of eyeballs glued to the little screen every day, in those 9 Major Cities. The inescapable reality is that those cities add up to less than 25 per cent of the population. Regardless, TAM is not designed to add invaluable insights on social issues or viewer values. Used on its own, TV channel managers, media buyers and marketers would remain ignorant of the equally important need to understand viewer behaviour, needs and wants.

Let's restrict the debate to Urban Indonesia, including the Nine Major Cities measured by TAM, but without excluding the smaller cities and towns. The Top 10 Programs measured by Roy Morgan Single Source reveal what attracts viewers in the cities and towns of Indonesia on a continuing basis. These are the 'evergreen' long-running programs, the list does not include special events.

It would be difficult to find many democracies in the world where spiritual programs are permanent fixtures within the Top 10 list. Let me hasten to add that I have nothing against spirituality. Nor do I have anything against faith-based programming. But in a multi-cultural and multi-religious society, the needs of minorities also need to be carefully fostered. In Indonesia, television has a crucial role to play in protecting democratic principles and nurturing individual freedoms, more than any other medium. To play that role, the TV channels need to understand and monitor the nuances of societal development, within but also beyond the major cities.

The single-minded pursuit of ratings alone, if encouraged and rewarded by marketers, can cause incalculable damage to the fabric of society. The freedom of choice, the ability to live and let live are fundamental rights that television has the power to promote. Failure to do so today may well lead to a tomorrow when Religion and State will have merged. Television content in Indonesia then will not be dissimilar to television programming in a theocracy. Is that a desirable scenario for what is today a secular democracy? How many rupiah would the industry generate in advertising revenues if that day ever dawns?

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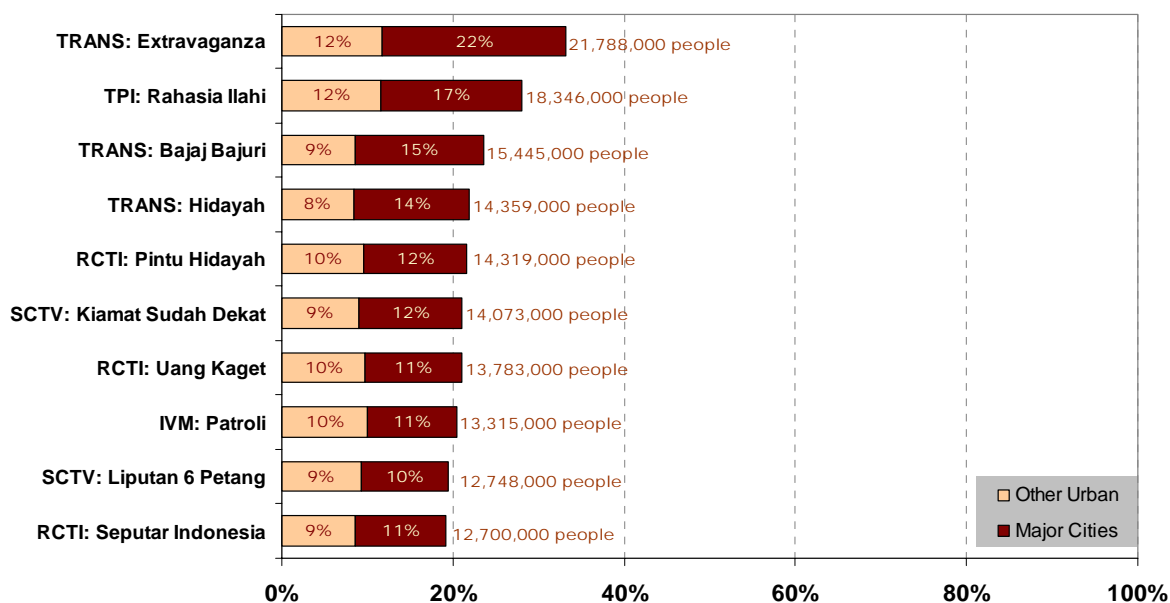
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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

TOP 10 TV PROGRAMS

(Major Cities & Other Urban)



Major Cities: Jabotabek, Greater Surabaya, Greater Bandung, Semarang, Medan, Makassar, Yogyakarta, Palembang, and Denpasar

How hard is it to use the popularity of blockbuster programs to spread the message of individual freedoms? How difficult is it to weave a discussion of key social issues into the script of every single episode of successful programs like Bajaj Bajuri? How many media buyers and marketers are there who have raised these issues with the TV stations? Inaction is not an option, nor can ignorance be bliss for much longer.

Can the response to actions taken be monitored periodically, by geography, demography or by specific segments of society? The answer is yes. Today, savvy media and marketing professionals are looking at insights beyond TAM, both qualitatively and geographically. For example, Roy Morgan Single Source data reveals that of all viewers 14 years old and above, 22 per cent of those who live in the 9 Major Cities and 12 per cent of the residents of other cities and towns, all watch the No 1 program, Extravaganza. The 21.8 million viewers of that program include millions more than TAM measures in the 9 major cities. But the more important distinction between the two sources of viewership data is the Single Source capability to directly link selected groups like “Main Grocery Buyers Who Buy Powdered Milk” to *their* No 1 program. That program, Cek & Ricek, with 2.4 million such viewers doesn’t even feature in the national Top 10 list.

That ability to zoom into specially identified groups can be used to measure changes in the different segments of society, their opinions and attitudes over time. Any stimuli that the media and marketing community provide via the small screen can also be tracked, the positive as well as the negative signs. Let individuals decide what’s good or bad, but with due consideration of different views. Opinion leaders I talk with from different sides of the social debate often express views that are far removed from realities on the ground. Too many of them are grossly out of touch with attitudinal changes taking place across the country they claim to know instinctively.

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