

Local Television and Cultural Dynamics: Assessing Contributions to Indonesia's Cultural Sphere

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Received: September 4, 2025

Accepted: November 2, 2025

Online Published: November 3, 2025

doi:10.11114/smc.v14i1.7930

URL: <https://doi.org/10.11114/smc.v14i1.7930>

Abstract

In culturally diverse countries, such as Indonesia, the cultural sphere often poses significant challenges. Unfortunately, this topic has not received adequate attention, especially when compared to the public sphere. This research investigates the contribution of local television to Indonesia's cultural sphere. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observations, and document analysis. The study finds that while local television serves as an important medium for local cultural expression, its contribution to the cultural sphere in Indonesia remains limited. The commercial nature of local television has constrained its contribution to the cultural sphere, as cultural programs must ultimately be marketable. Moreover, the way local television defines and represents culture constrains the role of local television in fostering a diverse cultural sphere. In general, local television managers adopt a cultural essentialist perspective, which leads them to prioritize dominant culture's representation while marginalizing or rejecting other cultures, perceiving them as a threat. The cultural sphere is ultimately unable to build a cultural democracy because it is not inclusive. Cultural access and participation are only open to the dominant culture.

Keywords: cultural sphere, political economy of media, cultural construction, local television

1. Introduction

The public sphere has become an important concept in the social sciences (Verstraeten, 2000) particularly when discussing democracy (Curran, 2011). However, critiques of Jürgen Habermas's notion have prompted scholars such as McGuigan (2005, 2011) to develop what he terms the cultural public sphere or the cultural sphere (Featherstone, 1992). Nevertheless, the application of the cultural sphere concept within media studies remains underexplored. While studies employing the public sphere have been extensively investigated by researchers (Chatterjee, 2012; Rahman, 2012; Rey & Carlos, 2018; Sicakkan, 2012; Utomo, 2022), social scientists have not paid much attention to the cultural sphere. A few researchers have explored the cultural sphere (Choi, 2010; Kristóf, 2021; Sassatelli, 2011) in various fields, but the application of this theory to media such as television remains rare. This fact seems inseparable from the view that journalism and political life are prioritized over popular culture (Willems, 2012). Popular culture is often relegated to the realm of entertainment and pleasure production, thus considered to offer no significant contributions beyond entertainment. However, political culture is not merely a matter of rational cognition (as emphasized in the public sphere) but also involves affective dimensions (esthetics and emotions) (McGuigan, 2005).

The cultural sphere is not merely another form of the public sphere; rather, it represents a multidimensional approach that considers affective and esthetic elements (Sassatelli, 2011). While the public sphere emphasizes cognitive and rational dimensions, the cultural sphere focuses more on affective communication. It pays attention to cultural content (O'Regan, 2002), thereby encompassing all cultural industry products, such as television, film, radio, and other media products. The public sphere is often associated with journalism and linked to political democracy (Curran, 2011). In contrast, the cultural sphere is more closely related to culture or non-journalistic content, which is why it is also referred to as the cultural public sphere. Analyses of the public sphere are generally connected to the existence of mass and new media (Dawes, 2014; Rey & Carlos, 2018; Sumartias et al., 2023), in political life, particularly regarding government policies across various fields. Meanwhile, analyses of the cultural sphere examine cultural policies and their implications for cultural autonomy (Kristóf, 2021) or the development of a regions's popular culture (Choi, 2010; Zhen, 2023).

In culturally diverse countries, such as Indonesia, discussions about the cultural sphere require greater attention, as cultural policies in such pluralistic societies often leave critical issues unresolved. On the one hand, there is a need to build a new national culture following independence from colonial rule (Jones, 2005, 2012). On the other hand, there is a need to preserve long-established ethnic cultures (Schefold, 1998). In the Indonesian context, the coexistence of these needs has generated tensions throughout the country's post-colonial history (Jones, 2012), which is well-reflected in various cultural congresses (Supardi, 2007). These tensions also permeate the intellectual level, evident in the cultural polemics between those advocating for the adoption of Western culture and those insisting on preserving local cultures (Hidayat, 1997). This cultural debate has persisted from the colonial era to Indonesia's independence, represented by various Indonesian intellectual figures.

The New Order regime's authoritarianism posed another challenge due to its desire to construct a uniform culture amid demands for diversity. Consequently, in the case of Indonesia, cultural differences at the grassroots and local levels were suppressed in favor of building a culture desired by the elite (Jones, 2005; Larasati, 2022). In this context, the cultural sphere has not only failed to safeguard the cultural autonomy of minority groups but also facilitated the dominance of certain ethnic cultures, marginalizing others (Miharja, 2017; Paramita et al., 2022). Furthermore, centralized mass media, such as television, contribute to the cultural sphere's weakening by perpetually marginalizing local cultures (Kitley, 2000).

Following the collapse of the New Order regime in Indonesia in the late 1990s, two crucial legislations were enacted: Law No. 32/2002 on Broadcasting and Law No. 22/1999 on regional autonomy. Both laws contributed to the democratization of the television sector, particularly by encouraging the emergence of local television in Indonesia. Broadcasting law explicitly guarantees the existence of local television, while regional autonomy law grants local governments the authority to issue operating licenses for local television stations. This condition significantly spurred the growth of local television. Local television supporters hoped that the presence of local television would serve local communities and express local cultures and identities that had long been suppressed by national television (Armando, 2014; Harahap et al., 2020). Therefore, it is unsurprising that local television stations emerging after the Broadcasting Law and regional autonomy carry an important mission: preserving local culture or countering foreign culture, with local culture becoming a highlighted non-news programming focus (Haryono et al., 2025).

In an effort to evaluate local television and its role in the cultural sphere, this study argues that while local television serves as a crucial platform for the expression of local culture, its overall contribution to strengthening the cultural sphere remains significantly limited. Political-economic factors restrict the significant contribution of local television to the cultural sphere in Indonesia. Moreover, the way local television constructs culture restricts its ability to develop a strong cultural sphere.

2. Theoretical Framework

The cultural sphere concept is inseparable from Habermas's public sphere theory (McGuigan, 2005, 2011). He describes the (bourgeois) public sphere as a region of tension that develops between society and the state. The public sphere is a virtual space in which citizens interact and exchange ideas on public issues to reach consensus or public opinion. Verstraeten (2000) summarizes three basic elements of the public sphere as proposed by Habermas. First, the public sphere requires a forum accessible to as many people as possible, where diverse social experiences within society can be expressed and exchanged. Second, various arguments and views are debated in the public sphere through rational discussion. Consequently, "rational" political choices are only possible if the public sphere first offers clear insight into the possible alternatives. At the same time, the media must offer the broadest possible range of interpretive frameworks, so that citizens are also aware of what they are not choosing. Third, the primary task of the public sphere is to critically scrutinize government policies. In this context, mass media play a crucial role in shaping the public sphere (Jorge & Lubenow, 2012; McKee, 2005).

The public sphere prioritizes information and public debate as a political public sphere. Consequently, the political public sphere focuses more on cognitive communication, which directly influences the press and broadcasting. Conversely, affective communication is marginalized and even considered detrimental, as information and entertainment (infotainment) replace serious news (McGuigan, 2005). Because the public sphere refers to open and rational critical debate, journalism and the quality of information become important objects of discussion, making journalistic works in the form of news and information important characteristics of democracy because they provide input into public debate (Michailidou & Trenz, 2021). Journalism is a prerequisite for a healthy public sphere (Curran, 2011). Conversely, the esthetic and emotional aspects of life can be seen as a means of distorting news and are therefore neglected by critical researchers (McGuigan, 2005). According to McGuigan, this is unfortunate because public culture is not only cognitive but also affective. Peter Dahlgren (McGuigan, 2005) criticizes the framework's distinction in media studies between cognitive communication, which is related to the public sphere, and affective communication, which is related to the enjoyment of popular culture. Dahlgren further argues that no representation, even for television

news, is entirely cognitive-rational, regardless of its intentions. In practice, across all television genres, factual and fictional programs combine affective and cognitive elements in a mixed bag.

In the modern world, the cultural public sphere encompasses various channels and circuits of popular mass culture and entertainment that routinely mediate esthetic and emotional reflections on how we live and imagine a good life (McGuigan, 2005). The concept of the cultural public sphere refers to political, public, and private expressions that are often debated through affective (esthetic and emotional) modes of communication. In popular mass media, such as television, the cultural public sphere can be witnessed in fiction and entertainment broadcasts (McGuigan, 2011). By focusing on fiction and entertainment, the concept of the cultural public sphere is particularly useful in evaluating the impact of local television on the cultural sphere. First, the cultural sphere can be used as a framework for analyzing local television by emphasizing the affective rather than cognitive dimension, with attention paid to non-news programming, and placing entertainment on equal footing with news programming. McGuigan (1996) argues that the logic of art differs from that of political democracy because art does not necessarily conclude critical discussions of artistic culture with rational agreements about the meaning and value of esthetic expressions. Culture is related to meaning and pleasure (McGuigan, 1996), so the focus of analysis can be on popular culture, entertainment, and infotainment. This perspective will also open a broader perspective in viewing media because it allows discussion not only to be limited to the public sphere, but also to the cultural sphere. By imagining the cultural sphere, we can analyze non-news broadcast programs, or, in this article, cultural programs on local television.

Furthermore, suppose news broadcasts are related to the circulation of information to build deliberative political democracy. In this case, the analysis of cultural programs also leads to efforts to build cultural democracy. In other words, if a dynamic public sphere is a prerequisite for (political) democracy (Adut, 2012), then a dynamic cultural sphere should also be required for cultural democracy.

3. Method

This study investigates the contribution of local television to Indonesia's cultural sphere. To address this, this study examines two local television stations in Indonesia: ADiTV in Yogyakarta and Bali TV in Bali. The selection of local television stations in Yogyakarta and Bali was based on their significant roles in cultural discourse in Indonesia (Jones, 2005), providing rich material for local television to express local culture.

This study employs a qualitative approach. Data was collected through in-depth interviews conducted with managers at ADiTV and Bali TV. Interviews were conducted with the directors, managers, and creative teams. These interviews aimed to uncover the construction of culture and the forms of cultural expression at both stations. Additionally, the interviews explored the factors influencing these forms of cultural expression. Interviews were also conducted with cultural practitioners and observers beyond station managers. To enrich the data, a series of observations was conducted on cultural broadcast programs aired by ADiTV and Bali TV. The data were analyzed based on relevant themes, such as cultural construction, forms of cultural expression, and political-economic factors influencing cultural expression at both television stations.

4. Results

4.1 Condition of the Indonesian Cultural Sphere

The condition of the cultural sphere in Indonesia and the debates surrounding it cannot be separated from the state of the cultural sphere during the authoritarian New Order (Orde Baru) regime, particularly regarding media policies. Although liberalization occurred in the 1980s, the centralization of broadcasting, which was previously dominated by government television (TVRI), did not undergo significant changes. Private television stations that received broadcasting licenses remained within President Suharto's sphere of influence, thus maintaining control within the regime (Armando, 2014; Kitley, 2000). While the public sphere remained under the control of the authoritarian New Order regime, the condition of the cultural sphere was no different. Larasati (2022) argues that the national cultural image supported by the government emphasized the "noble" culture of the royal courts and Hindu epics; while excluding other forms and groups arising from various sentiments, such as ethnicity, class, location, and experience.

Tod Jones's (2005) analysis of cultural policies in Indonesia before and after the reform provides a more accurate depiction of the condition of the cultural sphere. Ted Jones's cultural policy areas encompass a broad spectrum. However, policies in the fields of language and the arts are directly related to this study. In this context, the Indonesian language is positioned as the national language that unites Indonesian society, and therefore, it must be widely used. The standardization of the language became crucial and was placed on the policy agenda. The consequence of this policy is that foreign and regional languages are relegated to "supporting" roles in the development of the Indonesian language.

In the realm of arts, "depoliticize art" during the Guided Democracy era under Sukarno, cultural policies placed greater emphasis on esthetic dimensions. This esthetic discourse regulated the inclusion and exclusion of art and artists within the category of "national art." If a particular art form lacked sufficient "spiritual" essence, it was categorized as low art

and deemed necessary for transformation. This emphasis on the esthetic dimension ultimately led to cultural essentialism. In the context of this esthetic discourse, Javanese and Balinese cultures held significant positions as they became the standards for esthetic evaluation of all regional arts, especially when artists had to engage with bureaucracy to obtain promotional patronage (Jones, 2005).

Cultural policies during the reform era experienced only slight shifts when culture entered the tourism realm. Nevertheless, the bureaucratic elite continued to employ the old paradigm in managing cultural policies in Indonesia, characterized by a command or authoritarian approach. Post-reform cultural policies still did not favor regional artists significantly. Essentially, according to Tod Jones, post-reform cultural policies represent a continuation of the bureaucratic authoritarian culture, which is linked to cultural academics who prioritize national development and national culture, alongside advocacy from both conservative and liberal groups regarding regional cultural rights. Despite this, there are numerous opportunities for local policies to promote tradition and locality to compete with national culture and modernity in some regions (Jones, 2005).

In line with the centralist cultural policies, the media policies of the New Order regime were not different. Media during the New Order era, particularly television, also exhibited centralization. Media policies, especially in the television sector, were used to support authoritarian and centralist power with a development ideology. Consequently, television was positioned as an "instrument" of government power. In the mid-1980s, liberalization was limited. These policies remained within the corridors of authoritarianism, where the existence of private television was still under government control. This control was achieved by granting licenses to individuals within the New Order circle. While some shifts did occur, they remained centralistic. As a result, the condition of the cultural sphere in Indonesia did not change significantly. Sen and Hill (2000) concludes that the liberalization of the private television sector in Indonesia during the 1980s did not represent a paradigm shift toward a more democratic or market-driven media. Instead, this liberalization was merely a policy adjustment to the changing media landscape within the framework of central cultural control over peripheral regions. According to Sen and Hill, although the New Order regime lost some political-economic control by granting broadcasting licenses to private entities, nepotism in the licensing process allowed the regime to reassert control over the television monopoly in Indonesia.

Following the fall of the authoritarian President Suharto, one of the reform agendas was to promote political and media democratization, including the democratization of broadcasting. This agenda was marked by the enactment of Law No. 40/1999 on the Press, which prohibited censorship and bans on the press—practices that were common during President Suharto's regime. Broadcasting Law No. 32/2002 was passed in the broadcasting sector. This law reversed the previous broadcasting legislation, which had been more authoritarian. Law No. 32/2002 has two key points for the democratization of broadcasting in Indonesia: first, restrictions on ownership and broadcast reach. Except for TVRI, whose status was changed from a government to a public broadcasting institution, private television stations conducting national broadcasts were required to transition into networked broadcasting stations. Second, the recognition of the local private television. Article 31, Paragraphs (1) and (5) of Law No. 32/2002 on Broadcasting explicitly address this issue. Paragraph (1) of Article 31 states that broadcasting institutions providing radio or television broadcasting services consist of networked broadcasting stations and local broadcasting stations. Meanwhile, Paragraph (5) specifies that local broadcasting stations may be established in specific locations within the territory of the Republic of Indonesia, with their broadcast reach limited to those areas.

Local television supporters in the legislative body emphasized the importance of local television in maintaining a balance between local and national broadcasting. For instance, Joko Susilo (Hendrawan, 2017), a member of the Special Committee for the 2002 Broadcasting Bill, stated that people in the regions had long been treated as objects of broadcasting and that national television broadcasts from Jakarta did not align with local cultures because national television broadcast reflected the tastes of Jakarta's culture and, more broadly, Javanese culture.

After more than two decades of broadcasting reform in Indonesia, the cultural sphere has not significantly shifted from what Kitley (2000) described as the center's dominance over the periphery. While local television has indeed grown, it struggles to survive (Maryani et al., 2018). Conversely, the broadcasting system remains dominated by national broadcasting stations in Jakarta due to the failure of the networked broadcasting system's implementation (Armando, 2014). As a result, Indonesia's cultural sphere continues to be dominated by Jakarta's national television, which perpetually produces a central bias in discourse, as seen in soap operas, Jakarta dialects, and metropolitan lifestyles. National television intensively, massively, and continuously constructs an Indonesia that is reduced from Jakarta's perspective (Armando, 2014). Broadcasting's centralization, both before and after the liberalization of broadcasting, ultimately keeps regional cultures on the periphery (Kitley, 2000).

The centralistic and oligopolistic nature of Jakarta's national television (Masduki & D'Haenens, 2022; Sudibyo & Patria, 2013) remains dominant and fails to showcase local diversity (Armando, 2014). Instead, central discourse is

homogenized (Jakarta), marginalizing local subjects (Barkin, 2006) and exploiting the periphery. In terms of homogenization, the situation is often absurd, as not only must other regions accept irrelevant broadcasts, but in terms of religion, there is also imposition when Hindu communities in Bali must simultaneously hear the Jakarta television call to prayer at the same time (Armando, 2011).

4.2 Contribution of Local Television to the Cultural Sphere

Access, inclusiveness, and participation are three important elements to building a vibrant public sphere (Verstraeten, 2000). Thus, a healthy cultural sphere must fulfill these three elements. First, it must be accessible to all cultural communities in the area. Second, it must be inclusive of or open to various cultural groups. Third, participation from various cultures must be encouraged.

Considering the three elements and factors that can distort the cultural sphere, this study concludes that the contribution of local television to the cultural sphere remains limited. Commercialization and how local television managers construct culture have limited the contribution of local television, as both factors restrict access, inclusivity, and cultural participation. As a result, the cultural sphere of local television is filled with marketable culture. Local television programs are part of the cultural industry that must sell and generate profits. Cultural construction creates a cultural space filled with dominant ethnic cultures, such as Javanese culture on ADiTV, and Balinese culture on Bali TV. Outside the dominant culture, other cultures do not have sufficient space in the cultural sphere on local television. As a result, the cultural sphere on local television is ultimately unable to build cultural democracy.

4.2.1 Political-Economic Factors

The local television station that is the subject/object of this research is a private television station. Therefore, local television products cannot be separated from their cultural industry position. According to UNESCO (Schiller, 1989), cultural industries are created, reproduced, stored, or distributed on a large scale through industrial and commercial channels with strategies that focus more on economics than on cultural development. This cultural industry includes publishing/printing, the press, film, radio, television, photography, recording, advertising, sports, and more recently, the information industry (such as database creation, computer software production, and various other forms of marketable information). The cultural industry is the entirety of media products oriented toward commercial needs.

When culture appears on private television, cultural programs may serve the needs of marginalized local cultures for representation and expression. However, as Adorno and Horkheimer (2006) highlight, the cultural industry remains an entertainment business. As Adorno and Horkheimer further argued, the entertainment business was an extension of labor under late capitalism. In capitalism, everything must ultimately be marketable. Cultural industry products, including cultural programs broadcast on television, must meet the requirements of being a valuable commodity.

Local television stations' choices for cultural programs as part of the cultural industry cannot be separated from economic interests. At ADiTV, economic motives are the primary driver of cultural program continuity. There are two considerations in determining the broadcast program: near-zero production costs and the potential for cultural programs to attract sponsors or advertising. ADiTV's cultural programs, such as *Jenggleng Manasuka* and *Wedang Ronde*, have been running for years thanks to sponsors. The *Jenggleng Manasuka* is a Javanese cultural variety show. This program combines *gamelan* (traditional Javanese music), *tembang* (Javanese songs), and dialogue between artists dressed in Javanese attire. The *Wedang ronde* is set in a typical Yogyakarta food stall, *angkringan* (a street food stall). The name *Wedang Ronde* is derived from a traditional Yogyakarta drink.

Cultural programming on Bali TV may seem obscured due to its focus on promoting the *Ajeg Bali* movement. Nevertheless, each program must still have economic value that can be sold to sponsors or advertisers. For example, indigenous communities who wish to appear on the news program, *Lila Cita*, must pay Bali TV as part of the production costs. Film Television (FTV) is another program with high commercial value. However, unlike national television FTVs, Bali TV FTVs draw on legendary stories that have been alive in Bali for decades, even hundreds of years. Using a historical approach, FTVs strive to present the Balinese people with heroic tales full of love and mysticism. These programs attract numerous sponsors, both from the local government and private companies. Economic interests ultimately limit the access and participation of specific cultural groups in society, both in Yogyakarta and Bali. In other words, the commercialization of cultural programming on local television limits the access and participation of specific cultural communities, particularly those with little market value or low social capital. Commercial interests ultimately destroy the cultural sphere's inclusiveness of itself because the local television cultural sphere is not equally open to cultural communities. Only groups with marketable social and cultural capital dominate cultural broadcasts on Bali TV. In this regard, Ras Amanda Gelgel (interview, September 24, 2024) stated that contestation occurs in gaining access to the cultural sphere. At the local level, cultural groups compete or contest to fill the cultural sphere on Bali TV. Power relations on local television ultimately determine who or which cultures will appear in the cultural sphere of local television.

Another obstacle-preventing local television from contributing significantly to Indonesia's cultural sphere is the strong dominance of Jakarta television. Indonesian audiences watch television through free-to-air (FTA) broadcasts. Conversely, the number of households that subscribe to it is minimal. Therefore, distribution advantages are crucial. This situation makes it increasingly difficult for the development of local television stations. The first factor is limited capital, which prevents them from producing quality products. Therefore, in terms of product quality, local television is far inferior (at least technically) to nationally broadcast TV in Jakarta. The second factor is limited distribution channels (reach). In this context, local television faces two problems: low-quality cultural products that need to be reproduced and limited distribution. Bali TV may have benefited from its entry into satellite television. However, the quality of its product, particularly its visuals, is far inferior to that of nationally broadcast TV in Jakarta.

The consequences of the centralized and oligopolistic television market structure hinder the development of the local television industry but also limit its audience. Television viewers, who are generally older (mainly in their 60s and 70s), are more likely to watch national television broadcasts in Jakarta, which are dominated by entertainment programs, compared to local television. This means that national television broadcasts in Jakarta hold control over distribution, a key advantage and benefit in the cultural industry. In this situation, the condition of the cultural sphere in Indonesia has essentially not changed significantly compared to before the growth of local television following the enactment of Broadcasting Law No. 32/2002. As Kitley previously concluded, local culture remains marginalized. In other words, although local TV stations such as ADiTV and Bali TV have attempted to showcase local culture, their contribution remains limited. In addition to their local reach, they are unable to compete with the dominance of national television broadcasts in Jakarta for local audiences. This situation does not allow for the emergence of a meeting of local cultures that would allow for the recognition and acceptance of other cultures, as envisioned by Ki Hajar Dewantara, regarding regional cultures as the pinnacles of national culture.

Ki Hajar Dewantara (1994) explained that regional or ethnic cultures would become the pinnacles or essences of national culture if there were recognition, that is, all that is noble and beautiful in Indonesia is the wealth of the Indonesian people. Thus, the culture of an ethnic group or region no longer belongs to that region or ethnic group alone but belongs to all Indonesians. It becomes the property of supporters of other regional cultures (Dewantara, 1994). In other words, "the pinnacles of regional culture" can be interpreted as elements of regional culture that can be accepted by culture supporters in other regions. This situation is impossible to achieve when local television broadcasts are limited and continue to be dominated by Jakarta television, which broadcasts nationally. In other words, the cultural sphere in Indonesia will continue to be dominated by national broadcasts from Jakarta television, which tend to be biased in viewing local culture. In contrast, the cultural sphere of national broadcasts from Jakarta television is dominated by global and national cultures that are still finding their form.

Problem of cultural construction

Beyond political-economic factors, the construction of culture also determines the forms of culture expressed on local television and its contribution to the cultural sphere. There are two main aspects to how local television managers construct culture. First, culture is understood as the "property" of a specific ethnic group inhabit a particular region. Although attempts have been made to broaden the understanding of culture, it ultimately falls back on the notion of local culture based on ethnicity tied to a specific geographic area. ADiTV understands culture as Javanese culture centered on the Yogyakarta and Surakarta palaces, while Bali TV understands culture as Balinese culture.

Furthermore, when their cultural programs express local culture, the cultures they portray are limited to the majority ethnic groups that have historically been the "owners" of those cultures, namely, Javanese and Balinese. The reality that other ethnic groups or communities with diverse cultures also inhabit these geographic areas is not primary concern. Therefore, culture essentially refers to the culture that thrives and evolves within the majority community or ethnic group that has historically inhabited the area and claims the greatest right to define the culture that should be recognized. Second, their understanding of culture reflects an essentialist view of culture. On Bali TV, this essentialist perspective on culture is powerfully expressed through the concept of *Ajeg* Bali or "Steadfast Bali." *Ajeg* means steadfast and unchanging.

Anthropological studies have divided cultural construction into two forms: culture as static, objective, and uniform, adhered to by all members of a group, and culture as dynamic, without essence. The first perspective refers to what is known as "cultural essentialism." Grillo (2003) defined cultural essentialism as "a belief system based on the conception of humans as subjects of 'culture' (and under certain conditions territorial and national), namely carriers of culture, situated in a bounded world that defines them and distinguishes them from others." In the essentialist understanding of culture, culture determines an individual's essence, shaping both individual and collective identity, as well as the subject's place in socio-political contexts. In this sense, culture becomes synonymous with ethnicity. Ethnic communities are defined by their culture, and associated attachments, identities, and characteristics. Individuals or communities may lose their culture, leading to the perception that a culture must be protected like an "endangered species."

Drawing from European experiences, cultural essentialism is a specific idea with a long history in social contexts in Europe, closely related to the construction of nations and nation-states as the primary building blocks of political, local, and global societies since the 18th century. Because cultural essentialism "determines individual and collective identity," the existence of culture underpins the categorization of ethnic, cultural, national, and often religious identities within cultural societies. The understanding of cultural essentialism, which positions culture as a determinant of individual and group identity, has led to the emergence of what is referred to as "cultural anxiety" or cultural concern. Individuals or cultural collectives feel that they are at risk of losing their identity and culture. Consequently, they seek to "protect" their culture from the mixing of other cultures. Cultural anxiety, or the fear of losing identity and culture, is a response to modernity's expansion. Grillo (2003) states that the underlying backdrop is the long-term process of nationalization and nation-building, which fosters a sense of uniqueness, homogeneity, and national cultural identity. Thus, we concluded that the view of culture as something unchanging and static arises from a long-term process, rooted in modernity or the continuation of modernity and neoliberal globalization.

Local television managers find themselves trapped in an essentialist understanding of culture, even as they view it ambivalently. For example, while they play a significant role in the *Ajeg* Bali movement, which is understood as a steadfast or unchanging Bali, they refuse to assert that the movement aims to return to the past's cultural essence. Instead, they claim that the intended "*ajeg*" signifies a change for the better. However, this movement cannot conceal the anxiety that drives them to create cultural programs to protect their culture from external influences. Specifically, Bali TV has a program called *Ajeg* Bali, aimed at preserving Balinese culture and "fortifying" it against both national and global influences.

The essentialist view of culture, as understood by the actors at both ADiTV and Bali TV, has become a dominant public discourse among policymakers, in Asia, Europe and other parts of the world (Grillo, 2003). Developed countries, particularly in Europe, also experience similar cultural anxieties, fearing the loss of their identity and culture due to migration influxes (especially from developing countries) or the influence of other cultures through media, such as concerns over American popular culture. Such anxieties are prevalent in Indonesia, especially among political elites and some intellectuals. Political speeches are often colored by worries about the erosion of Indonesia's national culture, paradoxically failing to recognize that efforts to build a modern Indonesian culture lead to the marginalization of regional cultures.

In Indonesia, understanding cultural essentialism is rooted in a long policy history. It intertwines national and international policies. UNESCO plays a significant role in promoting discourse and policies for cultural preservation. As Larasati (2022) pointed out, no global cultural policy mandates the preservation of cultural continuity due to interest in specific existing cultures and artistic practices. Instead, these policies emphasize the preservation of traditional arts as authentic, actively preventing them from undergoing transformation and resisting various new interpretations, methods, and readings.

Development, which has accompanied modernist projects, has also introduced cultural imperialism to Indonesia. However, in the context of local culture, "cultural imperialism" must be understood in two aspects. First, cultural globalization is perceived as a threat to local cultures (both in the national and the regional or subnational sense). Second, there is a threat from the national culture that is seeking its form. For some local cultures, this threat arises from the efforts of the New Order to homogenize culture, specifically through Javanization (Atmadja, 2010; Foulcher, 1997; Jones, 2005).

The essentialist understanding of culture, tied to the majority ethnic groups, has constrained the ability of local television stations to express cultures beyond those of the majority ethnic group. This localized understanding has led Bali TV and ADiTV to exclude ethnicities and cultures outside the majority, specifically Balinese and Javanese culture (particularly the Javanese palace culture). As a result, local television has failed to foster cultural democracy and diversity because it has subordinated the expression of local culture to the dominant culture. In contrast, they focus solely on dominant ethnic cultures. In this context, cultural essentialism inevitably restricts the provision of space for ethnic cultures within local television. Instead, cultural essentialism views other ethnic cultures as "threats." Such sentiments are reflected in the context of *Ajeg* Bali or "steadfast Bali" (Pageh et al., 2021).

Essentialism obstructs hybridization and multicultural thinking on culture. Ethnic arrogance can be diminished by the emergence of multiculturalism and hybridization (Pageh et al., 2021). Essentialism also prevents local television from fostering cultural democracy, a prerequisite for multiculturalism. As previously stated, cultural democracy is based on the notion that the nature of humanity lies in its culture (the nature of man is his culture), thus emphasizing coexistence among diverse cultures (Evrard, 1997). It rejects ethnocentrism because this perspective regards one culture as superior to others. This, in turn, fosters a vision of cultural multiculturalism where every subculture segment or preference can find its legitimate expression.

5. Conclusion

This study examines the role of local television in shaping Indonesia's cultural sphere. The findings indicate that while local television has provided an important platform for the expression of local culture, it has not substantially contribute to the development of a robust cultural sphere. Two primary factors explain the limited impact of local television on Indonesia's cultural sphere.

Political-economic factors limit the contribution of local television to Indonesia's cultural sphere. Cultural programs cannot be separated from cultural industry products that are commodified by local TV stations such as ADiTV and Bali TV. At ADiTV, the "marketability" of cultural programs is heavily dependent on two factors: the availability of sponsors or advertisements and the costs required to produce these programs. Economic factors ultimately guide and determine the sustainability of nearly all cultural programs at ADiTV. On Bali TV, economic interests also influence forms of cultural expression, although the ideological need to preserve Balinese culture is also prominent.

Another factor is the construction and expression of culture on local television. Generally, local television constructs culture in an essentialist manner and understands culture within a framework of geographic and ethnic majority. This construction influences the presentation of cultural programs forms. Although the interviewed informants reject essentialist understandings of culture, the arguments behind cultural broadcast programs, particularly at Bali TV, are inseparable from "anxiety" and efforts to protect their culture from the penetration of other cultures. In the context of Bali TV, their position as part of the *Ajeg* Bali project is a manifestation of this more essentialist cultural construction. Not much different from Bali TV, ADiTV follows a similar pattern. Its cultural construction refers to the Yogyakarta and Surakarta palaces' culture.

This study essentially reaffirms the dominant perspective that has long been applied in examining markets and their influence on the public sphere—or, in this case, the cultural sphere—as well as the widespread prevalence of cultural essentialism. Cultural essentialism has become the dominant perspective in Indonesia. This perspective accepts foreign cultures as threats. This perspective is reflected in the discourse of cultural preservation, which permeates nearly all cultural policies in Indonesia, and has repercussions on how local television presents cultural broadcasts.

Acknowledgments

We express our sincere gratitude to all informants who generously shared their information, perspectives, and field experiences. We also thank Hidayatunnaifah for her valuable assistance in reviewing the final draft of this manuscript to ensure compliance with the SMC Journal guidelines.

Authors contributions

P.R., H.I.W., and S.B.W. were responsible for study design, drafted the manuscript, and revising. P.R. was also responsible for data collection. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Funding

Not applicable

Competing interests

Not applicable

Informed consent

Obtained.

Ethics approval

The Publication Ethics Committee of the Redfame Publishing.

The journal's policies adhere to the Core Practices established by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE).

Provenance and peer review

Not commissioned; externally double-blind peer reviewed.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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