

## Religiopolitical and Sociocultural Factors Shaping Creative Decisions in the Production of British and Malaysian Islamic Television

NUR KAREELAWATI ABD KARIM  
AHMAD FADILAH AHMAD  
*Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia*

### ABSTRACT

By drawing on ethnographic data gathered from British and Malaysian Islamic television channels between 2012 and 2017, this article argues that different religiopolitical and sociocultural environments in which such television production workers as creative managers, producers and researchers exist, shape how they make creative decisions for religious programmes that they produced. This article points to the extent to which these television production workers from both the British and Malaysian television channels have various degrees of creative autonomy, and how 'limited' creative autonomy affects their working life. The results show that the creative managers and producers of British Muslim television channel have lesser autonomy than their Malaysian counterparts. The clash between the Western and Islamic cultures and intergenerational clash are mainly the forms of religiopolitical and sociocultural factors that shape the creative autonomy in Islamic television production in Britain. Such representational issues relating to religious personalities, music artists and performances, and women, are among the constraints that these workers faced. By contrast, creative managers and producers in Malaysia, have some degree of autonomy. Unlike their British colleagues, religiopolitical and sociocultural factors concerning identity politics have less implication for their working life. Nonetheless, despite having a higher level of creative autonomy than their British equals, their creative decisions often are driven by the notion of giving what audiences want. Such commercial pressures as audience ratings and advertising force are the primary factors that shape the creative autonomy of managers and producers of Islamic programmes in Malaysia.

**Keywords:** *Creative autonomy, television labour, Muslim identity, production culture, representation.*

### INTRODUCTION

The notion of 'creative autonomy' of media producers is central to the analysis of religiopolitical and sociocultural factors that shape Islamic television production. Derived from the Kantian and utilitarian philosophy's conceptions of 'the person', and of 'personal morality', the term 'autonomy' is widely used in multidisciplinary studies and cannot be detached from its philosophical roots (Hesmondhalgh & Baker, 2011: 40). In their book *Creative Labour: Media Work in Three Cultural Industries*, David Hesmondhalgh and Sarah Baker use 'creative autonomy' to describe the 'self-determination' of creative workers (Hesmondhalgh & Baker 2011). Much like Hesmondhalgh and Baker, we apply the notion of creative autonomy to describe television production workers' ability in making personal decisions with minimal intervention from those at the top of the organisational and production hierarchies, e.g., the CEO and the manager. Unlike the concept of creative autonomy in the Western culture, which emphasises individualism, personal gratification, and self-actualisation, our concept of creative autonomy sits within the parameter of the five purposes of Islamic Law (*maqasid al-shari'ah*) aims to promote the well-being of television workers. The five foundational goals of the *shari'ah* (*maqasid al-shari'ah*) include

the preservation of 1) religion/faith (*deen*); 2) life (*nafs*); 3) lineage/progeny (*all*); 4) intellect (*'aql*); and 5) property/wealth (*mal*). The consideration of these five elements of *maqasid al-shari'ah* appears to be holistic and significant to Muslim television workers, managers, corporations, audiences, and society as a whole (Nur Kareelawati et al., 2017).

Aside from considering the boundary of individual creative autonomy, we also acknowledge the advantage and disadvantage of owning a certain degree of autonomy in television production. It is because studies show that possessing autonomy within the creative media work can be both good and bad for workers. While Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011) regard autonomy as characterising good work, Banks (2007: 61) argue that 'the seduction of autonomy' is strong enough for workers 'to deny the hardships of individualised work and to eclipse the feelings of exhaustion and despair'. In such context, creative autonomy can function as a double-edged sword for creative labour. For example, on the one hand, having a certain degree of creative autonomy increases worker satisfaction, as they operate free from influence while making creative decisions. By having a certain degree of creative autonomy, television production workers can also be over-worked or self-exploited, which subsequently affects their work-life balance. In such case, workers tend to self-exploit to maintain the freedom (creative autonomy) that they struggle for (Banks, 2007).

In this article, we explore the creative autonomy of television production workers that include such work roles as managers, producers and researcher at the *Islam Channel* in the UK and the *Astro Oasis* in Malaysia. We aim to unveil the extent to which sociocultural and religiopolitical factors challenge their creative autonomy. These factors include issues concerned with representational matters relating to Islam and Muslims. The circulating knowledge, values and beliefs in the society from which these workers draw while making creative decisions, therefore, must be negotiated. In agreement with Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011), we acknowledge that creative autonomy of managers and producers of Islamic television is limited. By drawing on the idea of 'limited' creative autonomy, we explore the extent to which creative decision-making is enabled or constrained by religiopolitical and sociocultural factors that are external to these Islamic television channels. In doing so, we divide this article into four main sections. First section explores the literature on production studies of religious television. The second section sets the context for the study of Islamic television channels. The third section discusses the ethnographic research design and methods. Finally, the fourth section presents the results of the analysis.

#### PRODUCTION STUDIES OF RELIGIOUS TELEVISION

Cultural studies scholars, in particular, frame the study of religion and media 'in terms that decenter religion and media from traditional, institutionally dominated definitions, refocusing on the intersections of institutions, authorities, and production with popular practices, circulation, and reception' (Morgan, 2008: xiii). Under such a paradigm, the media are seen as 'instruments for converting ideas or intentions into mass-produced forms for mass dissemination'. Most approaches to religion and media attempted by the cultural studies scholars have not explicitly discussed the production of religious broadcast institutions. These studies are within the context of media, religion and culture in the United States. With the exception of doctoral theses of Ailsa Hollinshead (2002) on *The Production and Reception of Discourses Concerning Religion in Fictional Broadcasting*, and Caitriona Noonan (2008) on *The Production of Religious Broadcasting: the Case of the BBC*, and Nur

Kareelawati Abd Karim (2015) on *Production Culture of Religious Television: the Case of the Islam Channel*, there remains a dearth of production studies of religious television that focus upon institutional context and the experiences of television production workers.

There are some research studies into the intersections of Islam and media from the viewpoint of media sociology and cultural studies. These studies include areas such as television talk shows and political change in Egypt (Sakr, 2013a) and the political economy of Arab satellite television (e.g., Sakr, 1997; Kraidy & Khalil, 2009; Sakr, 2011; 2012; 2013b; 2013c). Other studies include the ideological influences of Islamic authorities upon religious broadcasting in the Middle East (Hroub, 2012) and the political economy of a single-broadcast institution such as Al-Jazeera (Cherribi, 2012). Nevertheless, these research projects emphasise macro-analyses of power relations within the context of the political economy of media organisations and Islam in the Middle East. In addition to differences in geographical context and the particular foci of these studies (i.e., macro-analyses of the political economy of religious broadcasting), such research provides little information regarding the production of Islamic television. There are studies concerning talk shows (Sakr 2013a) and the perspectives of television producers (Sakr, 1998), as well as research on single broadcasters, like Al-Jazeera (Cherribi, 2012), which may be relevant to our research project. However, such research does not provide accurate accounts of the lived experiences of the workers involved in a television production, which we aim to achieve.

Research stemming from the cultural studies tradition concerns Islam and popular culture, as well as observations of phenomena, such as the religious celebrity, authority and Islamic televangelism (Moll, 2010; Echchaibi, 2011). Other studies focus on policy research on the intersections of media, Islam and Muslim identity within the Western context (e.g., Ramadan, 2004; 2009; 2010; Karim & Eid, 2014). There are also studies regarding how Muslims living in the West can and ought to integrate with the 'Western Other', Islamophobia, extremism and the domestic war on terror (Kundnani, 2015). Within the British context, research into such areas includes the representation of Islam and Muslims in the British media (e.g., Poole, 2009; Knott et al., 2013).

From the Malaysian perspective, there is still a limited amount of studies on labour in creative media, particularly, in television production. Most studies of media workers focus on journalists and freedom of expression. Mustafa K. Anuar (2000) and Mohd Azizuddin Mohd Sani (2008) research focus on journalist freedom of speech and its impact on citizen's democratic right. Netto (2002) argues that the lack of autonomy among journalists resulting from the complicated relationship between the Malaysian media and the government, which religion and political situation have been highly polarised. Other study focuses on the state-media relationship, Tapsell (2013) approached journalists who attempted to implement reform in the media industry in the *Post-Reformasi* era of 1998, which marks Malaysia's political economic turmoil. His study found that journalists fight for their right to provide detailed news stories that are free from the direct editorial and the ruling political intervention i.e., under the National Coalition (*Barisan Nasional*). These articles may address on how journalistic work has been controlled by the government and media companies associated with government leaders. They may inform us about the sociocultural and religiopolitical factors that shape journalists creative autonomy. However, these studies provide us a little insight into how government control and editorial interventions affect the journalists autonomy.

Aside from journalists experiences, we also found that studies on the challenges faced by public relations practitioners may have tapped into issues concerning autonomy among media workers. Nonetheless, these studies do not provide details of television production workers experience. Mohd Yahya (2016) discusses importance of the public relation practices among the Malay Muslim editors in media organisations in Malaysia. However, issues relating to creative autonomy of these Muslim editors was not part of his analysis.

Also from the context of public relations practitioners in Malaysia, Idid and Arandas (2016) emphasise on the professional values in public relations sectors by raising the importance of autonomy. However, the notion of creative autonomy is not central to Idid and Arandas' (2016) study as they suggest that professionalism, ethics, education, and experience shaped the professional values of public relations practitioners. Both Mohd Yahya Mohd Ariffin (2016) with Idid and Arandas (2016) studies lack of emphasis on creative autonomy of workers.

As with the case of television talk show in Malaysia, Juliana Abdul Wahab (2011) attempts to trace the development of locally produced television talk shows within the context of the Malaysian television industry. She applies the Habermas concept of a public sphere, which heavily relies on audience analysis. Her study left a large gap in the production aspects of television talk show.

Despite a significant number of studies relating to Islam and the media, conducted within the Western, British and Malaysian contexts, and from the viewpoints of media sociology and cultural studies, studies of Islamic television workers from an organisational context are still underdeveloped. The next section provides the context for the study, which includes a brief overview of the *Islam Channel* and *Astro Oasis*, including their missionary goals and the magazine talk shows that they produce.

#### CONTEXT FOR THE STUDY

This article is built upon the ethnography of two research sites: the *Islam Channel*, UK and *Astro Oasis*, Malaysia. Understanding the religiopolitical and sociocultural contexts in which these Islamic television channels exist offers insights into the genre programming, target audience and kinds of challenges that these channels faced during the time of the ethnography was conducted. To accomplish such an understanding, we now in turn, discuss each of these Islamic television channels.

##### *Islamic Television Channels in the UK and Malaysia*

The *Islam Channel* is an Islamic television station based in central London. Mohamed Ali Harrath, a Tunisian political exile who migrated to the UK, founded the *Islam Channel* in 2004. The UK government census reported 59% of Muslims in this country watch the *Islam Channel* at some point (Ofcom, 2011). The use of the English language by the channel allows a wider audience to access such programming, which might signify the channel's support of a social cohesion agenda. Other Islam-based satellite programmes established in the UK either combine Urdu with English (e.g., Noor TV) or uses only Urdu (e.g., Peace TV) or Arabic as the language of television programming (e.g., Al Hiwar Channel). Furthermore, although the *Islam Channel* is based in central London, viewers in 136 countries can access its programmes via satellite and the Internet (Islam Channel, 2015). The Ofcom Content Sanctions Committee (Graf et al., 2007: 6) identifies the Islam Channel as 'a specialist

religious channel that broadcasts on the SKY platform (EPG 813) and is directed at Muslim audience both in Britain and around the world'. The use of the English language in its programmes not only allows access to English-speaking Muslims but also complements the channel's mission to proselytise non-Muslim viewers (Islam Channel, 2015).

The *Islam Channel's* missionary goals, which include: 1) present a moderate form of Islam to non-Muslims, 2) educate Muslims, and 3) become the 'voice of the voiceless, voice for the oppressed' Muslims locally and abroad. These mission goals signify the way in which the *Islam Channel* has positioned itself as a Muslim organisation located in the West. Since the events of 9/11 in the United States of America and the 7/7 attack on London, Islamic culture have become politicised. Islamic media organisations have been scrutinised both by the media regulator Ofcom and by the Islamic institutions that monitor their operation within society. The *Islam Channel* is one such organisation. In 2006, for instance, Ofcom investigated the *Islam Channel* for 'failing to treat major matters of political controversy with due impartiality' (Graf et al. 2007: 3). In 2010, the UK-based counter-extremism think-tank, the Quilliam Foundation, scrutinised Islam-based television organisations beneath a political lens. According to the Quilliam Foundation report (Rajab 2010), the *Islam Channel* is 'reprogramming' young British Muslims. The report accused the *Islam Channel* of disseminating extremist ideology through a 'live' phone-in television programme called *IslamQA*.

Regarding the target audience, the *Islam Channel* represents 'everyday television' for young and conservative Muslim audiences in Britain. The programmes produced by the channel cover a wide range of genres, from current affairs and political discussion to light-hearted lifestyle and nonfictional programmes. According to the Office of National Statistics, there were 2.71 million Muslims in the UK in 2011 (Muslim Council of Britain, 2015: 16). Of this 2.71 million, 59% watch the *Islam Channel* (Islam Channel 2012). Also, other data supporting this report indicate that Muslims under the age of 50 are more attracted to Muslim media than their elders (Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2012: 10). Such reports suggest that the *Islam Channel*, in particular, is popular among young British Muslims. Another report by the *Islam Channel* stated that 80% of the channel's programming are religious programming (Islam Channel, 2013).

Unlike the *Islam Channel*, which has been established in 2004 in London amidst Western society/minority-Muslim country, *Astro Oasis* was launched in 2007 in a Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia a majority-Muslim country. *Astro Oasis* is the first Islamic television channel broadcast by Astro All Asia Broadcast Centre, a subscriber-based satellite television channel. It is currently available for free-to-view on Channel 106, *Astro NJOI*. Being a channel that broadcast such highly-rated reality TV shows as *Imam Muda* (Young Imam) (2010 – 2012) being the first Islamic channel in Malaysia, are the main reasons for us to conduct an ethnography at the *Astro Oasis* (Yoong, 2010).

*Astro Oasis* is committed to producing Islamic programmes in its form and mould. A concept of lifestyle Islamic television channel is still new during the time it was launched. *Astro Oasis* strives to be the pioneer of Islamic programmes using the a lifestyle religious format that aims to attract and satisfy the tastes of its young audiences. As claimed by Izelan Basar, *Astro Oasis* former creative manager and creator of the reality show the Young Imam, the aim of the channel is to entertain and educate people in correct religious practice (Henderson 2010, in Martin & Lewis, 2016).

By contrast to the *Islam Channel*, which its producers faced ideological constraints in presenting religious personality, music artist and entertainment and portrayal of women (i.e., content that does not comply to the *Salafi* fundamentalist rules) (Nur Kareelawati, 2015), at *Astro Oasis*, ideological clash was not its primary concern. As long as creative decisions are made according to the *shariah*, the *Sunni* mazhab (Shafie Mazhab is the Malaysian official religious sectarian) and the Home Ministry's censorship guidelines, managers and producers at *Astro Oasis* are free to make their creative decisions. The religious authority in Malaysia such JAKIM actively involved in the religiopolitical and sociocultural agenda of that *Astro Oasis*. For example, the Minister of Religious Affair, Jamil Khir Baharom expressed the ministry's support for such religiopolitical agenda, claiming that a religious programme like the *Imam Muda* the best platform for encouraging Muslim youth participation in the state strategies (Martin & Lewis, 2016). As Martin and Lewis put it, such response from the state and religious authority is 'a particularly compelling example of state strategies to conflate Islamic nationalism with modernity and to ensure their continued high visibility in a mediated public sphere' (Martin & Lewis, 2016: 187). Based on such analyses, we argue that different religiopolitical and sociocultural contexts in which these Islamic television channels exist, to some extent, shape the production of religious programmes that they produce.

It is the ways in which religious elements are treated by managers and producers, certain creative decisions are made, and how the state authorities respond to these channels' missionary goals that distinguish the kinds of religiopolitical and sociocultural challenges faced by the *Islam Channel* (e.g., the broadcast regulator Ofcom and counter-extremism think-tank Quilliam in the UK) and *Astro Oasis* (e.g., the Ministry of Home Affairs and JAKIM in Malaysia). To further explore how these contexts affect the Islamic television production, the following subsection discusses the magazine talk shows that the *Islam Channel* and *Astro Oasis* have produced.

### Magazine Talk Shows

A number of studies in the nineties and early 2000s have analysed television talk shows (daytime or confessional talk shows) regarding socio-cultural and political perspectives (e.g., Munson, 1993; Livingstone & Lunt, 1994; Shattuc, 1997; Lowney, 1999), the history of television talk shows (Timberg, 2002), the production of daytime talk shows (Grindstaff, 2002) and audience reception of the talk show genre (Mittell, 2003). With the exception of the Grindstaff study, which utilises an ethnographic approach to talk shows in the US, most of these studies are either based on textual analyses of talk shows (i.e., narrative and historical approaches to a wide-range of talk shows produced in the UK and the US) or upon interviews with the presenters and talk show studio audiences. The production of television talk shows within the context of religious television, however, remains under-explored.

Like Grindstaff (2002), our approach is ethnographic. However, unlike her work, which is based on four different 'pre-recorded' daytime talk shows, this article focuses on magazine talk show *Living the Life* (2012 – present) produced 'live' by the *Islam Channel* and *Salam Duha* (2015 –2017) produced by *Astro Oasis*.

*Living the Life* is a magazine talk show that is broadcast 'live' every Monday to Thursday at 7:00 pm on the *Islam Channel*. *Living the Life* was first aired on July 2012, and it aimed to emulate the genre conventions of *The One Show*, a magazine talk show produced by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). *The One Show* is broadcast 'live' on BBC 1 at 7:00 pm, five days a week.

As a public service broadcasting organisation, the BBC aims 'to enrich people's lives with programmes and services that inform, educate and entertain'. *The One Show* is a television programme that attempts to materialise such an ethos. Likewise, *Living the Life* is also subject to the *Islam Channel's* mission. Whereas the BBC's public service broadcasting remit aims to serve the British public, the socio-religious and political mission of the *Islam Channel* targets global Muslims (the *ummah*) and non-Muslims.

*Living the Life* begins with the presenters introducing themselves to home viewers. During the interviews, the presenters talk to the guests in turn. They briefly ask the guests questions related to the topic of discussion. Each episode also includes the presenters reading viewer comments received via *Twitter* and email. *Living the Life* features three segments: 'Story of the Day'; 'Question of the Day' (audience reply via *Twitter* and email); and 'Cover Story' (three story items).

From the Malaysian perspective, *Salam Duha* is a magazine talk show, a platform for delivering news and information relating to activities and events on Muslim communities around the world. This one-hour magazine talk show was aired 'live' on *Astro Oasis* every Saturday from 09:00 am till 10.00am. It features Muslim music artists, carnivals, celebrities and preachers who talk about Islamic issues and problems. There are seven segments of each episode, which are cover story, event, trending, tips, quiz, fashion and who's who. The talk show was led by two presenters, who are responsible to steer these seven segments into a chatty television talk infused with Islamic elements.

Similar to *Living the Life*, *Salam Duha* was targeted at young people and female audiences, focusing on how they manage their everyday life as Muslims. We choose *Salam Duha* as a production site to gather ethnographic data due to its genre conventions, which almost similar to *Living the Life*. Such similarities include two presenters, cover stories/items that discuss current issues and events concerning Muslims around the world. The only difference that may be observed regarding the genre conventions of these magazine talk shows is on how each segment was tailored and presented to a specific audience of whom these channels envision. For instance, *Salam Duha* is tailored to Muslim women/housewives who spend time at home in the morning, and *Living the Life* is for young and conservative Muslims among (students and professionals) who are at home in the evening and tune to the *Islam Channel*.

#### RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

Our research design can be characterised as a small-scale cultural-institutional design, which we draw from ethnographic data gathered from two production sites: the production magazine talk shows called *Living the Life* on the *Islam Channel*, UK and *Salam Duha* on *Astro Oasis*, Malaysia. We examined the dynamics of power at a micro-social level of religious television. We chose such ethnographic methods as participant observation and interviews because these are central to television production studies. Researchers like John Caldwell (2008), Laura Grindstaff (2002) and Georgina Born (2004) in particular, employed an ethnographic research design to study television production. Nonetheless, their ethnography is different in term of geographical, sociocultural, industrial and genre contexts. Caldwell (2008), for example, adopted a cultural-industrial approach to study television and film industries in the USA, whereas Grindstaff (2002) applied a sociocultural-institutional approach to the study US-American television talk shows production.

We chose an ethnographic research design that observes television professionals in their natural setting and engages in their production rituals. Among these ethnographic approaches to television production, we mainly refer to Caldwell and Grindstaff's studies. Caldwell's analysis of television production workers' experiences 'as forms of cultural negotiation and expression' allowed us to examine the dynamics of power in an Islamic television production (Caldwell, 2008: 2). Grindstaff's study guided us in exploring 'the norms and practices that circumscribe [talk show] production, as well as the ways in which [production workers] makes sense of the genre' (Grindstaff, 2002: 34). Thus, the research design of our study is based on this four-layer analytical framework, which helps us determine the forms of religiopolitical and sociocultural factors that shape an Islamic television production. Subsequently, we examine the implication of the limited creative autonomy for Islamic television workers.

Analysis of the creative managers, producers and researchers' struggles and lack of creative autonomy in the production of *Living the Life* and *Salam Duha* is drawn from two production phases: 'the development stage' (pre-production) and 'the show day' ('live' broadcast). The development stage involved such routines as researching, selecting and pre-interviewing guests and the treatment of VT and the 'Story of the Day' segment. The second phase is 'the show day', a term which we borrow from Rebecca Whitefoot's (2014) article about her experience as a researcher for the magazine talk show, *The One Show* on BBC1. We use the term 'show day' as a reference to the day when *Living the Life* and *Salam Duha* episodes was due for its 'live' broadcast. Production routines on show day involved editorial meetings, script-writing and talk show guest briefings. We map the experience of the producers and researchers according to these phases to identify their degree of creative autonomy and, subsequently, the extent to which a limited creative autonomy affects the quality of their working lives. We do not intend to dismiss the experience of other workers. However, rather, we choose the producers over the presenters because they are autonomous and among the top creative roles in the television production hierarchy. In addition, producers also experience potentially greater interference with their work than the technical operators as they are dealing primarily with choices regarding the content of the show.

Unlike Livingstone and Lunt (1994) and Grindstaff's (2002) studies, which detail the presenters' involvement in the development of television talk shows, the presenters of *Living the Life* and *Salam Duha* production did not take part in such process. Therefore, we explore the experience of creative autonomy of the creative managers, producers and researchers.

Although a researcher is less autonomous compared to the producer, in the process of developing a magazine talk show such as *Living the Life* and *Salam Duha*, a researcher plays a crucial role. Grindstaff's (2002) experience as a researcher/intern of talk shows indicates that the researcher is a key staffer in the production process. Whitefoot's (2014) experience as a *The One Show* researcher further confirms the importance of researcher roles in the production of a magazine talk show. As a researcher, he/she is involved in searching for interesting story items/guests, developing ideas from current sociocultural and religiopolitical situations in the UK and Malaysia, verifying sources and checking against secondary sources to ensure the presenter statements are factually correct. For these reasons, we chose to analyse the experience of creative autonomy of the managers,



producers and researchers (including ethnographers' involvement) in the production of *Living the Life* and *Salam Duha*.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

We discuss above the 'limited' creative autonomy among such work roles as creative managers, producers and researchers (UK case), specifically, those involved in the production of such magazine talk shows as *Living the Life*, (Islam Channel, UK) and *Salam Duha* (Astro Oasis, Malaysia). This section deliberates key findings of our analysis by highlighting the extent to which creative autonomy exists in the production of magazine talk shows, and how commercial pressures i.e., ratings and advertising, affect creative autonomy. We mapped the respondents' feedbacks and literature review against two production phases that these respondents experienced. These phases include the 'development phase' (pre-production) and the 'show day' (production). We identify ourselves as 'the ethnographer' when reflecting on various accounts of creative autonomy at these research sites.

### *Fostering the 'Culture of Caution': A Different Degree of Creative Autonomy*

Our ethnography concludes that the creative managers, producers and researchers in the British Muslim television channel have lesser autonomy than their Malaysian counterparts. The clash between the Western and Islamic cultures and intergenerational clash are mainly the forms of religio-political and sociocultural factors that shape creative autonomy in Islamic television production in Britain. Such representational issues relating to religious personalities, music artists and performances, and women, are among the constraints that these workers faced.

At the development stage of *Living the Life* for instance, the producer, to some degree, free to explore diverse areas to make a 'good' magazine talk show. The problem arose when invited guests were perceived to be 'controversial' by the creative manager. A thorough filtering process discussed by the creative manager as follows:

We do not leave anyone opportunity to discredit us. Because all eyes are on us, we must ask ourselves: 'who are the guests that we invite? Have we done our check-and-balance? [...]' (Fieldnotes, Islam Channel, 4 March 2013).

The above statement signifies 'the culture of caution' that spread within the *Islam Channel*. The creative manager was cautious about who the producer or the research team members invited on *Living the Life* since the guests are supposed to represent the *Islam Channel's* image or views. Such rules applied especially/not only to guests who were religious personalities. Moreover, the channel also aimed not to offend its conservative audience when presenting certain forms of musical performance, *nasheed* artists or females as guests. With 'the culture of caution', the pre-production stage has turned into a distressing experience for the creative team instead of an experience that could stimulate their creativity and allow them to make *Living the Life* more entertaining. This culture of great caution has reduced the creative autonomy of the producer and researchers. Also, it may have implications for working life of these television workers.

We can argue that the producer and researchers' limited creative autonomy resulted from the conflict between their desire to make a 'good' magazine talk show and the various

interests within the channel. For instance, clashes between CEO's moderate view and the programming's *Salafi* fundamentalists were all determinants that shaped the producer and researchers' creative autonomy. The producer of *Living the Life* often struggled to create something that he thought might be suitable for a magazine talk show. For example, the producer perceived a *nasheed* artist singing and strumming his guitar would make *Living the Life* entertaining, a good magazine talk show segment. However, such understanding contradicted the *Salafis* in the programming department, i.e., they felt that such a performance would not be by their doctrinal understanding and, subsequently, offensive to conservative viewers. For that reason, any form of performance involving guitar or stringed instruments had to be avoided on *Living the Life*.

Like Banks (2007) and Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011) argue that a lack of/limited autonomy in creative work is a characteristic of poor working conditions. At *Living the Life*, since its production is largely based on researchers' skills in developing interesting ideas or stories for the programmes, the lack of creative autonomy is also a sign of limitation in their working lives. For instance, as a researcher, the ethnographer looked for a unique and inspiring story for the programme. She managed to book a teenaged girl who was trained by the Fulham Football Club. She thought it would be interesting for *Living the Life* to feature a young talent. Unfortunately, the ethnographer's idea of having such a talent on the show was rejected as a result of the culture of caution. Such incident may be sensed in the following response that the ethnographer received from the producer:

It is woman football so we cannot bring her. As far as I know, women football players practising with men; they do not separate the practice session. So, there is no segregation between men and women. If we cover a male player, that is different; that's fine. We cannot cover a story about a female football player. The outfit is another thing, although a Muslim, she must be wearing shorts, so we cannot show that on TV [...]. (Fieldnotes, Islam Channel, 11 April 2013).

The producer feared that the video clips portraying a woman football player wearing a pair of shorts might be offensive to the conservative viewers of the *Islam Channel*. For that reason, the potential guest was cancelled. The ethnographer found that was difficult to tell the guest that she was not a suitable guest for *Living the Life* after expressing interest in the guest's story.

The experience with 'the culture of caution' and working with a producer can be illustrated on one occasion. When a *Sufi* poet cum *nasheed* artist from the US, Ahmad James was known as 'Baraka Blue', was invited on *Living the Life* (Fieldnotes, Islam Channel, 23 April 2013). The producer warned the researcher/ethnographer to be careful; making sure that the interview questions did not cover Ahmad's *Sufi* practices. Ahmad James is influenced by Rumi, whose *Sufism* thoughts and views of life are 'somewhat complex', according to the producer. The ethnographer was told not to lead the singer into such discussion; he emphasised, 'to avoid confusion amongst viewers upon such topic'. The ethnographer could sense the caution in his voice, which explained that either he had tried to avoid writing questions that might lead to an in-depth discussion about *Sufism* (with Ahmad James) or offending ('confusing') the *Islam Channel* conservative audience. He may also have been trying to avoid conflict with the *Salafi* fundamentalism of the programming

department. Views like this and ethnographers' experience in the production of magazine talk shows such as *Living the Life* indicate that the lack of creative autonomy, to a certain degree, not only affected the production quality of *Living the Life*, but also the working life of those involved in its production.

The situation was different at *Astro Oasis* whereby the experience of creative autonomy was highly visible, manifested in the *Salam Duha* production. As claimed by the producer:

I need to make sure that my team members maintain their 'mood' and 'momentum' in doing their tasks. Although at times, I am quite strict, but most of the time I allow them to make decisions and be creative [...] and of course, within the limits [set by the religious authority and censorship board] (Producer 1, interview, *Astro Oasis*, 13 January 2017).

By allowing his sub-ordinates to exercise self-censorship, the producer demonstrates a certain degree of creative autonomy. Researchers who work for *Salam Duha* production were more autonomous than those who work with the *Living the Life* production. Such production rituals as self-censorship and check and balance were quite prominent among the researchers in *Salam Duha* production. The researchers enjoyed a certain degree of freedom, which allowed them to make creative decisions under a minimal supervision. As one researcher put it:

The channel sets the angle of the show and we will develop and present its content based on our own creativity. There is no hindrances [at the development stage]. But again, it depends on the producer whether or not to accept and execute such a creative idea (Researcher 1, interview, *Astro Oasis*, 12 January 2017).

These various degree of creative autonomy are the results of different religiopolitical and sociocultural backgrounds that the *Islam Channel* and *Astro Oasis* exist. The constant check-and-balance, which consequently developed into a culture of caution among workers of the *Living the Life*, lessen their creative autonomy.

#### *Commercial Imperatives: Ratings and Advertising*

Audience ratings and advertising are the kind of commercial force that highly affected creative autonomy of these workers, particularly at the development stage. In comparison to their British counterparts, creative manager, producers and researchers at *Salam Duha* enjoyed a higher degree of autonomy. It was the 'culture of caution' experienced by the producer and researcher at the *Islam Channel* that have shaped their creative decisions. That was not the case for *Salam Duha* production. The only intervention facing the *Salam Duha* team experienced have come from the sales and marketing department. An Islamic programme like the magazine talk show was highly driven by the commercial forces. As a result, creative decision-makers (i.e., creative manager and producer), had to surrender to such commercial forces as audience ratings and advertising (Fieldnotes, *Astro Oasis*, 13 January 2017). As one researcher puts it:

It depends on the topic itself. The decision have to be made based on target audience age between 18 – 36. I don't aim for heavy topic, like the Rohingya Crisis. When I decided on that kind of [heavy] topic, the ratings dropped. When I decided on light entertainment topic, the ratings increased. Other factor is the choice of guests. Guests that entertain always help with the ratings (Researcher 2, interview Astro Oasis, 13 January 2017).

The choices of topics and guests are the primary indicators that shape the creative autonomy at the workplace such as *Astro Oasis*. Based on the researcher's statement at *Astro Oasis* implies that he/she has a significant degree of freedom to choose the topic or story items. The genre convention of the magazine talk show that requires the element of 'light entertainment' that influence the creative decisions of the researchers and producers.

Aside from choosing interesting topics and guests, the creative manager also concerned with the audience ratings and how each episode should be improved to attract advertisers. The goal of *Astro Oasis* has shifted from serving the Muslim audience into competing with the other Islamic TV channel. As asserted by the creative manager:

The competition with other Islamic channel like TV Al-Hijrah is very tough. We cannot deny that this is business. Ratings and advertising are very important to television business. We need to ensure our programmes are up to the standard and appealing to our audiences (Creative manager, Astro Oasis, interview, 11 January 2017).

Unlike the case of the *Islam Channel*, the creative decisions of researchers and producers were constrained by ideological clash. The tensions between *Salafi* fundamentalists of the programming department and the CEO's moderate Islamic views shape the creative autonomy at the *Islam Channel* (Nur Kareelawati, 2015). Different from many commercial broadcasters, *Islam Channel* was driven neither by viewers' ratings nor advertising revenue figures. The unique thing about the channel was its business strategies, which embedded in its mission: the *da'wah*/proselytization goal. The channel's management expressed their concern about the revenue secured from the sponsorships and the *Da'wah* Card scheme just to maintain the channel's operation and its ability to produce programmes. The producer aimed to create a high-quality magazine talk show free from commercial pressure. The creative manager claimed that "good" television is 'a programme that has quality; it is liked by viewers and fits with the ethics and ideology of the channel' (Interview, Islam Channel, 20 June 2013). The problem with this argument was that the channel has no concrete evidence, such as rating figures, which could define the perceived 'quality' of the programme because according to the creative manager, the channel cannot afford to hire a consultant like Nielsen to oversee audience ratings. The only source of discovering what the audience likes is from its online survey on the *Islam Channel* website (Nur Kareelawati, 2015).

Understanding business strategy and audience tastes can attract advertising revenues and increase programme ratings (Saha 2012). Murdock and Golding (2005) assert that cultural industries in general and media organisations in particular are important sites to study because they are 'the major arena for advertising; the commercial media play a pivotal role in matching consumer demands to production' (Murdock & Golding, 2005: 60).

## CONCLUSION

Creative autonomy is central to Islamic television production because it influences the quality of working life of television production workers. Our study concludes that television production workers at the *Islam Channel* experienced lesser creative autonomy than their Malaysian counterparts due to clashes of cultures (Western vs. Islamic), ideology (*Salafi* vs. moderate Islam) and intergenerational clash (young vs. conservatives' audiences). Such representational issues as religious personality, music artist and performance, and women's appearances are among the elements that shaped the production of a magazine talk show *Living the Life* (Nur Kareelawati, 2015). Television production workers from *Salam Duha*, on the contrary, was not affected by such issues. Thus, enjoying a higher degree of creative autonomy. Additionally, a great support of the Malaysian government and religious authority for the *Astro Oasis* ensure the creative autonomy of its television production workers. This study shows that religiopolitical and sociocultural factors do shape creative decisions in Islamic television production. However, it may be insufficient to draw a concrete conclusion that warrants the extent to which the lack of creative autonomy affects the quality of working life of Islamic television production. Hence, further investigations are needed.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This article is part of a research project supported by the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education Fundamental Research Grant nos. USIM/FRGS/FKP/32/50916.

## BIODATA

*Nur Kareelawati* is a Senior Lecturer in broadcasting at Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia. Her research project focuses on creative media workers in Malaysia. Nur interested in the intersections of religion, communication, media and culture. She worked with Astro between 2001 and 2008. Email: kareelawati@usim.edu.my

*Ahmad Fadilah* is a PhD candidate in communication studies at Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia. His research focuses on Muslim workers in television industries. Ahmad has been with Astro from 1996 - 2007. He worked with Astro Awani prior to joining academia in 2016. Email: fardeela@yahoo.com

#### REFERENCES

- Abdul Wahab, J. (2011). Television talk shows and the public sphere. *Jurnal Komunikasi, Malaysian Journal of Communication*, 27(2), 29-45.
- Anuar, M. K. (2000). Malaysian media and democracy. *Media Asia*, 27(4), 183-199.
- Banks, M. (2007). *The politics of cultural work*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Caldwell, J. T. (2008). *Production culture : Industrial reflexivity and critical practice in film and television*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Cherribi, S. (2012). Al-Jazeera Arabic, transnational identity and influence. In Semetko, H., & Scammell, M. (Eds.), *The Sage Handbook of Political Communication* (pp. 472 – 483). London: Sage Publication.
- Echchaibi, N. (2011). From audio tapes to video blogs: The delocalisation of authority in Islam. *Nations and Nationalism*, 17(1), 25-44.
- Graf, P., Banatvala, C., & Worrall, K. (2007). *Consideration of sanction against the Islam Channel for breaches of Ofcom's Broadcasting Code*. Ofcom.
- Grindstaff, L. (2002). *The money shot : Trash, class, and the making of TV talk shows*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Hesmondhalgh, D., & Baker, S. (2011). *Creative labour : Media work in three cultural industries*. London: Routledge.
- Hollinshead, A. (2002). *The production and reception of discourses concerning religion in fictional broadcasting* (PhD thesis, University of Glasgow).
- Hroub, K. (Ed.). (2012). *Religious broadcasting in the Middle East* (1st ed.). London United Kingdom: Hurst & Company.
- Idid, S. A., & Fadel Arandas, M. (2016). Professional values, ethics, and professionalism of public relations practitioners. *Jurnal Komunikasi, Malaysian Journal of Communication*, 32(1), 287–311.
- Institute for Strategic Dialogue. (2012). *Muslims in the European mediascape*. British Council, Institute for Strategic Dialogue, Vodafone Stiftung Deutschland.
- Islam Channel. (2012). *About Islam channel*. Retrieved from <http://www.islamchannel.tv/aboutus.aspx>
- Islam Channel. (2013). *Spreading Islam through the media*. London: The Dawah Project.
- Islam Channel. (2015). *The Dawah Project*. Retrieved from <http://www.thedawahproject.com/>
- Karim, H. K., & Eid, M. (Eds.). (2014). *Engaging the other: Public policy and Western-Muslim intersections*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Knott, K., Poole, E., & Taira, T. (2013). *Media portayals of religion and the secular sacred: Representation and change*. England: Ashgate Publishing Ltd.
- Kraidy, M., & Khalil, J. F. (2009). *Arab television industries*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan on behalf of the British Film Institute.
- Kundnani, A. (2015). *The Muslims are coming!: Islamophobia, extremism, and the domestic war on terror*. London: Verso.
- Livingstone, S. M., & Lunt, P. K. (1994). *Talk on television : Audience participation and public debate*. London: Routledge.
- Lowney, K. S. (1999). *Barring our souls: TV talk shows and religion of recovery*. New York: Aldine De Gruyter.
- Martin, F., & Lewis, T. (Ed.). (2016). *Lifestyle media in Asia: Consumption, aspiration and identity*. New York: Routledge.

- Mittell, J. (2003). Audiences talking genre: Television talk shows and cultural hierarchies. *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 31(1), 36-46.
- Mohamed Ariffin, M. Y. (2016). Perhubungan media daripada perspektif editor Melayu Islam pertubuhan media di Malaysia. *Jurnal Komunikasi, Malaysian Journal of Communication*, 32(2), 259–276.
- Mohd Sani, M. A. (2008). Freedom of speech and democracy in Malaysia. *Asian Journal of Political Science*, 16(1), 85–104.
- Moll, Y. (2010). Islamic televangelism: Religion, media and visuality in contemporary Egypt. *Arab Media and Society*, 10, Spring.
- Morgan, D. (Ed.). (2008). *Keywords in religion, media and culture*. New York: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group.
- Munson, W. (1993). *All talk: The talkshow in media culture*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Murdock, G., & Golding, P. (2005). Culture, communications and political economy. In Curran, J., & Gurevitch, M. (Eds.), *Mass media and society* (4th ed.). London: Arnold.
- Muslim Council of Britain. (2015). *British Muslims in Numbers*. Retrieved from [https://www.mcb.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/MCBCensusReport\\_2015.pdf](https://www.mcb.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/MCBCensusReport_2015.pdf)
- Netto, A. (2002). Media freedom in Malaysia: The challenge facing civil society. *Media Asia*, 29(1), 17–23.
- Noonan, C. (2008). *The production of religious broadcasting: The case of the BBC* (PhD thesis, University of Glasgow).
- Nur Kareelawati Abd Karim. (2015). *The production culture of religious television: The case of the Islam Channel* (PhD thesis, University of Leeds).
- Nur Kareelawati Abd Karim, Dini Farhana Baharudin, Mohd Rosmizi Abd Rahman, ... Khatijah Othman. (2017). The need for human management model for muslims in television industries: A step toward balancing work and religious life. *Advanced Science Letters*, 23(5), 4835–4838. Retrieved from <http://www.ingentaconnect.com/contentone/asp/asl/2017/00000023/00000005/art00228?>
- Ofcom. (2011). *Ofcom Broadcast Bulletin*. Issue 196. Retrieved from [https://www.ofcom.org.uk/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0026/45467/obb196.pdf](https://www.ofcom.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0026/45467/obb196.pdf)
- Poole, E. (2009). *Reporting Islam: media representations of British Muslims*. London & New York: I.B. Tauris.
- Rajab, T. (2010). *Re-programming British Muslims: A study of the Islam Channel*. Quilliam Foundation.
- Ramadan, T. (2004). *Western Muslims and the future of Islam*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ramadan, T. (2009). *Radical reform: Islamic ethics and liberation*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Ramadan, T. (2010). *The quest for meaning: Developing a philosophy of pluralism*. London: Allen Lane.
- Saha, A. (2012). 'Beards, scarves, halal meat, terrorists, forced marriage': Television industries and the production of 'race.' *Media, Culture & Society*, 34(4), 424–438.
- Sakr, N. (1997). Media and political conflict: News from the Middle East by Gadi Wolfsfeld. *International Affairs*, 73(3), 565-566.

- Sakr, N. (2011). Reality television and Arab politics: Contention in public life. *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 43(3), 551-552.
- Sakr, N. (2012). Contemporary arab broadcast media. *Cinema Journal*, 52(1), 176-178.
- Sakr, N. (2013a). Social media, television talk shows, and political change in Egypt. *Television & New Media*, 14(4), 322-337.
- Sakr, N. (2013b). 'We cannot let it loose': Geopolitics, security and reform in Jordanian broadcasting. *National Broadcasting and State Policy in Arab Countries*, 96-116.
- Sakr, N. (2013c). Turkey, the Middle East & the media where Arab media magnates stand vis-à-vis globalized media flows: Insights from Egypt and Saudi Arabia. *International Journal of Communication*, 7(2013), 2285-2302. Retrieved from <http://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/1882>
- Shattuc, J. (1997). *The talking cure: TV talk shows and women*. New York: Routledge.
- Tapsell, R. (2013). The media freedom movement in Malaysia and the electoral authoritarian regime. *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 43(4), 613–635.
- Timberg, B. (Ed.). (2002). *Television talk: A history of the TV talk show*. United States: University of Texas Press.
- Whitefoot, R. (2014). *A One Show researcher's first recollections*. British Broadcasting Corporation. Retrieved from <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/2H8sv5WnBdX7TCh3HWcctR9/a-one-show-researchers-first-recollections>
- Yoong, S. (2010). Reality show concludes hunt for 'ultimate young imam'. *The Independent* (1 August). Retrieved from <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/reality-show-concludes-hunt-for-ultimate-young-imam-2041233.html>