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Beyond the Screen: Media Power, Religious Identity, and the Digital Defence of Pesantren in Contemporary Indonesia

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Abstract

The representation of Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) in Indonesian mainstream media has long been a site of tension between secular media logics and Islamic educational values, yet the specific dynamics of misrepresentation, public response, and regulatory intervention in the digital era remain underexplored. This study examines how the broadcast of Trans7's Xpose Uncensored programme in October 2025 triggered a crisis of pesantren representation, analyzes the digital counter-responses mounted by the santri community, and investigates the regulatory and political actions that followed. Employing a qualitative descriptive approach grounded in Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 1995) and thematic content analysis, this study draws on data from national online media, official institutional statements from KPID Banten, KPI, MUI, and DPR RI, and digital public responses across YouTube, Instagram, and X (Twitter). The findings reveal that the broadcast constructed a distorted image of pesantren life by decontextualizing ritual practices of respect (ta'dzim) as symbols of subjugation, thereby reproducing secular-capitalist discursive dominance over Islamic educational institutions. In response, the santri community mobilized a sustained digital counter-narrative through social media activism, transforming from passive media subjects into active producers of religious public discourse. Regulatory bodies subsequently confirmed broadcasting violations and imposed sanctions, while political and religious institutions affirmed the moral boundaries of permissible media representation. This study concludes that the pesantren community's digital response signals a significant shift in the socio-religious public sphere, and that ethical media governance in religiously plural societies requires institutional frameworks that are sensitive to the symbolic dimensions of faith-based education.

Key Word:

*Pesantren
Representation,
Media Framing,
Critical Discourse
Analysis,
Broadcasting
Regulation*

INTRODUCTION

The introduction should consist of approximately 20% of the body of the article, including the title, abstract, and keywords. The introduction should be written in about 4-5 pages with 1.15 spacing. This section includes the background of the problem, factual

data related to the issue being studied, in-depth problem analysis, a review of the latest research, relevant theories (literature review), an explanation of research findings from the past ten years, the contribution of the research (novelty), and at the end, the research objectives should be explained.

Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) occupy a foundational position in Indonesia's religious, educational, and cultural landscape, functioning for centuries as institutions that cultivate moral character, Islamic scholarship, and communal solidarity among their students (*santri*). As the largest Muslim-majority nation in the world, Indonesia's approximately 36,000 *pesantren* serve more than four million *santri*, making them not merely educational establishments but living repositories of Islamic civilization and ethical formation (Dhofier, 2011; Azra, 2014). Unlike formal schooling, *pesantren* operate through a comprehensive system of communal life in which religious learning, moral discipline, and social values are transmitted through daily practice rather than classroom instruction alone. In this sense, *pesantren* represent a distinctive pedagogical tradition that has shaped Indonesian Muslim identity across generations, and their public image carries profound implications for how Islam itself is perceived within the nation's social fabric.

The relationship between media representation and religious identity has become increasingly consequential in the digital era, as mass media institutions wield considerable power to construct, distort, or contest public understandings of faith communities. Drawing on the foundational insights of critical discourse analysis, Fairclough (1995) argues that language in media is never neutral — it reflects and reproduces ideological positions that privilege certain social actors while marginalising others. In the Indonesian context, mainstream television has historically engaged with Islamic institutions through frames shaped by secular entertainment logics, which frequently reduce complex religious practices to spectacle or controversy (Haryanto, 2021). When applied to *pesantren*, such frames risk stripping communal rituals of their spiritual and ethical meaning, substituting culturally grounded practice with narratives of backwardness or subservience that resonate with audiences unfamiliar with Islamic educational traditions.

Scholarly attention to the intersection of media, Islam, and *pesantren* in Indonesia has grown significantly over the past decade. Hall's (1997) theory of representation established that media images of social groups are never innocent reflections of reality but are constructed through selective framing that encodes particular ideological positions. Building on this foundation, researchers have examined how Indonesian media portray Muslim identity in ways that simultaneously affirm and challenge religious authority (Lim, 2017). Studies on digital Islam in Southeast Asia have further

demonstrated that Muslim communities increasingly leverage social media platforms to contest misrepresentation and assert alternative narratives of religious life (Slama, 2018; Wahid, 2019). Within pesantren studies specifically, scholars have documented the institution's adaptability in the face of modernisation and its growing engagement with digital communication as both a pedagogical and advocacy tool (Isbah, 2020; Muhtifah, 2022).

However, existing scholarship has not adequately addressed the specific dynamics that emerge when mainstream television broadcasting triggers a representational crisis involving pesantren, and particularly how the santri community responds through organised digital counter-activism. Prior studies on media and Islam in Indonesia have focused predominantly on online religious discourse and the spread of Islamic content through social media, without examining the institutional and regulatory dimensions that accompany a contested broadcasting incident. Furthermore, no study has theorised the transition of the pesantren community from a historically passive media subject to an active producer of counter-narrative in the digital public sphere — a shift that carries significant implications for understanding the evolving relationship between religious authority, media power, and civic participation in contemporary Indonesia.

The incident that prompted this study occurred in October 2025, when Trans7's programme *Xpose Uncensored* broadcast footage depicting santri at Pondok Pesantren Lirboyo engaged in practices of ritual deference toward their *kiai* — specifically, walking in a crouched posture and presenting envelopes — accompanied by commentary that framed these acts as expressions of extreme subjugation rather than as culturally embedded forms of respect (*ta'dzim*). The broadcast generated an immediate and sustained public reaction, with the hashtag *#BoikotTrans7* trending nationally within hours (Narasi.tv, 2025). Institutional responses followed swiftly, with KPID Banten confirming broadcasting violations, MUI issuing a formal statement condemning the content, and members of the DPR RI calling for the programme's suspension. This convergence of public, regulatory, and political responses makes the case analytically significant beyond its immediate controversy.

This study therefore aims to examine how pesantren were represented in the *Xpose Uncensored* broadcast through the lens of critical discourse analysis, to analyse the forms and dynamics of digital counter-response mobilised by the santri community, and to investigate the regulatory and political actions that followed the broadcast. By integrating Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional discourse model with thematic content analysis of digital public responses and institutional statements, this research contributes to the growing literature on media power, religious identity, and digital activism in Muslim-majority societies. The study's primary contribution lies in

theorising the pesantren community's digital response as an emergent form of socio-religious civic agency — one that challenges conventional assumptions about the passivity of traditional Islamic educational institutions in the face of mainstream media power.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative descriptive research design, selected on the grounds that the phenomenon under investigation — the misrepresentation of pesantren in mainstream television and the subsequent socio-digital responses it generated — requires contextual interpretation of meaning, discourse, and institutional action rather than numerical measurement (Creswell, 2014). Qualitative inquiry is particularly suited to this study because it allows the researcher to examine how ideology operates within media texts, how communities construct collective responses to perceived injustice, and how regulatory institutions translate public pressure into formal policy — all of which are processes that resist reduction to quantifiable variables. The study is therefore oriented toward understanding the social construction of meaning around a specific and bounded media controversy, making a case-oriented qualitative approach both methodologically appropriate and analytically productive.

The research draws on three categories of data sources, each selected to ensure that the analysis captures the full range of actors involved in the controversy. The primary data category consists of national online media reports published between October and November 2025, drawn specifically from Tirto.id, NU Online, Detik News, and Narasi.tv — outlets selected for their editorial credibility, wide public reach, and their respective positions as general and Islamic-oriented media, which together provide complementary perspectives on the same events. The second category comprises official institutional documents and public statements issued by KPID Banten, KPI Pusat, MUI, DPR RI, and RMI PBNU, including press releases, formal recommendations, and policy announcements that record the regulatory and political dimensions of the case. The third category encompasses digital public responses gathered from YouTube, Instagram, and X (formerly Twitter), focusing specifically on content generated by santri, pesantren alumni, and Islamic public figures in direct response to the broadcast. This combination of source categories ensures that the analysis is grounded in the perspectives of media institutions, regulatory bodies, and the affected community simultaneously.

Data were collected through systematic documentation and digital literature review conducted across a six-week period following the broadcast. The collection process proceeded through three sequential stages: identification of primary documents through keyword-based searches across the selected platforms and media outlets; initial thematic coding of relevant texts, statements, and digital content according to the study's

three analytical foci — media representation, public response, and regulatory action; and systematic organisation of coded data into thematic clusters that structure the subsequent analysis. Throughout this process, the researcher maintained a data log to ensure traceability and consistency in the treatment of sources.

Data analysis was conducted through two complementary approaches applied in sequence. Critical Discourse Analysis following Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional model was applied to media texts and official statements, examining each at the level of textual form, discursive practice, and broader social context. This framework enabled the researcher to identify how the broadcast constructed its representation of pesantren, what ideological assumptions underpinned its framing choices, and how institutional responses articulated competing discursive positions. Thematic content analysis was subsequently applied to the digital public response data, identifying recurring patterns of meaning across social media content and classifying them according to their rhetorical function — whether as counter-narrative, moral advocacy, or community solidarity expression.

To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, triangulation was applied at both the source and methodological levels, consistent with established standards for qualitative validity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Source triangulation involved cross-verification of claims across online media, institutional documents, and digital public content, ensuring that no single source type dominated the analytical conclusions. Methodological triangulation was achieved by applying both critical discourse analysis and thematic content analysis to overlapping data, allowing the two frameworks to check and enrich each other's findings. Direct quotations from source documents are preserved throughout the analysis to ensure transparency and confirmability, enabling readers to trace the interpretive pathway from raw data to analytical conclusion.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Representational Framing of Pesantren in the Broadcast

Analysis of the *Xpose Uncensored* broadcast reveals a consistent pattern of decontextualisation in which culturally embedded practices of pesantren life were systematically stripped of their religious and educational meaning. The specific footage that triggered public controversy depicted santri at Pondok Pesantren Lirboyo performing acts of ritual deference toward their *kiai* — walking in a crouched posture and presenting envelopes as a gesture of respect. Rather than identifying these acts as expressions of *ta'dzim*, a foundational principle of conduct within Islamic educational tradition, the programme's narration reframed them as manifestations of extreme

institutional submission, using commentary that connoted compulsion and social abnormality (Tirto.id, 2025). The broadcast made no reference to the religious or pedagogical significance of the depicted practices, offered no consultation with pesantren scholars or representatives, and provided no contextual framing that would allow viewers unfamiliar with Islamic educational culture to interpret the footage accurately.

Documentary evidence from the broadcast's reception further confirms the extent of this representational distortion. Santri and alumni of Pondok Pesantren Lirboyo who responded publicly in the days following the broadcast consistently affirmed that the footage did not represent the routine character of pesantren life but selectively isolated specific moments of ceremonial deference and reframed them through an editorial lens shaped by entertainment rather than educational values (YouTube, 2025). Institutional representatives from RMI PBNU similarly characterised the broadcast as a fundamental misrepresentation of pesantren culture, noting that the programme failed to distinguish between the spiritual and moral dimensions of the *kiai*-santri relationship and the distorted image of subjugation that its framing constructed (Islam.nu.or.id, 2025). Taken together, the textual and reception evidence establishes that the broadcast's representational choices produced a systematically distorted image of pesantren that was neither accidental nor incidental but structurally embedded in the programme's editorial framing.

The following table summarises the key representational discrepancies identified between the broadcast's framing and the accounts provided by pesantren community members:

Table 1.
Representational Discrepancies Between Broadcast Framing and Pesantren
Community Accounts

Aspect	Broadcast Framing	Pesantren Community Account
Crouching posture of santri	Sign of extreme submission	Expression of <i>ta'dzim</i> – ritual respect toward <i>kiai</i>
Envelope presentation	Symbol of institutional control	Cultural gesture of deference rooted in Islamic tradition
Kiai-santri relationship	Coercive and asymmetric	Spiritually grounded mentorship and moral formation
Pesantren environment	Oppressive and closed institution	Community of learning built on Islamic values
Overall portrayal	Anachronistic and irrational	Culturally coherent and pedagogically purposeful

Digital Counter-Narrative Mobilisation

The public response to the broadcast emerged with remarkable speed and organisational coherence across multiple digital platforms. Documentary analysis of social media activity in the immediate aftermath of the broadcast's circulation reveals that the hashtag *#BoikotTrans7* achieved national trending status on X (formerly Twitter) and Instagram within hours, driven by a concentrated wave of posts from santri, pesantren alumni, and Muslim public figures who collectively characterised the broadcast as a deliberate misrepresentation of Islamic educational culture ([Narasi.tv, 2025](#)). The volume and coordination of this digital mobilisation — encompassing thousands of posts across multiple platforms within a compressed timeframe — indicates that the response drew upon pre-existing networks of solidarity and communication infrastructure within the pesantren-affiliated community rather than emerging as a purely spontaneous reaction.

Beyond protest expression, the community's digital response took the substantive form of counter-narrative production. Santri and alumni of Pondok Pesantren Lirboyo published video testimonials and explanatory content on YouTube that directly addressed the broadcast's mischaracterisation of *ta'dzim*, offering first-person accounts of pesantren life that foregrounded the spiritual and communal dimensions of the practices depicted ([YouTube, 2025](#)). Islamic public figures and prominent alumni distributed corrective statements across Instagram, reaching audiences that extended well beyond the immediate pesantren community and drawing public attention to the cultural and religious context that the broadcast had omitted ([Instagram, 2025](#)). These productions were not reactive protests alone but constituted a structured counter-narrative grounded in the internal knowledge and lived experience of the pesantren community — one that offered viewers an alternative representational framework through which to interpret the contested footage.

At the institutional level, RMI PBNU formalised the community's response by issuing seven official claims directed at Trans7, encompassing a public apology, the immediate cessation of the *Xpose Uncensored* programme, a comprehensive editorial review of the production team responsible for the segment, and a commitment to more culturally informed coverage of pesantren in future broadcasts ([Islam.nu.or.id, 2025](#)). This transition from grassroots digital protest to structured institutional demand marked a significant escalation in the community's response strategy, demonstrating the capacity of pesantren-affiliated networks to coordinate action across both informal digital spaces and formal institutional channels simultaneously.

Regulatory, Political, and Religious Institutional Responses

Documentary analysis of official institutional records reveals that the regulatory response to the broadcast proceeded through a clearly defined sequence of escalating actions. KPID Banten conducted a formal content evaluation of the *Xpose Uncensored* programme and issued an official finding that the broadcast violated the Broadcasting Conduct Guidelines (*Pedoman Perilaku Penyiaran*) and Programme Standards (*Standar Program Siaran*), specifically provisions relating to the respectful treatment of religious values, cultural institutions, and educational organisations (KPID Banten, 2025). The evaluation finding documented that Trans7 had failed to conduct adequate content sensitivity review prior to broadcast and had not sought verification from pesantren community representatives. KPID Banten subsequently forwarded its findings to KPI Pusat with a formal recommendation for further administrative action. KPI Pusat responded by issuing an administrative sanction imposing the temporary suspension of *Xpose Uncensored*, citing both the demonstrable harm caused to the pesantren community and the programme's potential to generate public misinformation about Islamic educational institutions.

The political response unfolded in parallel with the regulatory process. Members of DPR RI Commission I, including legislator Dedi Mulyadi, issued public statements calling for the immediate suspension of the programme, characterising the broadcast as harmful to the integrity of Islamic education and damaging to the dignity of the Muslim community (DPR RI, 2025). The PKB parliamentary faction formally expressed support for KPI Pusat's suspension decision and affirmed legislative commitment to protecting pesantren institutions from media misrepresentation. The Minister of Religious Affairs, Yaqut Cholil Qoumas, issued an official statement emphasising that broadcasting institutions carry a responsibility to exercise heightened cultural sensitivity in their representation of pesantren, which he characterised as irreplaceable institutions of national character formation (NU Online, 2025).

The religious institutional response was coordinated primarily through MUI and PBNU. MUI issued a formal statement confirming that the broadcast violated the ethical principles of Islamic communication and was inconsistent with the values of constructive and dignified religious public discourse (MUI, 2025). The Chairman of PBNU, KH Yahya Cholil Staquf, publicly characterised the broadcast as an affront to Islamic tradition and directed PBNU's legal division to pursue formal legal proceedings against Trans7. The convergence of these responses across regulatory, political, and religious institutional domains produced a multi-layered accountability framework — summarised in Table 2 — that subjected Trans7 to simultaneous and coordinated

pressure from civil society, the state broadcasting regulator, the national legislature, and the principal representative bodies of Indonesian Islam.

Table 2.
Institutional Responses to the Xpose Uncensored Broadcast

Institution	Domain	Response	Outcome
KPID Banten	Regulatory	Formal content evaluation — violation confirmed	Forwarded to KPI Pusat
KPI Pusat	Regulatory	Administrative sanction	Temporary programme suspension
DPR RI Commission I	Political	Public call for suspension	Legislative pressure on KPI
PKB Faction	Political	Formal support for KPI decision	Parliamentary endorsement
Minister of Religious Affairs	Political-Religious	Official statement on media responsibility	Public moral framing
MUI	Religious	Formal condemnation of broadcast	Ethical boundary affirmation
PBNU / KH Yahya Cholil Staquf	Religious	Legal action directive	Formal legal proceedings initiated
RMI PBNU	Civil Society	Seven official claims to Trans7	Institutional accountability demand

Discussion

Media Power and the Construction of Pesantren as the Other

The findings of this study confirm that the Xpose Uncensored broadcast operated through a representational logic that Fairclough (1995) identifies as the ideological function of discourse — the capacity of media texts to naturalise particular ways of seeing social reality while concealing the constructed character of those representations. The broadcast's decontextualisation of ta'dzim practices did not merely reflect an editorial oversight; it constituted an active discursive choice that positioned pesantren culture as alien, irrational, and in need of external scrutiny.

This finding resonates with Hall's (1997) argument that representation always involves an exercise of power, since the act of naming and framing a social group determines the interpretive resources available to audiences. In the case of Xpose

Uncensored, the programme's framing positioned the secular entertainment gaze of mainstream television as the legitimate interpretive authority over Islamic educational practice — reproducing what Fairclough (1995) terms discursive dominance, in which one mode of meaning-making is elevated at the systematic expense of others.

This discursive dominance must be situated within the broader structural relationship between Islam and commercial television in Indonesia. Rakhmani (2017) has documented how Indonesian commercial television mediates Islamic identity through entertainment logics that prioritise spectacle, novelty, and audience engagement over theological accuracy or cultural sensitivity, treating religious institutions as raw material for content production rather than as communities with legitimate authority over their own representation.

Within this framework, the Xpose Uncensored incident represents an acute manifestation of a structural tendency in which the commercial media's interpretive apparatus is applied to culturally embedded practices without the contextual knowledge or ethical responsibility that accurate representation requires. Entman's (1993) framing theory further illuminates this dynamic: by selecting specific footage, excluding explanatory context, and applying particular attributions of cause and moral judgement, the broadcast defined the problem entirely on its own terms — constructing a narrative of institutional subjugation from practices whose meaning resided in a cultural and spiritual register that the programme neither acknowledged nor sought to understand.

What makes this case analytically distinctive is the degree to which the broadcast's framing operated through omission rather than fabrication. The footage itself was not manufactured; what the programme manufactured was a context — or more precisely, the absence of one. By stripping the depicted practices of their religious and pedagogical significance and substituting an entertainment-oriented interpretive frame, the broadcast produced a representation that was simultaneously factually grounded and epistemically distorted. This form of representational violence — in which communities are rendered visible while being denied the right to define the meaning of what is seen — illuminates a deeper ethical deficit in mainstream media's engagement with Islamic educational institutions, one that structural reform of editorial practices and regulatory standards must address.

Digital Counter-Narrative as Socio-Religious Civic Agency

The santri community's response constitutes a theoretically significant case of what this study terms socio-religious civic agency — the capacity of faith-based communities to mobilise collective action in defence of their identity and values through organised digital participation. Campbell's (2013) concept of the digital ummah provides a productive framework for understanding how the #BoikotTrans7 campaign achieved

national scale with remarkable speed: the response drew upon pre-existing digital networks of pesantren solidarity that transformed a localised institutional grievance into a nationally visible counter-discourse within hours.

Crucially, what distinguished the santri response was not merely its mobilisational velocity but its substantive character — the community did not simply protest but produced corrective knowledge, offering alternative representations of ta'dzim grounded in lived experience, religious scholarship, and the internal logic of Islamic educational tradition. Isbah (2020) has documented how pesantren have progressively developed digital communication capacities that extend well beyond their traditional institutional boundaries, and the present case confirms that these capacities can be rapidly and effectively deployed when the community's representational integrity is threatened.

The formal escalation of the community's response through RMI PBNU's seven official claims further demonstrates a sophisticated capacity to translate grassroots digital activism into structured institutional demands — a combination that proved decisive in generating regulatory and political accountability. Slama (2018) observes that Indonesian Muslim communities have developed nuanced strategies for leveraging social media to contest mainstream media narratives, but the Xpose Uncensored case extends this insight by showing that digital mobilisation is most effective when it operates simultaneously across informal and formal registers: social media protest created public pressure while institutional claims provided the accountability framework within which that pressure could be converted into concrete regulatory action. This two-tier architecture of response — digital activism at the base, institutional advocacy at the apex — represents an emergent model of community self-defence against media misrepresentation that has significant implications for how pesantren and similar faith-based institutions navigate the contemporary media environment.

Regulatory Response and the Limits of Media Freedom

The convergent responses of KPID Banten, KPI Pusat, DPR RI, and MUI illuminate the complex governance architecture through which Indonesian society negotiates the boundaries between media freedom and religious sensitivity. Their coordinated action affirms that Indonesian regulatory architecture recognises the symbolic dimensions of religious representation as a legitimate domain of public interest governance — a position grounded in KPI Regulation No. 01/P/KPI/03/2012, which explicitly requires broadcasting institutions to respect religious values, cultural institutions, and educational organisations.

The regulatory response therefore represented not an exceptional intervention but the operationalisation of an existing normative commitment — one that the Xpose

Uncensored broadcast was found to have violated through its failure to conduct adequate content sensitivity review prior to transmission. This finding aligns with the broader observation by Fakhruroji and Rustandi (2024) that Indonesian regulatory frameworks retain their effectiveness for conventional television broadcasting even as they face mounting challenges in the digital sphere.

What the case also reveals, however, is that formal regulatory authority alone does not generate institutional accountability in the absence of civil society pressure. The sequence of events — public digital mobilisation preceding regulatory action — suggests that KPID Banten's formal evaluation was, at least in part, catalysed by the scale and visibility of the community's digital response. Christians et al. (2016) argue that ethical media governance requires not only formal regulatory mechanisms but also the active participation of civil society in holding media institutions accountable, and the present case provides empirical confirmation of this theoretical claim.

The santri community's digital protest did not merely express grievance; it created the conditions under which regulatory action became politically necessary and institutionally expected. This dynamic points to a productive complementarity between formal and informal accountability mechanisms that has not been adequately theorised in the existing literature on media regulation in religiously plural societies.

The political dimension of the response — encompassing DPR RI Commission I members, the PKB faction, and the Minister of Religious Affairs — introduces a further layer of complexity that warrants careful interpretation. Political endorsement of regulatory action can reflect genuine commitment to ethical broadcasting, but it can equally reflect the strategic alignment of political interests with public sentiment, particularly in a society where pesantren carry significant social and electoral weight. The present study does not adjudicate between these interpretations but notes that the convergence of political, regulatory, and religious institutional responses produced an accountability outcome that neither domain could have achieved independently. This multi-domain convergence constitutes a distinctive feature of Indonesian media governance that future scholarship should examine more systematically, particularly in relation to how the boundaries of permissible media representation of religious communities are collectively constructed and enforced.

Theoretical Implications for Religious Identity and Media Governance

The Xpose Uncensored case advances theoretical understanding of religious identity, media power, and digital civic participation in two interconnected ways. First, it demonstrates that the pesantren community's engagement with digital media has reached a qualitative threshold at which it functions not merely as a supplementary communication channel but as a primary arena for the defence and articulation of

Islamic educational identity. This represents a significant departure from the historically marginal position of pesantren in Indonesia's national media landscape and confirms that the digital public sphere is enabling new forms of religious civic participation that increasingly challenge established hierarchies of representational authority. Aminuddin (2024) demonstrates, in the context of Islamic digital media more broadly, that online platforms enable communities to articulate interpretive frameworks that contest mainstream media's discursive dominance — a dynamic that the present case confirms and extends in the specific context of pesantren representation under crisis conditions.

Second, the case contributes to the literature on media ethics and religious governance by demonstrating that effective accountability for religious misrepresentation requires the integration of formal regulatory mechanisms, civil society mobilisation, and political engagement operating in mutually reinforcing ways. This finding suggests that future scholarship on media accountability in religiously plural societies should move beyond the study of regulatory frameworks in isolation and attend more closely to the synergies between formal and informal accountability mechanisms — and to the role of faith-based communities as active agents in media governance rather than merely as objects of media representation. For pesantren specifically, the case suggests that strategic investment in digital communication capacity is not merely a pedagogical or outreach concern but a form of institutional self-defence with direct implications for how the community's identity and values are represented in an increasingly contested national media environment.

CONCLUSION

The broadcast of *Xpose Uncensored* on Trans7 in October 2025 produced a systematically distorted representation of pesantren life by decontextualising culturally embedded practices of *ta'dzim* and reframing them through an entertainment logic that stripped away their religious and pedagogical significance. Rather than reflecting an isolated editorial lapse, this misrepresentation was structurally embedded in the programme's discursive choices — the selection of footage, the interpretive commentary, and the absence of cultural context — which collectively positioned pesantren as an anachronistic and coercive institution. This finding confirms that commercial television's engagement with Islamic educational culture continues to be shaped by secular media logics that prioritise spectacle over accuracy, with consequential implications for public understanding of pesantren's role in Indonesian society.

Confronted with this misrepresentation, the santri community mounted a rapid, coordinated, and substantively significant digital counter-response that demonstrated a qualitative shift in the community's capacity for public self-defence. Moving

simultaneously across informal social media platforms and formal institutional channels, the community produced corrective knowledge grounded in lived experience, mobilised national solidarity networks, and ultimately formalised its demands through RMI PBNU's seven official claims to Trans7. This two-tier architecture of response — grassroots digital activism reinforced by institutional advocacy — confirms that pesantren-affiliated communities have developed the digital civic capacity to contest mainstream media misrepresentation at scale, transforming from historically passive media subjects into active and strategically sophisticated producers of religious counter-narrative.

Institutional accountability for the broadcast was achieved through the convergence of regulatory, political, and religious responses that operated in mutually reinforcing ways across multiple domains of governance. KPID Banten's formal finding of broadcasting violations, KPI Pusat's administrative sanction, DPR RI's political pressure, and MUI's ethical condemnation collectively produced an accountability outcome that neither domain could have achieved independently. This convergence demonstrates that effective media governance in religiously plural societies depends not on regulatory frameworks alone but on the productive interaction between formal institutional authority and civil society pressure — a dynamic that the santri community's digital mobilisation proved decisive in activating.

Taken together, these findings advance a theoretically significant proposition: that culture-based faith communities possess — and are increasingly exercising — a form of digitally mediated representational sovereignty that challenges the discursive authority of mainstream commercial media over religious identity. Future research should examine how this capacity develops across different pesantren contexts and institutional scales, and whether structured media literacy programmes within pesantren education can systematically strengthen communities' preparedness for representational contestation. Scholars of media ethics and religious governance should also investigate the conditions under which multi-domain accountability convergence — as observed in this case — can be institutionalised as a durable mechanism for protecting faith-based communities from media misrepresentation in the digital era.

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