Soap Opera and Muddy Affairs in Indonesia
The Cultural Politics of the Lapindo Mudflow Case (2006–2014)

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Abstract

In May 2006 a devastating mudflow engulfed East-Java’s densely populated area of Sidoarjo. Nine years later, the origin of the disaster still remains the topic of an ongoing scientific debate. Two opposing conclusions dominate: the catastrophe was either ‘natural’—caused by an earthquake—or ‘man-made’, triggered by drilling activities of the oil and gas company Lapindo Brantas. Soon after the eruption of the mudflow, a Surabaya-based artists’ association produced a Javanese-language soap opera called Gali lubang, tutup lubang, ‘Dig a hole, fill a hole’. Several national and international newspapers described the television programme as a damage-control device, because the series was sponsored by the oil-and-gas-winning company implicated in the disaster. This article, however, shows that the series cannot simply be set aside as propaganda. A profound study of the production process and of the content of the soap opera—placed within the broader context of the (inter)national debate on the origin of the mudflow catastrophe—reveals the panorama of self-interests and cultural politics that gave shape to a controversial series about a controversial topic.

Keywords
Java – mudflow – soap opera – cultural politics – mining industry – disaster

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Introduction

A mudflow of extraordinary proportions that suddenly engulfed East-Java’s densely populated area of Sidoarjo in May 2006 has generated a continuous flow of controversial investigation facts and data. In the process of searching for background news on this devastating disaster, brief mentions were found in international, national, and local media of the production of an ‘odd’ local television programme called *Gali lubang, tutup lubang*, ‘Dig a hole, fill a hole’. This Javanese-language series, produced and broadcast in the second half of 2006, was depicted at the time as a damage-control phenomenon, initiated and paid for by the oil company held responsible for triggering the mudflow. This article, however, largely based on fieldwork, on interaction with the producers, and on a study of the audio-visual material of the soap series itself, delves into new facts and ideas, which shed further light on a disaster that keeps causing (inter)national impact and debate. It deals with the following questions: What is the background of the disaster controversy and what is the background of the soap opera? How was this series produced, by whom, and why? How does the series mediate the unfolding disaster and how does it portray the victims facing hardship? How can we relate this production to other modern media productions covering the mudflow? Should this soap opera be interpreted as mere propaganda, a clever damage-control device for the oil and gas company implicated in the disaster? I argue that *Gali lubang, tutup lubang*—albeit a production of very modest proportions and limited outreach—can hardly escape being considered as ‘propaganda’ because of the self-interests and social-political powers at stake. More careful study of its content, though, proves otherwise. What remains is an inconclusive debate.

Background of a Controversial Mudflow

Nine years after a noxious mudflow nicknamed Lusi started spilling out of the earth in East Java, the origin of this mud volcano still remains a highly disputed matter. Since its sudden birth on 29 May 2006, Lusi (an amalgamation of the Indonesian word *lumpur*, ‘mud’, and the first two letters of Sidoarjo, the East Javanese town near which the mudflow was born) has spread rapidly across more than seven square kilometres of countryside, from about 350 hectares in 2006 to around 800 in 2014, covering at least twelve entire villages and leaving nine villages in the danger zone and more than fifty thousand people homeless.

Furthermore, the local economy became severely affected because paddy fields and farmlands disappeared under the mud, factories and shrimp farms...
were inundated, and parts of the main highway to East Java’s capital Surabaya as well as the railway line Sidoarjo–Pasuruan were swallowed by mud (see figures 1 and 2).

The scientific journals *Earth and Planetary Science Letter*, *Marine and Petroleum Geology*, and *Nature Geoscience* published an ongoing debate between engineers, geophysicists, and geologists. Two opposing conclusions dominate: ‘natural’ versus ‘man-made’ disaster. A group of Indonesian scientists maintain that Lusi is a new mud volcano that occurred naturally, and was likely triggered by a magnitude 6.3 earthquake, which took place on 27 May 2006 in Yogyakarta (Central Java), at a distance of 250 kilometres from Sidoarjo (Sawolo et al. 2009, 2010). A research team consisting of German and Swiss geophysicists supports the theory that the distant Central-Java earthquake impacted on the East Javanese mudflow site: seismic energy-simulation methods proved that the Lusi eruption was a ‘natural occurrence’ (Lupi et al. 2013). However, according to a United Kingdom-led, international group of geologists, the mud volcano emerged because of errors made during drilling activities in the gas exploration well Banjar-Panji-1, situated 150 metres away from the place where Lusi started to erupt. The lower part of the drill pipe did not have a pro-
tective steel casing when it penetrated the earth at a depth of 2,834 metres and caused underground fractures to develop in rock strata. As a result, high-pressure water and gas were released from the rock, which, mixed with mud, pushed to the surface (Davies et al. 2008, 2010). A third, alternative reading of the Lusi-triggering scenario stresses the role of the adjacent magmatic volcano complex Arjuno–Welirang, which likely induced hydrothermal activity, making Lusi a ‘surface manifestation of a deep-seated sediment-hosted hydrothermal system’ rather than a traditional ‘mud volcano’ (Mazzini, Etoipe and Svensen 2012:314).

Meanwhile, from the second half of 2006 onwards, the Indonesian oil and gas company PT Lapindo Brantas Incorporated¹ (henceforth ‘Lapindo Brantas’), the owner and operator of the Banjar-Panji-1 exploration well, has started to pay off the victims who have had to be evacuated from their villages as they have been covered in mud. As a consequence, the mud volcano lost its original

¹ PT Lapindo Brantas Incorporated at the time was a joint venture between Energi Mega Persada, (50%), Medco Energi (32%), and Santos Australia (18%).
nickname Lusi, and became widely known as ‘Lapindo mud(flow)’ (lumpur Lapindo). The mining company, however, still does not acknowledge any failure in its operational history: according to Lapindo any payment to the victims does not imply a legal acceptance of responsibility but solely forms part of the company’s social solidarity efforts. Moreover, they insist that ‘the payment for the victims should take place under the framework of sell and purchase of property title, and not under any compensation scheme because this would imply that Lapindo is liable for causing the mudflow’ (Wibisana 2013:297).

In a social impact report on the disaster Lapindo Brantas explains why they provided help from the start:

The lack of emergency response capability by local government authorities led to a singularly unique scenario in the history of cataclysmic natural disasters; Lapindo Brantas operating a gas exploration well several hundred meters from the Lusi eruption, was thrust in to fill the vacuum in emergency response and in the process became a major contributor to the rebuilding of the area’s social fabric.

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2 Up to the present date, scientific articles still refer to the mud eruption as lumpur Sidoarjo or ‘Lusi’.

3 Disasters produce creative new terms: ‘In both traditional and novel manners, language and linguistic usages emerge to express events, name the peoples and parties involved, and manage the allegiances and contestations, so that, on top of all else, disaster brings to light sociolinguistic application and invention’ (Oliver-Smith and Hoffman 2007:11). A baby born at the refugee centre in Porong, Sidoarjo, was named ‘David Lapindo’. See Nabiha Shahab, http://reliefweb.int/report/indonesia/misery-indonesias-mud-volcano-victims (accessed 15-5-2015).

4 Here we need to differentiate between the three shareholders mentioned in footnote 1. Minority shareholder Santos Australia did not admit liability for the mudflow incident but states in its 2007 half-year financial report that it paid approximately US$20 million to cover operation expenses; see http://www.santos.com/library/Santos%202007%20Half%20Year%20Results.pdf (accessed 19-4-2015). In December 2008 Santos transferred its 18 % minority share to Minarak Labuan, a company associated with Lapindo Brantas; see http://www.santos.com/annual-report-2008/asia.aspx (accessed 19-4-2015). Second-largest shareholder Medco has denied responsibility from the start, accusing Lapindo Brantas of committing ‘gross negligence’ during its drilling activities (see Medco ‘warning’ letter of 5 June 2006 addressed to Lapindo in Azhar Akbar 2007:203). In March 2007 Medco divested its 32 % stake in the Brantas Block to Prakarsa Group, which is financially guaranteed by Minarak Labuan, an affiliate of the Bakrie Group. See John Aglionby, ‘Medco sells stake in mudflow oil field’, 2007, http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/o/c4dfe536-d762-11db-b9d7000b5df0621.html#axzz3Zl7iSXa (accessed 21-4-2015).
The Sawolo et al. articles (2009, 2010) mentioned above—which describe the Lusi phenomenon as a mud volcano—support Lapindo’s refusal to admit full responsibility for the disaster. The investigation team, led by senior drilling adviser Nurrochmat Sawolo, consisted of geoscientists and drilling engineers from the firm Energi Mega Persada, which owned a controlling stake in Lapindo Brantas.

Energi Mega Persada belongs to the Bakrie & Brothers conglomerate, which spans a wide variety of industries: coal, agribusiness, oil and gas, telecommunications, property, metal, and infrastructure. In order to avoid financial liability, Energi Mega Persada attempted twice to sell Lapindo between September and November 2006, but the Capital Market Supervisory Agency (Bapepam) did not approve of the sale because there was as yet no clear solution to the mudflow case. In 2008 the company diluted its stake in Lapindo Brantas from 100% to 0.01%.

The fact that the chairman of the Bakrie Business Group, Aburizal Bakrie, was coordinating minister for people’s welfare during the Yudhoyono government (2005–2009), that is to say, at the time when the disaster occurred, makes the eruption of ‘Lusi’ or ‘Lapindo-mud’ an even more controversial case. In 2009 Bakrie became chairman of the Golkar Party, and was chosen as the presidential candidate in 2013. In May 2014, however, two months before the presidential elections in July, he withdrew as a candidate because of image problems related to the Lapindo case. Bakrie, nevertheless, remains a powerful politician under the new administration of President Joko Widodo. In December 2014 he managed to secure a US$ 62 million loan (IDR 781 billion) from the government to settle the remaining compensation for the mudflow victims (Mietzner 2015:73).

Presidential Regulations and Compensation Issues

Lapindo Brantas’s rather inconsistent approach towards the mudflow crisis, that is, basically denying its responsibility whilst providing funds—among oth-
ers for the provision of emergency shelter, evacuation (IDR 500,000 per family), a house-rent assistance package (IDR 5 million per family), and a monthly living allowance (IDR 300,000 per person) (Mirdasy 2007:62–3)—seems to be related to the above-mentioned connections with political power and may well be the result of several presidential orders (McDonald and Widaningrum 2009:1110–1). By mid June 2006 President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono summoned Lapindo to compensate the mudflow victims. A week later Vice President Jusuf Kalla repeated this message when he visited the mudflow victims at the evacuee centre in the disaster area. He was accompanied by Bakrie Group shareholders representative Nirwan Bakrie, a younger brother of Aburizal Bakrie, who promised the victims that Lapindo Brantas would pay compensation. Soon after this meeting Lapindo indeed pledged to provide a ‘long-term financial package’, which included management of social issues and the selling and purchasing of the property of the victims in the affected areas: funding for buildings (IDR 1.5 million per square metre), funding for land (IDR 1 million per square metre), and payment for rice fields (IDR 120,000 per square metre) (Lapindo Brantas 2014).

From August 2006 onwards mudflow victims staged various mass demonstrations, road blocks, and strikes in the surroundings of the mud volcano as well as in the capital Jakarta, blaming both Lapindo and the government for lack of attention to their perilous situation (Schiller, Lucas and Sulistiyanto 2008:72–3; McDonald and Widaningrum 2009:1113–4).

In September 2006 the president issued a Presidential Decree (Keppres 13/2006), which stated that Lapindo had to fund the activities of the newly established Tim Nasional Penanggulangan Semburan Lumpur di Sidoarjo (TIMNAS PSLS, National Sidoarjo Mudflow Mitigation Task Force). This governmental agency had three main tasks: ‘to stop the eruption, manage the mudflow, and handle the resulting social problems’ (Wibisana 2013:297–8). On 4 December 2006 Lapindo Brantas—in agreement with the task force—defined the map of the affected area (see Figure 3), which indicated the villages where mudflow victims would be compensated for loss of their property. This was called a ‘cash and carry’ (tunai langsung) arrangement (Richard 2011:21, 64). Payment proceedings were delayed, however, and the task force did not achieve much.

8 ‘Wapres tekan Lapindo, Bakrie bantu Rp 5 m’, Bali Pos, 21-06-2006, http://www.balipost.co.id/balipostcetak/2006/6/21/n4.htm (accessed 16-4-2015).
9 Letter from Lapindo Brantas No. 1098/P/AAY/L06.
FIGURE 3  Map of the Sidoarjo mudflow disaster area
© GUADALUPE MARTÍNEZ RANGEL, GRAPHIC DESIGN, MÉXICO D.F.
BASED ON VARIOUS MAPS OF WWW.BPLS.GO.ID (ACCESSED APRIL 2015)
AND NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC 2008, NO. 1.
A Presidential Regulation dated April 2007 (Perpres 14/2007) stated that the temporary governmental mitigation task force would be replaced by the Badan Penanggulangan Lumpur Sidoarjo (BPLS, Sidoarjo Mudflow Mitigation Agency; henceforth BPLS). It obliged Lapindo Brantas to purchase the properties of the people in the affected areas—stipulating the exact area that was to be compensated (see Figure 3)—and it provided for an advance payment of 20% compensation, followed by a payment of 80% to be paid within two years.10 This was in line with Lapindo Brantas’s earlier promises on payment of a ‘long-term financial package’ as mentioned before (Lapindo Brantas 2014). Furthermore, the Presidential Regulation established the government’s share in future mitigation expenses: compensation for the affected areas outside of the 2007 map, as well as costs for repairs to the infrastructure would be allocated from the national budget.11 This last announcement in particular provoked much discussion about the indecisiveness of President Yudhoyono’s cabinet in defining responsibilities. On the one hand, it required corporate player Lapindo to take financial responsibility for the disaster; on the other, it appeared to be willing to pay for a considerable proportion of the damage caused. At the time critics interpreted the ambiguous attitude of both the government and Lapindo towards the mudflow case as proof of their intertwined political and economical interests at stake (Schiller, Lucas and Sulistiyanto 2008:63; Munawir 2007:5–8).

In order to handle the sale and purchase process, Lapindo Brantas formed the subsidiary Minarak Lapindo Jaya (MLJ). Before the first instalment payment of 20% could be made—as required by the 2007 Regulation—the victims had to hand over their submerged properties to MLJ by signing a deed of sale (akte jual beli). This transfer of property title turned out to be problematic for several reasons: there was disagreement between the mudflow victims and Lapindo about the value of buildings and land; a group of victims was opposed to the transfer of their land; and proof of land ownership became an issue because of the strict verification procedure for land certificates. It was also argued that Lapindo deliberately postponed the payment process. As a result of all of these issues, payment was delayed (Wibisana 2013:301).

The Presidential Regulation of 2007 was followed by a revised version in 2008 that broadened the map of the continuously expanding affected area

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10 Perpres 14/2007, Article 15, p. 8; see http://prokum.esdm.go.id/perpres/2007/perpres_14 _2007.pdf (accessed 17-8-2010).
11 Perpres 14/2007, Article 15, p. 8; see http://prokum.esdm.go.id/perpres/2007/perpres_14 _2007.pdf (accessed 17-8-2010).
Meanwhile, the promised second instalment of the remaining 80% was due, but Lapindo Brantas claimed to be unable to keep its initial promise because of the global financial crisis. Several groups of victims organized themselves to ask for particular compensation schemes. This finally led to Lapindo coming up with two alternative payment schemes: a ‘cash and carry’ scheme, which provided for monthly instalments of IDR 15 million for lost property, and a ‘cash and resettlement’ package, which provided the evacuees with a new house at the Kahuripan Nirvana Village housing estate, as well as compensation for lost property (less the value of the new house) in monthly instalments of IDR 15 million (Richard 2011:116–8).

In September 2009 Indonesia’s Supreme Court dismissed a lawsuit on the disaster put forward by environmentalists, concluding that there was no clear connection between Lusi and Lapindo. Likewise, investigations into the mudflow by regional authorities declared a lack of evidence and closed the case in August 2009. Between 2009 and 2012 several changes were made to the 2007 Presidential Regulation, reinforcing the authority of the mitigation agency BPLS in the allocation of state budget money. Moreover, a revision to the state budget in April 2012 enabled a notable increase in state funding covering mitigation costs: from the initially allocated IDR 1.3 to 1.6 trillion. In May 2012 an in-depth study on the controversial mudflow case saw the light, entitled *Lumpur Lapindo file: Konspirasi sby-Bakrie* (Lapindo mudflow file: SBY-Bakrie conspiracy). This book describes the handling of the mudflow disaster by both corporate player Lapindo Brantas, represented by Golkar party chairman and oil tycoon Aburizal Bakrie, as well as the government headed by President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (SBY). Environmental activist Ali Azhar Akbar, who studied petroleum engineering and petroleum law, investigated the process of policy-making in this matter between 2006 and 2010. He considers the fact that opinions have changed regarding who should take responsibility for the disaster as proof of a conspiracy. Whereas Keppres 2006 states that Lapindo needs to assume full responsibility for the disaster, in con-

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12 For more detailed information on the demands of several groups of victims concerning compensation schemes, see Bosman Batubara 2010, [http://www.insideindonesia.org/resistance-through-memory-2?highlight=WyJiYXR0YmFyYSIsImljbHViYXJhJ3MiLCJib3N0YW4iXQ%3D%3D](http://www.insideindonesia.org/resistance-through-memory-2?highlight=WyJiYXR0YmFyYSIsImljbHViYXJhJ3MiLCJib3N0YW4iXQ%3D%3D) (accessed 30-10-2012), and Novenanto 2009.

13 John M. Glionna, ‘Indonesia’s mud volcano flows on’, 2010, [http://articles.latimes.com/2010/jul/10/world/la-fg-indonesia-mudslide-20100710](http://articles.latimes.com/2010/jul/10/world/la-fg-indonesia-mudslide-20100710) (accessed 22-7-2010).

14 Hans David Tampubolon, ‘Endless mudflow breeds political apathy among Porong residents’, 2013, [http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2013/03/04/endless-mudflow-breeds-political-aphathy-among-porong-residents.html](http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2013/03/04/endless-mudflow-breeds-political-aphathy-among-porong-residents.html) (accessed 25-4-2013).
contrast Perpres 2007 emphasizes the sudden division in responsibility between the government and Lapindo, although it was not until September 2009 that the House of Representatives officially declared the mudflow a natural disaster. By the end of June 2012, while the road show of the book launch was still going on, Ali Azhar Akbar went into hiding. He had been threatened because of the provocative content of his book and because of the fact that—by mid June—he had started fighting the April 2012 amendment on state budget law by filing a demand for judicial review to the Constitutional Court.

Lapindo’s Mudflow and News Flow

From its first appearance, Lusi has caused a steady flow of spectacular news on Indonesian television, the Internet, and radio, covering all aspects of the disaster in a predominantly negative way. The ambiguous role of Lapindo Brantas in the disaster response has been particularly debated (Schiller, Lucas and Sulistiyanoto 2008:55–6). The Bakrie family, being closely connected to political power, tried to use the mass media and academic forums to steer the outcome of investigations concerning the Lapindo case, and lobbied on the subject in order to reduce damage to its image (Schiller, Lucas and Sulistiyanoto 2008:62–3; Azhar Akbar 2007:80–3, 152–3). Moreover, Bakrie & Brothers—one of Indonesia’s twelve media conglomerates with important shares in national private TV stations—increasingly used its own media to influence public opinion about the mudflow disaster.

Shortly after the disaster, Lapindo set up a ‘media centre’ for its public-relations campaign at the office of the regent in Sidoarjo (Steele 2011:90). The

15 Pancoran, ‘Ada konspirasi sby-Bakrie di Lumpur Lapindo, di mana?’, 2012, http://politik.kompasiana.com/2012/07/04/ada-konspirasi-sby-bakrie-di-lumpur-lapindo-di-mana-474452.html (accessed 8-9-2012).
16 Unfortunately I have been unable to find significant information on the author’s whereabouts after 2012, let alone his current status.
17 Wahyoe Boediwardhana, ‘Lapindo book author forced to stay into hiding’, 2012, http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2012/07/30/lapindo-book-author-forced-stay-hiding.html (accessed 25-4-2013).
18 For an overview of the Indonesian media landscape and the twelve media groups, see Merynna Lim, ‘@Crossroads: Democratization and corporatization of media in Indonesia’, 2011, retrieved from, http://participatorymedia.lab.asu.edu/files/Lim_Media_Ford_2011.pdf (last accessed 9-6-2015).
company offered substantial payments to several important Surabaya-based print media and to the local private television station JTJ in an attempt to shape the public discussion on the mudflow disaster (Nasrullah 2007). To give reports about the mudflow a positive twist, the company published advertorials in important national newspapers in 2007 and 2008 that presented Lusi as a ‘natural’ phenomenon (Wibisana 2011:297). Meanwhile, the Bakrie Group came up with a glossy weekly magazine called SoLusi (‘So-Lution’, with ‘Lusi’ at the core). It contained, among others, stories about innovative ways to stem the mudflow, including pictures of state-of-the-art pump machines, and about the potential of Lusi as a tourist destination, depicting images of children playing soccer on the mud and happily diving into a relief well. In 2008 the Bakrie family opted for a more radical solution to influence public opinion: they purchased the Surabaya Post. Two Lapindo Brantas executives were nominated as directors of the company. From that moment on journalists of this Indonesian-language newspaper were forced to practice self-censorship when writing about the mudflow (Tapsell 2012:237–8). In their reports they had to be careful not to criticize anything related to their boss Aburizal Bakrie (referred to as ARB) and his family. When ARB launched his presidential campaign in 2012, Surabaya Post became his political mouthpiece, but when he withdrew as a candidate the newspaper was dismantled and the employees were sent home.

As reputation remained of ongoing concern for the Bakrie family, they used public events and (social) media to project a good corporate image. Aburizal Bakrie repeatedly told the press that it was his mother, Roosniah Bakrie, who had urged him to care for the mudflow victims and to purchase their submerged land. He did this in carefully staged acts of damage control, of which the following—which took place while he was running for president—is an

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19 Lapindo Brantas offered one billion rupiah to several Surabaya-based media after the Presidential Regulation was released in April 2007 (Novenanto 2009:131–2).
20 SoLusi 2008 no. 21, http://www.hsf.humanitus.org/media/16992/media_solsusi_ed_21_21.pdf (accessed 16-4-2015).
21 SoLusi 2008 no. 18, http://www.docstoc.com/docs/20904779/Tamasya-Potensi-Lain-dari-Lumpur-Wisata-Bencana-Kenapa-Tidak (retrieved 15-10-2010).
22 Personal communication with a former Surabaya Post journalist who prefers to remain anonymous via e-mail, 9-6-2015.
23 Hans David Tampubolon, ‘Endless mudflow breeds political apathy among Porong residents’, 2013, http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2013/03/04/endless-mudflow-breeds-political-aphathy-among-porong-residents.html (accessed 25-4-2013).
example: At the end of June 2013, during the celebration of the ascension day of the Prophet Muhammad and the beginning of the fasting month (Isra’ Mi’raj and Tahrib Ramadan), Aburizal Bakrie explained to the employees of Bakrie Metal Industries that the Bakrie Brothers have never been obliged to pay compensation to the mudflow victims, simply because they cannot be blamed for the natural disaster—a fact that has been agreed twice by the Supreme Court. However, thanks to his mother, who summoned him—almost immediately after the disaster had happened—to share his wealth with the victims, the company proposed a sale and purchase agreement. They bought properties at the special rate of 20 times above the Land and Building Tax Imposition Base (Nilai Jual Objek Pajak, NJO/P), which made him ‘the most popular person in Sidoarjo’. A short video clip of Aburizal Bakrie’s speech during the Bakrie Metal meeting was posted on his YouTube site, which is linked to his personal website. Up until the present day the Bakrie family has made ample use of its own media institutions (national private TV stations TV One and ANTV, and the online wire service VIVA News) to provide positive news coverage of the Sidoarjo mudflow. Take, for example, the story of Sulastri from Gempolsari, who happily received money for her lost land—enough to buy a new house and save some more for the future.

24 For another example of a similar message from ARB about his mother, see http://politik.news.viva.co.id/news/read/468054-ARB--hhabis-rp9-triliun-lumpur-sidoarjo-dongkrak-popularitas-saya (accessed 6-6-2015).
25 ‘Penjelasan Aburizal Bakrie (ARB) tentang lumpur Lapindo’, Youtube channel of Aburizal Bakrie, http://www.youtube.com/user/bakrieaburizal?feature=watch (accessed 25-5-2015).
26 The documentary Di balik frekuensi (Behind the frequency) of filmmaker Ucu Agustin (2013) gives an interesting insight into the current Indonesian media landscape, which is dominated by media corporations, like the Bakrie Brothers, with strong political ties. One storyline of the film shows how mudflow victims Hari Suwandi and Harto Wiyono walked all the way from Sidoarjo to Jakarta, 847 kilometres, to seek justice concerning compensation payments. When they arrive in Jakarta, however, their act of protest suddenly turns into an act of propaganda. At this point the film uses original footage from Bakrie-owned TV One: Hari Suwandi appears during a TV One news show, telling that he regrets that he has undertaken his journey to protest. While crying, he apologizes to Aburizal Bakrie. See http://video.tvonenews.tv/arsip/view/59333/2012/07/25/hari_suwandi_sesali_aksi_jalan_kaki_porongjakarta.tvOne (last accessed 10-6-2015).
27 Arfi Bambani Amri and Tudji Martudji, ‘Sulastri tersenyum lebar tanahnya dibeli Minarak Lapindo: Tanahnya yang seluas 488 meter dihargai Rp 500 juta’, 2013, http://nasional.news.viva.co.id/news/read/399288-sulastri-tersenyum-lebar-tanahnya-dibeli-minarak-lapindo (accessed 20-5-2015).
and of Suparman from Kedungbendo, who tells (in a TV One reportage) how the disaster turned into a blessing: he set up his own business with money provided by the Bakrie family and was able to contract 26 fellow mud victims.28

Local Media Power and Cash Flow

Whereas several studies have touched upon the role of the print media in relation to the Lapindo mudflow case, information about television coverage of the disaster is limited. In particular, early coverage of the mudflow by the Surabaya-based TV station JTV has been practically overlooked. JTV, established in 2002, is a private television station selling local content with the slogan ‘100 % East Java’ (‘Satus Persen Jatim’). JTV is part of the large media corporation Jawa Pos News Network (JPNN), which has interests spanning the Indonesian media, tourism, and power plants (Ida 2011:18). Jawa Pos Group owner Dahlan Iskan started off as a local entrepreneur in the 1980s and more recently became active in national politics as state-owned enterprises minister from 2011 until 2014. As a local ‘little king’ he was able, as Rachmah Ida puts it, ‘to exploit the discourse of regionalism to acquire major national, political and economic advantages’ (Ida 2011:22). JTV, with its mission to disseminate local culture, favours local topics and discourse. When Lusi struck the Sidoarjo area in May 2006, the TV station had the task of covering this regional topic from the nearby disaster zone. Soon Lapindo Brantas approached the Jawa Pos Group to work together on the news coverage of this item.29 It is very likely that JTV became one of Indonesia’s first media players to capitalize on Lapindo’s need for a public-relations campaign.

Throughout the second half of 2006 JTV received money from Lapindo—in total IDR 2.6 billion—for the production of several news and entertainment shows that were meant to divert attention away from the mudflow disaster.30 A large amount of these funds went into the news division, whereas the remaining part of the money was used, among others, for producing (episodes of)

28 Ratnadewi Supriyadi Kumaidi, ‘Bencana lumpur Lapindo jadi berkah’, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IpfknJopkE (accessed 20-5-2015).
29 Aditya Santosha, http://adln.lib.unair.ac.id/go.php?id=gdlhub-gdl-s1--2010-santosaadi-12068&PHPSESSID=af933c4f689b9e443f6b999e8f960 (accessed 20-4-2015).
30 Shareholders Santos and Medco did not sponsor any TV programme related to the mudflow disaster.
the following programmes: the talkshow *Cangkrui’an*;\(^{31}\) sermons by famous preacher (*dai*) Abdullah Gymnastiar; the celebration of Independence Day; and a huge event on the annual Feast of Sacrifice (Idul Adha) (Nasrullah 2007). During this last event, 360 goats and 26 cows were slaughtered and divided between the mudflow victims at the Pasar Porong refugee centre, the largest number of animal sacrifices ever recorded by the Indonesian [World] Record Museum (MURI).\(^{32}\) Another Lapindo Brantas-sponsored JTV production was outsourced by JTV to a group of soap actors in Surabaya: a 13-episode serialized drama resembling a soap opera (*sinetron*) about the mudflow victims (Nasrullah 2007).

In the period between September 2006 and March 2007 several local, national, and international print media briefly mentioned the production of the *sinetron* *Gali lubang, tutup lubang* (Dig a hole, fill a hole; henceforth GLTL).\(^{33}\) Lapindo paid about IDR 520 million (USD 56,511) to JTV to cover production costs.\(^{34}\) In fact, less than half of the amount, IDR 195 million, was used by JTV for the production of the programme (Nasrullah 2007). The series was supposedly meant to ‘put a positive spin on the massive eruption of mud’ as ‘a novel form of damage control’\(^{35}\) and to ‘highlight stories of Lapindo’s hero-

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31 An interactive talkshow, *Cangkrui’an* (literally, ‘talking while sitting in a comfortable/relaxed way’) is set around a street-side guard post where kampung dwellers meet to hang out at night and talk about the latest social-political issues. The host interviews guests of different professions and backgrounds on hot topics, while TV watchers have the opportunity to phone in during the live show (Quinn 2012:71). One episode of *Cangkrui’an* used the Pasar Porong refugee centre as its backdrop. Lapindo representative Nirwan Bakrie and the deputy regent talked to the mudflow victims. However, the refugees were not allowed to directly confront the guest speakers with their own questions; they received prefabricated, ‘moderated’ text written by the JTV producers (Azhar Akbar 2007:152–3).

32 ‘Sembelih 360 kambing qurban, pecahkan rekor MURI’, 2006, http://www.antaranews.com/berita/49839/sembelih-360-kambing-qurban-pecahkan-rekor-muri (accessed 16-5-2015).

33 The word *sinetron* is an acronym for *sinema elektronik*, ‘electronic cinema’.

34 Indra Harsaputra, ‘Indonesia: tv digs a hole for Lapindo’, 2006, http://www.asiamedia.ucla.edu/article.asp?parentid=52185 (accessed 16-6-2007). Two other sources however mention a lower amount: USD 42,900; see Cindy Wockner, ‘The gods must be crazy’, 2006, http://www.couriermail.com.au/news/the-gods-must-be-crazy/story-e6freow6--11112755914 (accessed 31-10-2010) and USD 39,000; see Peter Ritter, ‘Add soap, spin’, 2006, http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1565620,00.html (accessed 16-6-2007).

35 Peter Ritter, ‘Add soap, spin’, 2006, http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1565620,00.html (accessed 16-6-2007).
ism’.36 Lapindo’s vice-president, Yuniwati Teryana, however, strongly denied the company’s involvement in the series.37

These mentions of GLTL triggered my attention while I was working on a project about the representation and mediatization of disaster, in early 2007. Because of its controversial nature, the Sidoarjo mudflow had already become the subject of worldwide discussions amongst scientists and environmentalists. But what was this sinetron about? From the few notes I came across in (digital) newspapers, written by Indonesian as well as foreign journalists, I learnt that GLTL was the product of ‘an unusual public relations exercise’ by Lapindo Brantas,38 which depicted the life of a ‘displaced youth activist’ who motivated his fellow mudflow victims ‘to get back on their feet’.39 Some sources, quoting JTV executive producer Awi Setiawan, stressed that the production showed ‘real-life issues’40 and a ‘real story about human interest’.41 Other sources mentioned how the sinetron on the one hand revealed positive things behind the disaster;42 and on the other hand invited people to be patient and accept hardship as God’s challenge.43 During my fieldwork I searched for more background information on the sinetron, examining its content and production process.

36 Indra Harsaputra, ‘Indonesia: TV digs a hole for Lapindo’, 2006, http://www.asiamedia.ucla.edu/article.asp?parentid=52185 (accessed 16-6-2007).
37 Indra Harsaputra, ‘Indonesia: TV digs a hole for Lapindo’, 2006, http://www.asiamedia.ucla.edu/article.asp?parentid=52185 (accessed 16-6-2007).
38 Geoff Thompson, ‘Indonesian gas company funds “mud volcano” soap opera’, 2006, http://www.abc.net.au/news/2007-01-01/indonesian-gas-company-funds-mud-volcano-soap-opera/2164018 (last accessed 15-6-2015).
39 Achmad Sukarsono, ‘TV soap on Indonesian mud disaster set to air’, 2006, http://news.sctsman.com/latest_odd.cfm?id=135382006 (accessed 16-06-2007).
40 Cindy Wockner, ‘The gods must be crazy’, 2006, http://www.couriermail.com.au/news/the-gods-must-be-crazy/story-e6freow6--111112755014 (accessed 31-10-2010).
41 Peter Ritter, ‘Add soap, spin’, 2006, http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1565620,00.html (accessed 16-6-2007).
42 Achmad Sukarsono, ‘TV soap on Indonesian mud disaster set to air’, 2006, http://news.sctsman.com/latest_odd.cfm?id=135382006 (accessed 16-06-2007).
43 Geoff Thompson, ‘Indonesian gas company funds “mud volcano” soap opera’, 2006, http://www.abc.net.au/news/2007-01-01/indonesian-gas-company-funds-mud-volcano-soap-opera/2164018 (last accessed 15-6-2015).
Mud and Mediated ‘Reality’

The sinetron GLTL consists of 13 one-hour episodes, which were produced and broadcast in the period September until December 2006 (see Figure 4). GLTL depicts the life of young student and NGO activist Ali, whose neighbourhood has been flooded by mud. Ali and his family have lost their house as well as their prawn crackers (krupuk) factory. Many mudflow victims, including Ali and his family, have found a temporary shelter on the Porong market, where they live in precarious circumstances.

Ali works as a volunteer at the mudflow relief task force of the local government. He has two female friends, who join him in taking care of the refugees: economics student Mei Lin and psychology student Kiya, both of whom seem to have their eye on him. Because Ali is very fond of both of them and doesn’t want to decide on a girlfriend yet, he carefully divides his activities, making sure that the girls never meet. Mei Lin teaches the evacuees about modern economy. She explains to them how to use a bank account and how to take care of their financial situation. Kiya joins Ali to all kinds of meetings, instructing the homeless and helping him to prepare food at the market kitchen provided by Lapindo Brantas.

Dolah, Ali’s younger brother who studies broadcasting, and his friends are of the opinion that Ali and his girlfriends are campaigning for the oil company by pushing the mudflow victims to agree and cooperate with its rescue policies. According to Dolah it is a mistake to accept the compensation payment offered by Lapindo. While Ali tries to persuade villagers still living in endangered, but not yet flooded, zones to evacuate, his brother Dolah meanwhile encourages these people to stay in their damaged houses until they are provided with a good alternative. Rather than confronting his brother in a direct and honest way, Dolah plays all sorts of dirty tricks to obstruct Ali’s activities. First of all, he makes the girls believe that Ali is a playboy with bad intentions and they decide to keep their distance. This does affect Ali’s state of mind, but he keeps on pursuing his goal. Meanwhile sister Ima gets into all kinds of trouble because of her kleptomanic tendencies and because of her manipulative brother Dolah, who uses her in his attacks on his older brother. This culminates in the disappearance of Ima, whom they rescue just before she is shipped abroad by an obscure network of women traffickers.

44 Here GLTL makes a reference to the Satuan Pelaksana (SATLAK, District Implementation Unit), set up in mid June 2006 by the Sidoarjo district. The committee was, together with Lapindo, in charge of relief efforts for displaced persons. Three months later the first national task force, TIMNAS, was created (Schiller, Lucas and Sulistiyanto 2008:65–6, 68).
FIGURE 4  Leaflet of the soap opera Gali lubang tutup lubang
COURTESY OF GLTL PRODUCERS
Although clearly a fictive story,\textsuperscript{45} theme and setting of \textsc{gltl} are inspired by real stories of evacuees.\textsuperscript{46} To illustrate the efforts of the production team to incorporate ‘real’ problems and events into the sinetron, below I give examples of several storylines, relating them to happenings at the time.

Ali tries to help his fellow citizens to cope with the difficulties of life as a refugee. Convinced that he needs to change his villagers’ plight, Ali has set himself the goal to make their troubles known to the world. Each of the 13 episodes starts with the same short fragment of Ali telling the audience how he feels the urge to write a thesis about this disaster:\textsuperscript{47}

I must write a thesis, which in turn will become a book that will be read by many people. I have to, in order to open everyone’s inner eye. Anyone can be struck by a disaster, anywhere.\textsuperscript{48}

Ali’s family, his parents, his younger brother Dolah, and his younger sister Ima are lucky enough to be assigned a proper house and move away from the market. This gives them a fair amount of freedom and space and time to build up a new life. Ali is worried, though, that promised payment of compensation by the oil and gas company has made his family passive and lacking in motivation to work. Here is where the title of the sinetron comes in: the expression ‘gali lubang tutup lubang’ literally means ‘dig a hole fill a hole’.\textsuperscript{49} On a basic level it refers to the drilling activities by Lapindo, but on a more profound level the title refers to Ali’s vision of the situation. His family as well as fellow citizens seem to neglect their economical situation. Instead of investing in their future they only ‘pay debts with borrowed money’. Therefore Ali tries to convince them

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\textsuperscript{45} A disclaimer at the beginning of the first episode states that any resemblance to reality is pure coincidence: ‘This sinetron is based on a fictive story with the Sidoarjo mudflow as its setting. Any resemblance to actual names, places and events is purely coincidental.’ (‘Sinetron ini mengetengahkan kisah drama fiktif yang menggunakan setting banjir lumpur Sidoarjo. Apabila ada kesamaan nama tokoh, tempat, dan peristiwa hanyalah kebetulan semata.’)
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\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{46} Interview with playwright Joko Irianto Hamid, Surabaya, 27-8-2007.
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\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{47} These opening lines of protagonist Ali are in the Indonesian language, whereas the remainder of the sinetron mainly uses the local Javanese dialect spoken in Surabaya, called ‘Suroboyoan’.
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\textsuperscript{48} ‘Aku harus bisa nyusun skripsi, sekaligus jadi buku yang dibaca banyak orang. Harus. Supaya bisa membuka mata hati semuanya. Bencana bisa menimpai siapa saja, kapan saja.’
\end{flushleft}

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{49} This is the equivalent of the English expression ‘Rob Peter to pay Paul’, paying a debt while incurring another debt.
\end{flushleft}
that they need to rise again (bangkit) to gain their independence. He explains to them how they can invest the money they already received from Lapindo to start a small business, like selling prawn crackers.

The town of Sidoarjo is known for its shrimp production, but in the sinetron, Ali’s father has lost his prawn cracker factory as a consequence of the mudflow, like many fellow producers. In the ‘unmediated’ Sidoarjo, too, people from the affected villages were relocated to Pasar Baru Porong (‘Porong New Market’), just like Ali and his family. This newly built place was designed to become the new market of the town, but suddenly this location acquired another function: by providing shelter to the mudflow victims, the market transformed into a refugee camp. The internally displaced persons lived in precarious conditions (Schiller, Lucas and Sulistiyanto 2008:71). The sinetron shows how victims live squashed like sardines in tiny vacant shops meant for market dwellers. After staying for a while at this temporary shelter, Ali and his family are provided with funding, allowing them to enter into a (two-year) housing rental contract. This ties in with the ‘unmediated’ situation in Sidoarjo, where Lapindo Brantas and the Bakrie family, although they always denied liability in the mudflow-case, offered compensation payments, home and life insurance, temporary shelter at the market and, eventually, rental properties and new houses (Lapindo Brantas 2014).

The ongoing fight between the brothers Ali and Dolah may be taken to symbolize the different opinions that arose between victims of the mudflow about the best solution to their problems. Some villagers immediately accepted compensation payment offers, like Ali. Many of them, however, like the fictive character Dolah, were opposed to the initial offers of Lapindo Brantas and apparently ‘provoked’ the situation by publicly declining compensation payment, blocking roads, and spreading rumours about Lapindo’s bad intentions (Schiller, Lucas and Sulistiyanto 2008:72–3).

Amidst all the chaos, real-estate brokers flocked to the disaster area trying to take advantage of the victims’ need for a place to live.50 This is represented in the sinetron by Dolah receiving instructions from such brokers. They want him to spread the rumour amongst victims of the mudflow that high officials (pejabat tinggi) from Jakarta have promised a compensation payment of 5 million rupiah per metre.51 Shots follow of victims calculating the size of their

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50 Cindy Wockner, ‘The gods must be crazy’, 2006, http://www.couriermail.com.au/news/the-gods-must-be-crazy/story-e6freow6-111112755014 (accessed 31-10-2010).
51 At the time rumours of this type were repeatedly spread in the disaster area. The idea ‘it is not “news” unless a public official says it’ (Steele 2011:92) was integrated into this G.I.T.L.
former house and garden. In episode 11 Ali’s mother, referred to as Mak, and her friend Gina are portrayed pressing the buttons of a calculator. Suddenly Gina cries out to her friend: ‘Wow Mak, you are rich now. This mudflow means cash flow!’ Mak starts daydreaming about all the amazing house equipment she will be able to buy once the payment has arrived. And what about presents, like a motorcycle and a car for her children?

Both in GLTL and in Sidoarjo after Lusi, real-estate brokers, eagerly waiting for the mudflow victims to leave their temporary shelter, initiated all kind of housing programmes. Ali’s aunt Fatonah, a younger sister of his mother, has been working abroad for 15 years as a ‘TKW’ (Tenaga Kerja Wanita, or female migrant worker). When she arrives back home, she discovers that her house, built over the years using her savings, has been swallowed by the mudflow. Ali and his mother are very concerned about Fatonah’s welfare. Her sad story becomes front-page news for Radar Surabaya. Episode 8 shows how director Roy of Real Estate Pelangi and his friend Indra, director of the business association for female migrant workers (Asosiasi Bisnis Tenaga Kerja Wanita (TKW) Luar Negeri) decide to use this moment to focus on TKW Fatonah for their real-estate development programme. Surrounded by journalists, they give Fatonah a ‘type 70’ house worth 100 million rupiah. Here GLTL refers to the way reporters dramatize the victims’ stories and how businessmen, seemingly caring about victims, stage a media event for their own profit.

Another storyline tells of the children Siti (10 years old), Wawan (11) and Ja’i (12), who lost their home because the mudflow breached an emergency embankment near their house. The risk of overflowing and collapsing dykes built to retain the mudflow has been a continuous threat to the villagers of the ‘unmediated’ Sidoarjo area (Azhar Akbar 2007:116–7). In episode 4, dedicated to the children of the Sidoarjo mudflow, Ali meets Siti at the busy
Ramadan night market. To make ends meet the little girl and her brothers have decided to go out on the street in search of an income. Siti works as a street musician, Wawan polishes shoes, and Ja'i sells newspapers. Siti offers to sing for Ali, saying: ‘One thousand rupiah for a song, way cheaper than a pirated tape.’ Ali, intrigued by the spontaneous little girl, asks her why she is out on the streets. She tells him that her house was swallowed by mud and her parents lost their job. Because it was a rented house, the family will not receive compensation payment to rent a home. A flashback in sepia tones shows the moment disaster struck close to Siti’s house. Villagers are running and screaming: ‘The dyke has broken!’ (‘Tanggul lumpur jebol!’). The family hurries out of the house while the mudflow inundates their surroundings, and shots follow of the five of them walking through the desolate muddy landscape after the event, all of them carrying a few belongings and the father with a huge mattress on his back. Ali feels moved by the sad story and tells Siti to be patient (sabar):

Ali: We need to face disaster in a sincere way, Dhik. If not, what would God say?
Siti: Mmmm, you’re right, Mas, but my poor father, he can’t do it. He just loves to talk about the mudflow and gets emotional.

Ali writes his phone number on a small piece of paper and hands it over to Siti:

Ali: If you have a problem Dhik, you call me OK?
Siti: Ahh you’re just like a Power Ranger who likes to help!

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episode 4). The director of this episode, Danial Rifki, made a short film called Anak-anak lumpur (Children of the mud) that depicted how children in the Sidoarjo area were coping with the disaster (Rifki 2009).

56 ‘Sak lagu sewu. Lebih murah saka kaset bajakan.’
57 ‘Dhik’ or ‘Adhik’ is a term of address for a younger sibling or a person younger than the speaker.
58 ‘Mas’ is a friendly term of address for a man.
59 Ali: ‘Ngadepi musibah kudu sing ikhlas, Dhik. Lek gak, jaré Allah piyé?’ / Siti: ‘Eemm, bener yo jarené Mas, tapi saknoe Bapakku, gak ikhlas. Senengané ning omong banjir lumpur iku mesti emosi.’
60 One of the ‘super heroes’ starring in the North American Power Rangers television series.
61 Ali: ‘Lek onok kesulitan Dhik, hubungi HPné Mas, yo?’ / Siti: ‘Ancen iki koyok Power Ranger ae senengane nolong!’
Siti, joking about Ali’s ‘heroic’ gesture to help, runs off happily and gets on with her ‘work’, singing and begging for money at the Ramadan night market. This episode was filmed and broadcast in October 2006 during the fasting month. The viewers at home must have recognized the hustle and bustle of the market, where the rich and poor meet at dawn to break their fast. Street children hope to earn some extra money at the market in these times of forgiveness. In this way the GLTL crew managed to capture homelessness, poverty, and the atmosphere of the ‘real’ Sidoarjo into the storyline. Sometimes they made last-minute changes to the plot to be able to depict the latest news.

Incorporating the Latest News

An example of the incorporation of the latest ‘breaking news’ into the sinetron was the depiction of the dreadful land-subsidence event that took place on 22 November 2006. On that date the province’s natural-gas pipeline, operated by the national oil and gas company Pertamina, exploded due to the weight of collapsing mudground. The explosion killed thirteen people and destroyed many kilometres of embankments built to control the mudflow (Schiller, Lucas and Sulistiyanto 2008:53). Several villages that had been, at least temporarily, protected by the levees, became invaded by the mudflow. Episode 10 of GLTL, broadcast shortly after the event, starts with the following scene: Umi, head of the village and mother of Ali’s ‘girlfriend’ Kiya, is rushed to the RS1 Siti Hajar Sidoarjo hospital by ambulance; she is in a state of unconsciousness and covered with mud. She had happened to be participating in a forum about the mudflow disaster at the precise moment of the explosion. Kiya arrives at the hospital crying, and runs into the emergency room where Umi is being treated. The doctor explains that Umi needs to recover from a light heart attack. There are some minor skin problems because of the hot mud, but Umi’s heart had probably already been fragile. When Umi finally opens her eyes she asks her daughter: ‘What happened to my village?’ Kiya explains that mud has entered the village due to the rupture of the pipeline, and that many people had to evacuate.

Here we see how the screenwriter inserted sudden news events into the series. He visited—together with his crew members—severely affected disaster areas when he heard that specific events had occurred, like the pipeline explosion. During the production process of the series, unit manager and member of the ‘creative team’ Tedjo Laksana sent his actors to the Porong market, where the majority of the displaced people found shelter. The idea was to get
in touch with the victims, hear their stories, and apply this knowledge to shape their fictive characters.62

Both unit manager Tedjo Laksana and producer Joko Irianto Hamid were very keen on providing their audience with ‘real’ events and images. They wanted to give a voice to the ordinary people, while embedding the stories of these people’s misery and despair within the framework of a dramatic love story. Most of the scenes were depicted with the mudflow as a backdrop, or literally filmed in the mud.63 The merging of information and entertainment, as well as the search for ‘authenticity’ and ‘realness’, can be understood as common tendencies within the broadcast industry of the Reformasi era (Arps and Van Heeren 2006).

GLTL was produced episode by episode. A summary of the main plot and character descriptions were available from the start, but it was not until the actual rehearsals started that producer-playwright Joko Irianto Hamid provided his actors with a detailed script. In this way, the initial plot was modified and extended week after week, incorporating the latest news issues on the disaster. From Monday to Thursday the crew worked on rehearsals and filming, followed by editing on Friday and broadcasting on Saturday night. In order to improve continuity, they searched for a house near the mud, which could serve as Ali’s house. The crew made their shootings in and around this house and on location in the affected area, enduring the heat of the day and the horrible smell of the mud. Work was especially physically challenging during the fasting month in October 2006. For realistic and unique background shots, they approached the Banjar-Panji-1 gas exploration well where, close by, the eruption of the mud volcano had begun:

We were not allowed to enter, but we did it anyway in order to get nice shots. […] We needed a background which was real and frames from reality: the mud flow up close, the drilling well, houses drowned in mud, tractors, trucks moving sand, dust, et cetera. We managed to mislead Lapindo workers and soldiers in order to keep filming and to make sure that the creative process was [based on] reality and not invented by us.64

62 Interview with Tedjo Laksana, Surabaya, 10-9-2007.
63 Interview with Joko Irianto Hamid on 27-8-2007 and with Tedjo Laksana on 10-9-2007.
64 ‘Kita tidak boleh masuk, tapi kita tetap masuk supaya gambar itu bagus. […] Background atau frame-frame kita perlu yang realita: lumpur banjir, sumur panji pengeboran, rumah tenggelam, traktor, mobil-mobil truck yang angkut pasir, debu-debu dan lain sebagainya. Sampai kita tipu-tipu pegawai Lapindo termasuk tentara, militer, kita syuting tetap. Bahwa proses kreatifitas itu adalah realita yang tidak kita buat-buat.’ Interview with Tedjo Laksana, 10-9-2007.
Determined to capture the right images, the crew entered a prohibited and dangerous area (see Figure 5). From time to time angry villagers tried to chase them away violently, but they were able to win their sympathy with words, cigarettes, and money:

My crew and I, we kept approaching the youngsters, which enabled us to continue filming. We approached them in a friendly way, giving them, for example, cigarettes and money to secure a smooth production process. [...] We did this, over and over, because making a mistake towards local society would certainly mean the end of our production process.65

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65 'Pemain dan kru saya, kita tetap mendekati pemuda-pemuda itu supaya syuting tetap jalan. Dengan cara mendekati dengan keramah-tamahan kita. Seperti kita kasih rokok dia, kita kasih duit dia dan kita dekati dia dengan baik, maka proses produksi kita bisa lancar. [...] Dan itu kita lakukan secara terus menerus. Soalnya sekali kita buat kesalahan pada masyarakat di sana, maka semua produksi kita akan hancur.' Interview with Tedjo Laksana, 10-9-2007.
For the sake of ‘real’ images the crew violated ‘reality’ from time to time with their tricks to outsmart authorities and angry villagers, but that did not seem an issue for them. Helyanto, enacting Dolah, proudly explained how they managed to overcome problems in ‘sensitive areas’ by negotiating. As Tedjo Laksana told me, they were also lucky enough to be able to count on the village head’s bodyguards. The Renokenongo village head herself actually became involved in the sinetron: Mahmudahtul Fatkiya (henceforth Mahmudah) played the role of village head ‘Umi’, Kiya’s mother in the sinetron. Because she was familiar with the disaster area and aware of the emotional and psychological problems of the victims, she could convince the local people of the importance of the project. Her efforts paid off:

When I finally performed [on TV] all the villagers of Renokenongo watched: ‘Oh, now it’s the moment of our village head [starring]!’ They really liked it. And my friends in Sidoarjo recognized me, because I’m a female village head. And many people who know me, many of them watched at the time … friends in Sidoarjo, Jombang, Malang and I received phone calls.

Mahmudah—who stands out as a village head because she was one of the few women in this position—used her influence and connections to help the filmmakers to solve problems in the field as well as to make the series more attractive to the audience.

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66 Interview with Mahmudah, Renokenongo, 12-9-2007. Renokenongo was one of the villages flooded in May 2006. By the time of the interview Mahmudah was busy handling cases of compensation payment. A year later, in October 2008, the entire village was submerged by the mudflow because the temporary dykes broke.

67 ‘Dan akhirnya ketika saya yang main semua warga Renokenongo melihat: “Oh sekarang kan wayahi Ibu lurah!” Warga senang sekali. Dan teman-teman saya di Sidoarjo mengenali saya, karena saya kepala desa perempuan. Dan banyak yang kenal saya, akhirnya banyak yang lihat waktu itu. Teman-teman di Sidoarjo, di Jombang, di Malang, saya dibel.’

68 Participation in the series likely suited Mahmudah’s political agenda. Rumour goes that she had business relations with Lapindo. In 2005 she encouraged the villagers of Renokenongo to sell their land ‘for cattle-breeding’. This later turned out to be the land occupied by Lapindo for gas exploration. See Anton Novenanto, ‘Negara absen dalam kasus Lapindo, apa iya?’, 2015, http://korbanlumpur.info/2015/03/negara-absen-dalam-kasus-lapindo-apa-iya-1 (accessed 15-4-2015). Mahmudah, however, has always denied these accusations. To date (June 2015) she is still active as a spokesperson for the victims.
I will now address questions on the origin and aim of the GLTL sinetron: Why was GLTL created? What was the aim of the series as representation of the mudflow disaster, as entertainment, and as a possible means of propaganda?

**Orchestration of (Rival) Interests**

Soon after the mud volcano inundated East Java, journalist Joko Irianto Hamid (henceforth Irianto) felt convinced that this terrible disaster was of global significance and needed to be visualized on screen. This was all the more important as he perceived a lack of interest from local and international media, which were all focused on the earthquake in Yogyakarta that had occurred a few days before mud started spilling out of the earth. According to Irianto, the conflict about the cause of the disaster—did it occur ‘naturally’ or was it ‘human-induced’?—led to multiple interpretations on both religious and metaphysical levels and raised discussions about the possible origin of this calamity and its social-political and economic impact on society. While producing GLTL, Irianto decided to step aside from what seemed to be a never-ending debate. Instead, he focused on the victims and aimed to portray them by using their local language. He opted for what he believed to be the more communicative local dialect of Javanese, so-called ‘Suroboyoan’, rather than the national language Indonesian.69 At the time JTV set a trend for the revival of ‘Surabaya-ness’ with their popular Surabayan-Javanese newscast Pojok Kampung (Neighbourhood corner), which has been broadcast since 2003 (Arps and Van Heeren 2006:308–16).

The inhabitants of Surabaya, known for their outspoken nature, tend to use a lot of swearing and rude words in their daily communication. Their way of talking, although coarse and direct, in fact reflects their friendliness. Most common expressions somehow turn into poetic language (*parikan*) (Adipitoyo 2011). In other words, this local variety of the Javanese language, with its witty and egalitarian character, is an intrinsic part of Surabayan society. Irianto aimed to draw a link between humour as a quintessential part of Surabayan culture and the popular Javanese-language theatre form *ludruk*, which has strong roots in East Java.70 He described his production of GLTL as *sinetron ludruk* (‘ludruk

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69 One of the reasons that Irianto wanted to promote the local language was because he considered it a way to counterbalance the increasing influence of Jakartan youth slang. Interview with Joko Irianto Hamid, Surabaya, 27-8-2007.

70 *Ludruk* performances, characterized by their emphasis on humour and social critic, gen-
dramedy’). By combining the Indonesian portmanteau *sinetron*, adopted nationwide to refer to this Indonesian version of Western soap operas or comedies, and the East Javanese popular theatre genre *ludruk*, he coined a new term that should appeal to his target audience of the local TV station JTV Surabaya: low- to middle-class people interested in shows with a local flavour. Sung poetry (*kidung parikan*) and *gamelan* theme music were interspersed with the main narrative, especially before and after commercial breaks.71

As director of the Surabaya branch of the Persatuan Artis Sinetron Indonesia Jawa Timor (Indonesian Sinetron Artists Association, Parsi Jatim), Irianto approached JTV with his idea to produce a sinetron about the mud volcano. During negotiations between Parsi and JTV, Lapindo presented itself as the third partner interested in sponsoring the series.72 Tedjo Laksana’s version of the origin of GLTL was slightly different, though. He agreed that Irianto had the initial idea for the series, but he also told me that Parsi actually received an order from the business and marketing department of JTV to produce a soap opera sponsored by Lapindo.73 Despite these different opinions on the genesis of the series, all sources—except Lapindo Brantas itself—agreed upon the fact that the mining company got involved moneywise. JTV, as mentioned before, was one of the first media stations able to take advantage of Lapindo’s image problems and profit from sponsorship money.

At this point the question remains how Joko Irianto Hamid and Tedjo Laksana negotiated and mediated the interests, including their own, of all the parties involved and/or depicted in GLTL. Obviously they had to make compromises with Lapindo and JTV in shaping their production. What concessions did they make in terms of the depiction of facts and figures? When I asked them about this matter, the producers simply stressed that their aim was to show different opinions on the disaster without being judgemental. This ‘neutral’ answer probably relates to the fact that Irianto and Laksana—both professional journalists—practised self-censorship in order to prevent (future)

erally feature the following elements: an opening dance (*ngremo*), a comic prologue consisting of sung poetry (*kidung parikan*), and clowning skits (*dhagelan*), followed by the main story (*lakon*)—based on local legends and stories about ordinary people—which is interspersed with dance and songs by a female impersonator. For more information on *ludruk*, see Supriyanto 1992; for more information on *kidung parikan*, see Supriyanto 2004.

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71 Interview with Joko Irianto Hamid, Surabaya, 27-8-2007.
72 Interview with Joko Irianto Hamid, Surabaya, 27-8-2007.
73 Personal communication with Tedjo Laksana via e-mail, 14-10-2009.
problems with their superiors in the news industry.\footnote{74} At the time they both had freelance connections with magazines, newspapers, and television programmes of the Jawa Pos Group.\footnote{75}

A close reading of the sinetron suggests that the makers (Irianto and Laksana), aware of the wishes of their clients (read: JTV and Lapindo), have been very cautious in their treatment of the mudflow theme. They genuinely tried to get across the human interest stories of those affected by the disaster and succeeded to a certain extent: the greater part of the storyline ties in with conditions in the field and shows the impact of the mudflow. Apart from the interests of Lapindo, JTV, and Parsi the filmmakers had to take into account the interests of local government officials and agencies like the village head and the emergency task force. Furthermore, they had to consider the interests of the newspaper Radar Surabaya, of the military, and of villagers. Their intention to provide a balanced view of the disaster does not seem to have been fulfilled, though: at numerous points in the story the filmmakers actually favour their clients’ position that Lapindo is not to be blamed. This can be illustrated by looking at the discourse of the protagonist, who repeatedly tells his fellow victims to be patient (sabar) and sincere (ikhlas) in facing disaster.

Irianto inserted Islamic views to orchestrate the rival interests between Ali and his brother, which provided the series with the ingredients of a ‘public-relations exercise’: the main character Ali, an intelligent, sympathetic, and good-looking student has the noble task of informing the victims as to how to cope with the disaster, and how to remain patient and positive, despite of the problems they are facing. His brother Dolah, the antagonist and provocateur, symbolizes the angry villager unwilling to have faith and enjoying running amok and stirring up chaos. This black-and-white character opposition is a feature one expects of a soap series, but in this case the fraternal division bears a more profound, religious message: a disaster needs to be accepted as a trial from God. Ali repeatedly uses the terms cobaan Allah, ‘trial from God’ and hikmah Allah, ‘Allah’s wisdom’, when trying to convince his brother and his fellow victims to stay calm and to not lose faith. He is convinced that Lusi is an act of God. Dolah, however, openly blames the oil and gas company for all the problems he is facing. As such the ‘good’ and the ‘bad’ character represent the contrast between the ‘natural, God-given’ and the ‘man-made’, favouring Ali’s position, which suggests that Lapindo Brantas cannot be blamed.

\footnote{74} Even in the post-Suharto time of Reformasi, self-censorship is still widely practised among Indonesian journalists; see Tapsell 2012.

\footnote{75} Currently, Irianto is editor-in-chief of PT Lensa Indonesia Global Media in Jakarta and Laksana works as a floor manager at JTV Surabaya.
When we observe the religious moral of acceptance as advertised by protagonist Ali, it has to be noted that this way of addressing calamities fits with the idea of Islam in Indonesia as an ‘increasingly dominant public narrative’. As one scholar phrases it: ‘Stricter Muslims say that musibah (calamities) are trials, put in one’s path by God (coban teka Tuhan)’ (Wessing 2010:52). In this case, it is not surprising that a sinetron targeted at an audience of predominantly Muslim background presents the theme of ‘disaster as trial’. It seems to me, however, that the filmmakers deliberately made use of this Islamic discourse to strengthen Ali’s ‘winning argument’ of acceptance: disaster can strike anyone, anywhere.

Ali’s struggle to help the victims is justified by the divine. When Ali and his friend Mei Lin, while driving by car through the disaster area, are confronted with angry villagers—supposedly sent by Ali’s brother Dolah, who wants to split up the couple—a kyai (religious leader) appears, summoning the men who are running amok to calm down: ‘How come you make such a fuss during times of fasting?’ While the youngsters run off, the kyai turns to Ali, adding: ‘Continue your struggle. We have all heard that your goals are truthful [...] concerning your instructions to the people that are struck by the mud, I stand behind you.’

Several of the kidung parikan, the sung poetry inserted prior to, and at the end of, each commercial break, support the overall religious moral. During episode 7, Kiya, Ali’s girlfriend, sings in front of houses largely covered by mud:

My friends keep a clear mind/Disaster is God’s will/ We should keep in mind that mankind/ Has to confront different types of calamities.

Later in this episode Ali sings:

O Allah O God I ask for help/ All disasters will be over, won’t they?/ O Allah O Lord I seek refuge/ In You Allah Almighty.
In episode 8 Ali sings the following:

Be a patient man of faith/ In the times of Allah there have been many calamities/ Calamities come in all kind of forms/ The mudflow is just one of them.80

These *kidung parikan*, promoting a religious rather than a scientific explanation for the mudflow, likely served as an explanatory tool to ignore Lapindo's possible liability.

**Conclusion**

In this article I have argued that the GLTL television series is more than a simple propaganda exercise. The producers managed to create a story that depicted key elements of Sidoarjo's unfolding disaster between August and December 2006: refugees living at the Porong market; families falling apart because of stress and poverty; the emergency response by NGO volunteers and local government agencies; fights over compensation issues and forced relocation; media coverage of victims; and corruption in real estate. Meanwhile, the controversial catastrophe became a recurring theme of journalistic reports and scientific articles. Even nine years after the initial start of the disaster, certain dramatic aspects of Lusi's early history—as reflected in the sinetron—remain unresolved.81

The series gave voice to the victims not only by showing their tragic social conditions, but also by depicting how they tried to survive. The confusion over possible solutions to their problems was embedded in the leading story of the protagonist who, in his quest for justice and love, encountered the aggression of his brother. The portrait of the rival siblings—in characteristic black-and-white soap-opera terms—provided the series with a religious message: one has to face disaster with patience and a clear mind. Although a fairly common message when speaking about disaster in Indonesia, it seems that the filmmakers

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80 ‘Dadi wong iman sabar lan tabah/ Lamana Allah aweh musibah/ Musibah iku akeh warnane/ Luapan lumpur iku tunggale.’

81 Payment to the victims by Lapindo, through a loan from the government as agreed in December 2014 between President Jokowi and the Bakrie family, has been postponed several times but is supposedly due before the end of the fasting month in July 2015. Lapindo has to pay back the loan to the government within four years with an interest rate of 4.8%.
used this discourse to suit their clients’ wishes. After all, it was Lapindo Brantas, in an attempt to upgrade its corporate image, that gave Parsi, through JTV, the order to produce a series about the mudflow. Although the series carries the clear message that Lusi was a natural occurrence, it failed as a public-relations exercise. Tedjo Laksana and Joko Irianto Hamid genuinely tried to reflect all sides of the disaster story. This was quite a challenge, though, because they had to operate in an environment with different interests and power relationships at stake, which led to compromise and self-censorship.

The crew did carry out fieldwork to try to understand the hardship of the victims. In their search for ‘authentic’ images they dared to face the extreme conditions of the muddy reality: the burning sun and dangerously hot, stinky mud, which made their filming experience all the more interesting—they were literally trying to approach reality. The result is a sinetron—with the ‘real’ mudflow as its backdrop—that depicted muddy (love) affairs, while integrating the latest (disaster) news.

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