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Shifting from National Channels to Digital Platforms: An Examination of Limitations on Creative Practices in Turkish Serial Production

Ulusal Kanallardan Dijital Platformlara: Türkiye'de Dizi Üretiminde Yaratıcılık Üzerindeki Sınırlılıkların İncelenmesi

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the changes in creative production practices of Turkish television serials in the last decade due to the expansion of Turkish television serial industry and the fairly concurrent launch of three video-on-demand platforms, Netflix Turkey, puhutv and BluTV. The range of genres, characters, narrative structures and stylistic choices in the serials produced for these platforms is broader compared to others that are broadcast on national television channels; whether the changes on these new screens are reflected as transformations in the production practices remains a question to be answered. This paper investigates the structures of serial production processes and their limitations on creativity by means of an outlook of an analysis of actors that affect production decisions, including producers, channels, and audiences, and interviews with the creative people who actually produce the end products.

ÖZ

Bu çalışma, Türk televizyon dizisi endüstrisinin genişlemesi ve dijital platformlar olan Netflix Türkiye, puhutv ve BluTV'nin Türkiye'de faaliyete geçmesi nedeniyle son on yılda televizyon dizilerinin üretim uygulamalarındaki değişikliklere odaklanmaktadır. Bu platformlar için üretilen dizilerde türler, karakterler, anlatı yapıları ve üslup seçenekleri ulusal televizyon kanallarında yayınlanan diğerlerine göre daha geniş bir yelpazededir; ancak bu dönüşümün üretim uygulamalarında bir yansıması olup olmadığı hala cevaplanması gereken bir sorudur. Bu makale seri üretim süreçlerinin yapılarını ve yaratıcılık üzerindeki sınırlamalarını yapımcılar, kanallar ve izleyiciler gibi üretim kararlarını etkileyen aktörlerin analizi ve nihai ürünleri üreten yaratıcı profesyoneller ile yapılan görüşmelerle inceleyip tartışmaya açacaktır.

INTRODUCTION

The last decade has seen an increasing uniformity in the content of serials that are broadcast on national television in Turkey, while a more diversified range of genres, narratives, themes and styles are produced for online viewing. Being one of the most popular fiction media content on national television channels and digital platforms, serial production arguably takes up the largest section in media production. In this paper, we aim to identify and focus on those factors that affect creative practices in serial production, and question whether they interfere with decisions related to visual style and narrative content. In other words, we aim to explore the extent of actors and structures of serial production becoming limitations on creativity. Zygmunt Bauman divides pressures into two general categories, first of them being external constraints:

External constraints are the elements of which individual intentions can be applied and unrealistic, and that individuals want to achieve through action are also highly likely and far less likely. The individual still pursues the goals he freely chooses; but his well-designed efforts collapse as he collides with the hard rock, power, and insurmountable wall of class or compelling instruments. (Bauman, 2015: 12)

External constraints originate from external sources and surround the individual in a way that limits the individual's freedom despite her efforts and actions. The second concept is about the regulatory forces that tend to be internalized by the individual. According to Bauman:

The individual's sole motivation, expectation, hope and ambition are shaped in a special way by education, exercise and information, or just by the people around him, so that his directions cannot be said to be accidental from the beginning. This kind of de-randomization is accepted by the concepts of culture, tradition and ideology. (Bauman, 2015: 12-13)

Capitalizing on these conceptions, we argue that the limitations on the creative practices of television serial production can be grouped into two: external and internalized. According to Bauman, human actions are regulated by apparently external or seemingly internal influences. We argue that the external limitations that originate from extrinsic factors transform into internal limitations by influencing the individual and limiting her freedom, and reveal in self-governance and self-censorship mechanisms.

External limitations on television production comprise of political and economic factors as well as governmental rules and regulations set for broadcasting, hence they arise from institutions rather than individuals, whereas internalized limitations are directly related to the decision-making processes of people working in creative production. We list the external limitations as: RTÜK (Radio Television Supreme Council) sanctions and the Turkish radio television law, media monopolization in Turkey, economic structure of channels and their advertisement strategies, the ratings measurement system, and finally, the global exportation of serials. We argue that the external and internal limitations are not independent, on the contrary, the external ones, which are seemingly more visible, trigger the internalized, invisible ones leading to a self-censorship mechanism in creative production. In the following sections, we will be dwelling on these limitations in detail in an attempt to question the impact of their co-dependence on creative production processes.

AN OVERVIEW OF PERSONAL REFLECTIONS OF PROFESSIONALS ON LIMITING FACTORS

This study makes use of semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted with 13 industry professionals who worked or are still working in the making of serials for online streaming

platforms and traditional television channels.¹ The interviewees were chosen among scriptwriters, directors and producers. These semi-structured interviews were conducted in Turkish, some of which had to be made via phone or Skype instead of face to face due to the interviewees' tight schedules. All interviewees were asked the same set of seven questions regarding their position in production and their opinions about production practices and the kinds of limitations they have faced in their work. During the interviews, some additional questions were asked.

Almost all the interviewees explain that the making of a television serial for national channels involves overlapping phases that demand meticulous time management. During production and broadcasting, scriptwriters continue to write new episode scripts for 150-minute shows while the production crew are shooting the previously written episodes. Trying to meet deadlines, the conventional system is quite fast for a creative process, involving everyone to rush to complete scriptwriting, shooting and editing on time, leaving almost no time for errors. During this process, channels and producers may demand revisions, and the crew make changes according to feedback. Timing pressures dominate creativity.

Some interviewees claim that the establishment of online platforms has changed the situation described above, as they introduced new workflows and methods of production to the sector. One interviewee², a showrunner working for a SVOD platform, explains the working conditions during the writing process of an original series: When a project is accepted for production, a writer's room is set, in which all of the writers gather and discuss the main story and side stories of each episode. The showrunner is in charge of the writers in the room. When they decide on the stories, they complete each treatment for each episode together. Then the writers split episodes and everyone writes their own. The writers work nine to five, five days a week until all of the episodes for a season are written. The interviewee argues that collaboration is key in this sector and the streaming platforms use writers' collaboration effectively and creatively. According to him, they have three revisions for each treatment and three for each script, which means "many more revisions than those allowed for television serials".

Another interviewee working for an SVOD platform similarly states that scripts of all eight episodes for a season are completed before the production begins. The scripts are never re-edited once they are agreed upon, and the shooting starts only when the scripts are completed. She says, "This also helps us reduce the budget and allows us to think more about the project." She compares the writing processes of traditional television serials with SVOD platform originals and says "You have one week to write the script in the former, and three to five months in the latter. The shooting does not start until the writers and producers approve that this is the final version of the script." In this respect, online platforms provide a tremendous liberty for those who work for its originals compared to the conventional working conditions. Knowing exactly how the story will unfold enables the writers to lead the other members of crew to pay attention to details that improve the story in other phases of production. Another interviewee argues that online SVOD platforms can separate production phases more easily due to the fact that seasons and episode lengths are much shorter than television serials. Short episodes lasting between 45-60 minutes (as opposed to 120-150 minutes on television) for mini-series allows the creative crew to have enough time to complete the writing on time and shoot episodes simultaneously. One scriptwriter argues that the different distribution, production, financing and consumption styles of online streaming platforms allow for diversity of content in serial production.

¹ See Appendix A and Appendix B for list of interviewees and interview questions.

² To protect the privacy of the interviewees their names are undisclosed.

Regardless of the phases of production they are working in, almost all interviewees agree that in order for a project to be sold, individuals internalize a set of restrictions stemming from external limitations, thus a self-censorship mechanism starts to form. When creating stories, scriptwriters shape their creativity to follow certain formulas that produce more “popular” content. One scriptwriter portrays the internalization of external limitations, and the emergence of self-censorship while working for traditional television channels with these words:

You write in line with the taste of the public and the moral values of the people, which kills original stories. There are some stories that you cannot tell on Turkish television. You cannot talk about politics. There are some unwritten rules that you should be careful with. There is self-censorship in showing cheating and extramarital affairs. Because Turkish people are sensitive to these issues you need to be careful. You can't show sexuality much, but you can imply. Self-censorship is at work here. To speed things up, you do not write what you want because you already know that your script will be declined by the producer. It's like you start thinking with the moral codes of the audience. Self-censorship is when you start thinking about what others like and what others want. But they promise that freedom in digital platforms, and you are writing without these patterns of thinking. Like we did in the past years.

Another scriptwriter expresses that after spending some time trying to develop projects for traditional television she embarked upon some setbacks. She says these setbacks and rejections from channels and producers may transform an individual's thinking mechanism and may become a reflex if she is not too careful. She explains the process of the mindset transformation, or internalization, with these words:

After a while you constantly hear ‘this won't do, this won't be,’ and you start not to do that. When your idea is a seed, a core, you take it out of your mind because you think they won't accept it anyway. In this sense, you will turn to more standard, more ordinary, more in-line material. As long as you can realize it, no problem, but it will ossify after a while. One of the reasons I ran away from TV is that. I tried several things, sent stories to people and I always get the same answer: ‘Yeah, that is great, but bring us something simpler.’ I even heard that. ‘It doesn't have to be so beautiful.’ I heard that from the producer. It's very dangerous when you start practicing self-censorship, which automatically becomes your own reflex after a while. On the one hand, the dark times of crisis and repression ignite creativity very much. Because when you are surrounded from all sides, you have to come up with an idea that will not come to the mind of a more original, more creative person than usual. When you put the self-censorship mechanism on the other side, this pressure and darkness start to take you out. You are no longer able to produce creative material. I wish this will not happen in the digital...

Both statements exemplify the emergence of self-censorship mechanism, the dangers it brings to creativity, the transformation of thinking process with this emergence and the approach to the content.

RTÜK AND ITS EXTENT OF CONTROL

In Turkey, like in many other countries, the broadcast content is under the governance and control of state institutions. RTÜK, or Radio Television Supreme Council, was established in 1994 - three years after the introduction of private channels in Turkey - under the Law No. 3984, as a legal authority to regulate and supervise television and radio channels in Turkey, and it has been effective on audiovisual content since then. RTÜK's responsibilities can be described as to organize and supervise the radio and television events carried out by public or private broadcasters at national, regional and local levels. In this sense RTÜK is the major authority in Turkey that is responsible for frequency planning, licensing and permitting the radio and television establishments, devising the rules for private broadcasters to follow, monitoring and governing private channels and applying punishments such as canceling the

licenses, giving fines, and temporarily or indefinitely stopping broadcasting. RTÜK's domain has expanded over the years with radio television law and regulations that followed Law No. 3984, especially with Law No. 6112 (dated 2011) and the succeeding omnibus bills that included televisual regulations.³ The law has questionable clauses regarding what can be screened on television and this ambiguity creates a major external limitation, affecting channels' economies and their approach to content.

A report about the new radio television law states that the new law of 2011 positions RTÜK as an inspection institution. With the additional edits, the authority of RTÜK president expanded, new expert definitions were added, and the employees were forced to hide information after they were disconnected with RTÜK. In this sense, RTÜK is getting far from being a transparent organization (Sümer and Adaklı, 2011). There is also an ambiguity in the law; in Article 8 of RTÜK law, it is stated that the broadcasting services "cannot be against the national and moral values of society, the general morality and the principle of protection of family" (Anon, 2011). The lack of definition of general morality and the moral values of society results in different views and interpretations of content, thus unclear punishment practices for televised content. There is a substantial increase⁴ in the amount of monetary penalties given by RTÜK to broadcasters since the year 2011. Due to the business models of television channels and the political economy of television distribution in Turkey, RTÜK's sanctions, depending on ambiguous clauses directly affect channels. The production processes and the televisual content are made and altered to meet the demands of RTÜK in order to avoid fines that have the power to damage a channel's or a production companies' economy.

Seemingly, there is a more liberated environment in online streaming platforms as RTÜK's control is less visible⁵, but the penalties given by RTÜK in the previous years for television content shape the decisions of channels and production companies. Moreover, the internalization of this external limitation leads to self-censorship reflexes that affect the content for online streaming content as well. One of the interviewees claims that RTÜK is a control mechanism in the production process. She explains that even though RTÜK does not have control over her individual work "...but the channel and the producer are like looking from RTÜK's eyes. They become my RTÜK." Thus, the standards RTÜK sets for an audiovisual product to be broadcast become internalized by the crew itself. The content is made appropriate for RTÜK standards throughout the revision processes, or sometimes from the initiation of an idea. In this process of self-control or self-censorship, creative crew start to regulate their behavior often limiting themselves, holding back from producing alternative and unconventional projects. The ambiguity in the altered radio television law ensures that the clauses are all-inclusive so that the punishments and fines can be justified anyhow and also at times they can be unexpected. In this sense, executives and gatekeepers in the serial industry (producers, channels, etc.) become sentinels of this governmental institution, closely inspecting the crew and the products.

On interviewee explains the shade of RTÜK and the approach of the gatekeepers:

No project I have written has received RTÜK penalties, but the shadow of RTÜK falls to every project, of course. One of these projects had a gay character. It's been there since we first handed over the project to the production company. It was already written, it was known. It was going to be revealed in the 15th episode. Then when we

³ Details of laws and legislations can be found on RTÜK's website, <https://www.rtuk.gov.tr/en/legislation-5217>.

⁴ Data acquired from yearly sectoral reports of RTÜK available at <https://www.rtuk.gov.tr/faaliyet-raporlari/3696/890/yillik-faaliyet-raporlari.html>.

⁵ On 01.08.2019 RTÜK enacted a new regulation that enables it to involve online streaming platforms active in Turkey. With that regulation it is stated that, online streaming platforms have to get a license from RTÜK in order to continue streaming and RTÜK can intervene the content of these platforms.

wrote the scene where he came out to his friends, the producers changed their mind: 'Let's not make him gay, it is going to be a trouble.' We said it's been broadcasted for a year. It is saying something like: 'I have changed my mind right now so I can make a female character a man.' This was something we had gradually built on top of. Then came the channel: 'Why do we need it? Let's not do it.' There was no actual RTÜK involvement, but this pressure was an external censorship I faced. We did not change the character being gay, but we changed the way he said it. We found a middle way.

Even though RTÜK does not directly affect the creative process, producers and channels, the gatekeepers within the industry, interfere with the content often taking off specific scenes, characters and representations of lifestyles, preventing the alternatives being visible on mainstream media.

One interviewee says there was less control and pressure seven or eight years ago. She states "RTÜK has been a severe pressure for the last three or four years." She says "We're developing a self-control for ourselves even when we're reading the script. The idea of 'we cannot broadcast this' starts to form in our minds, unfortunately." Even though RTÜK covers online platforms right now, it has not given any punishments to any original serials produced by platforms yet. Therefore, nobody is sure about the extent of RTÜK's power on online platforms, yet similar concerns endure. This interviewee argues that the position of not even starting to pursue an original idea because of expectations of discontinuity is swiftly adopted as a position when working for online platforms as well. She states "I read scenarios with the concern that if they are produced, we will get a penalty for sure. Inevitably, we develop a self-control that prevents us from flying." The idea of governance and control is contagious; the accepted working conditions for mainstream media remain slightly changed when working for another platform. Since the industry and its people are the same, former concerns about "what cannot be broadcast" still exist. One manager for an online streaming platform states her stance about the new radio television law and RTÜK's extent on televisual content:

The framework of (the law) is still unknown. Because it does not pass a list (of things that can't be done). It presents a very open clause. It says that it is against the "general morals of society", for example, we do not know what that is. It is open-ended. RTÜK works a little like that. You do something, you get a fine, then you learn what you should not do. So, some things pass by untried. You say to yourself that they do not allow it and you have to take it out of the story.

The amounts fined by RTÜK is an important issue here, as they can affect a channel's economy. Eventually, decisions about creativity are turned into decisions about financing.

One director who works for an original platform serial explains the setbacks she faced during the production process. She states that even though there was no pressure coming directly from RTÜK, a scene she wanted to add to an episode could not be in the final version because "(the producers) said something like 'let's not underline something we have already given, in order not to block the continuation (of the medium)'" She states that producers are afraid of punishments and they narrow the possibilities down. Due to these anxieties, self-censorship mechanisms arise. She claims that showing active sexuality and explicit sexual identities is a way of broadening what can be shown on screen.

As evident from these examples, there is an ongoing fear about the future of these platforms; in order to protect their existence, people who work for them play safe not to attract any attention from RTÜK. Before a threat comes from outside, there is an effort to anticipate that threat and work around its obstacles accordingly. Even if that means a scene being cut off from the final version, it is a precaution, as well as a creative and financial compromise.

MONOPOLIZATION OF MEDIA INDUSTRIES IN TURKEY

In Turkey, the media is structured as an oligopoly (Bulunmaz, 2011). A great part of major media outlets, newspapers, television channels and such are owned, controlled and run by certain conglomerates. This monopolized media ownership structure has an effect on media products (Bulunmaz, 2011; Dağtaş, 2008). Like many other media products, television productions are highly affected by those who produce them (production company and production crew), as well as those who broadcast or stream them (channels and platforms). Currently the total number of television channels in Turkey is 196, the number of national channels is 19. (RATEM 2019) This indicates there is a limited number of channels that reach the total audience in Turkey. Today there are six major channels in Turkey which have a nationwide range, broad audience coverage and programming strategies that broadcast serials multiple days of the week: TRT 1, ATV, FOX, Kanal D, Star TV and Show TV. Since the focus of this paper is the production processes of television serials, the number of channels in our discussion can be narrowed down to these six channels.

Almost all these channels, established and owned by conglomerates,⁶ were handed over to another establishment in the last decade. It can be said that after the proliferation of private channels in Turkey and the transformation to a media oligopoly, the relationship with power and governmental tools has changed. This change transformed television content by affecting channels' economies.⁷ Bulunmaz, who has worked on the monopolization of Turkish media, points out that "Monopolization in the media is, above all, a formation against pluralism in thought and expression. Collecting mass media in one hand restricts freedom of thought and expression. The number of people working in the media decreases and the media is generally directed towards monotony" (2011). One of the reasons behind the monotonous content that is visible on television arises from lack of alternative media outlets in Turkey. This deficiency leaves creative crew with limited options to exhibit their work. There are several active channels in Turkey, but the content expectations of those channels show similarities because essentially the expectations stem from similar sources.

One producer explains the monopolized environment of Turkish serial industry with these words:

If you look at the production companies of the Turkish series, you will see the same companies mostly. There are small firms that make daily serials and bigger firms like Pastel Gold, O3 and Ay Yapım. Their singularity and scarcity also create a vicious circle because they emerge from the same decision-making mechanism. So, you have three or four channel managers. Maybe not individual people, there are three or four channel management, there are 15-20 production companies that combine each other trying to do business with each other.

The picture depicted here, shows an important reason behind uniformed content on traditional television. Today in Turkish television there are a handful of alternative stories, characters and settings. The lack of alternative channels and production companies is one of the reasons behind this creative drought.

⁶ The ownership structures of these six prominent television channels that broadcast serials multiple days of week can be examined in Appendix C.

⁷ Six leading television channels in Turkey passed into other hands in the recent years. We can also see that three channels, Star TV, ATV and Show TV passed in the hands of TMSF (Savings Deposit Insurance Fund) before they pass into their current owners. Four out of six channels are owned by a Turkish conglomerate, ATV is owned by Turkuvaz Media Group since 2007, Kanal D is owned by Demirören Conglomerate since 2018, Show TV is owned by Ciner Media Conglomerate since 2013 and Star is owned by Doğuş Media Group since 2011 and Fox TV is owned by the American company Walt Disney since 2017.

Traditional television channels' expectation of content, their approach to serials and projects and their target audiences are similar. The content shapes according to the expectations of the handful of channels that broadcast serials. The creative field is very narrow because of the lack of alternative channels that have different expectations from the content.

ECONOMIC CONCERNS AND THE RATINGS SYSTEM

A television channel's economic decisions for broadcasting policies become another major external limitation for creative practices, as they have a considerable influence on almost all audiovisual content on screen. Like in any other profit-oriented business, a channel's ultimate goal is to increase its revenues; televisual flow and content are planned and designed accordingly. Main income sources can be listed as advertisements, product placement, tele-shopping, and sponsorships.⁸ Being the strongest source for revenues, advertisements directly influence temporal structures on television, such as the decisions about timing and duration of commercial breaks. Broadcasting transformed in the 1990s in Turkey, with the introduction of private television channels, and program flows shifted as TV slots were separated as daytime and prime time, similar to global broadcasting trends. Prime time was divided into two subsections as PT 1 from 20.00 to 22.30 and PT 2 from 22.30 to 00.00, differentiated by the programs broadcasted. As evident in the daily schedules of channels in the 90s, a television show (for example a game show) followed a serial, or two serials broadcasted in a row. With the recent transformation of Turkish TV programming in the last decade, two separate slots merged into a singular slot and the channels started broadcasting only one serial or a television show in that slot. Since the channels try to get the biggest income with less expenditures, the number of serials broadcasted halved. This further limited the opportunities of alternative shows being broadcasted. The competitive environment escalated and brutalized because of the lessened options; thus, the televised content monotonized and uniformed. Advertisement prices are determined by several factors: the time slot, form and length of a commercial effects pricing, all of which are mainly dependent on the ratings that a certain channel or a program gets. This leads to a competition with other channels that try to get the same advertisements in their own flows. The more rating a channel gets, the higher advertisement prices are. Because of this reason, content needs to be popular, leading to more monotony and uniformity, because producers do not want to take many risks but stick to what they know sells best. "One of the most dramatic changes transforming broadcasting in post-industrial societies has been the growth of commercial competition." (Holtz-Bacha and Norris, 2001) Rating measurements determine the quantity and the nature of what the audiences watch. As discussed above, the rating a certain channel gets affects the advertisement fees which affects the channel's content. In other words, content cannot be thought as independent from the relationship between advertising income and ratings.

Until 2012 rating measurements in Turkey were conducted by the ratings measurement company AGB Nielsen. According to different news outlets in the late 2000's, supposedly 1100 out of nearly 2500 house with people meter devices, a device used for rating measurements, were revealed, and the residents have been bribed and convinced by some producers and channel employees to watch their channels or shows (Anon, 2009). After the increasing news about fraud, some major channels withdrew from the rating measurements and TRT officially complained about the system leading to the cancellation of the 22-year-long agreement with AGB. The entire rating measurement system was altered in 2012 and Kantar Media became the new company responsible for it, supervised by TİAK, another TV audience research company.

⁸ According to RATEM's (Society of Radio and Television Broadcasters) sectoral report, (RATEM 2019), the advertising revenues of national televisions had a share of 94% in total commercial communication revenues in 2017. See Appendix D for detailed information.

In the new socioeconomic group sampling for ratings, “profession” is a more important factor than “education”, unlike before; this contributes to the integration of the economic factor (TÜAD, 2012). With this new approach, income of individuals in the samples became the main criteria for determination of socioeconomic groups. The change of the rating system consequently altered the demand for content in television: the monotonous programming and uniformity of content increased, in serials more basic storylines and typical characters started to be preferred, spread and eventually dominated the screen. For example, melodramatic stories centered around poor victim uneducated women protagonists were preferred by channels and producers: *Paramparça* (2014-2017), *Kadın* (2017) and so on. Stories centered around heroic soldiers started to appear on the screen: *Söz* (2017-2019), *Savaşçı* (2017-...), *İsimsizler* (2017) and so on.

Channels pursue different strategies in order to get the highest budget from advertisers. The most profitable time slot, that is, prime time,⁹ is usually dedicated to serials or global formats. Thus, the channel executives plan their flow accordingly. According to the interviewees, the shift in channel flow in the last decade relies heavily on budgetary reasons. In the last decade the content broadcasted on the prime time zone formally changed because of the competitive media environment of Turkey, most evidently the durations of serials seriously increased and TV genres other than serials became nearly extinct. To fill out their flow, channels demanded longer episodes that exceed three hours of screen time along with episode summaries and commercial breaks. One interviewee working for a national channel states that ratings are an important stress factor and because of the changing ratings, some stories get cancelled and executives interfere with the story. She says: “Ratings shape the story, when the rating is high, there is no intervention, but if it goes below a certain point, confidence in scriptwriters is lost.” On the other hand, an interviewee working for a digital platform explains “They (people who work for serials) know that the show will not be cancelled.” She also states that the actors know how their character will transform in time, from the beginning of production, and they are able to adapt to their role better.

We can also talk about an impact on the content that originates from the expectations of advertisers. One director, who is also an actor for Turkish television serials for almost 15 years, explains the influence of advertisements on traditional television with an example about product placement: “For instance, car sponsors usually give their ads to scenes in which the car falls off a cliff, and the man or woman come out alive.” This means that the script could be shaped around the sponsor’s hidden message. Another interviewee states that when a channel or a platform’s main revenue source is advertisements, the advertisers became decisive on the content. She states “No car company would want the bad character to use their car.” and she adds that in order to draw advertisers they must follow a stereotypical storyline. She claims that “The love between the leading actor and actress must remain clean and they must be very well committed to each other. But external forces prevent them from being together.” The advertisers influence on the story limits the creative field, creatives are forced to build two dimensional characters and familiar storylines. The products that are placed in the serial become eclectic, they do not blend in the story harmoniously.

Since a channel’s main target is to gain the most revenue from advertisements, it aims standard works that could be watched and understood by the whole country. Most of the channels’ content expectations are shaped by this pattern. Channels expect and order standard projects, like a serial that started in 2019 *Leke*, centers around a story that was popular ten years

⁹ According to the RTÜK audience research 2018, in Turkey “The peak time of watching television during weekdays is 18: 00-21: 00 (75.7%) and 21: 00-24: 00 (65.1%) respectively. This time zone, which covers a large part of the audience, is the time period in which the rate of view, called Prime Time.” (Anon 2018).

prior, *Binbir Gece* (2006-2009). The main character's conflicts and the main story arches are basically the same. When a scriptwriter has an alternative story that differs from the monotonous content on the television, the possibility of getting rejected increases. A scriptwriter who has a 15-year experience in the industry states that her stories have been rejected on the grounds that they were not stereotypical. She gives an example that she wrote a project involving a Russian woman as a protagonist. She explains that kind of a character is usually expected to be an antagonist, a villain or convert to Islam in the context of the serial but because the hero was not any of that her project got rejected. She mentions another rejected serial with an unusual story, and a radical anti-hero. Even if both projects were admired by the channel executives, they rejected the projects because the executives thought they would take a risk by producing and broadcasting these projects. The target audience of both projects were limited to AB group unlike the channel's expectation to reach total audience. She indicates that the producers and channel executives suggested revisions on the content in order to alter the story to reach total audience, but she says the implied revisions would disrupt the dramatic structure. She further explains that she presented her anti-hero story to an online streaming platform that she sees as a more radical and liberated medium.

The rating rivalry between different channels is effective on the extension of durations. When another channel extends a serial five more minutes, the channel executive demands the same from his/her crew. There is a constant increase in the episode durations and the number of episodes of television serials on Turkish television since the 1990s. According to Aysel Aziz, one of the TRT's most prominent serials in the 1980s, *Küçük Ağa* was shot and edited as eight episodes, its episode durations was 45 minutes. (Aziz, 1999, p. 79) A popular drama from the end of 1990's screened on ATV is *İkinci Bahar*, which consisted of 37 episodes and three seasons, each episode was around 45 minutes long. Produced in 2004, *Çemberimde Gül Oya* broadcasted in Kanal D was 60 minutes long, it was on air for two seasons and 40 episodes were produced in total. By the end of the 2000s, episode durations increased to 90 minutes. *Ezel* (2009), can be shown as an example here. This popular drama was on Show TV for the first season then transferred to ATV for the second season. The serial has 71, 90 minutes long episodes and two seasons. In the end of 2010's, the episode durations increased to two hours. *Sen Anlat Karadeniz* was top of the 2018's rating chart above other dramas. Its first season consisted of 20 episodes of 120 minute long.

One of our interviewees underlines the increase in terms of duration and its effect on storytelling "In the beginning we were writing 60-65 minutes, this duration increased to 140-150 minutes per episode in the last ten years¹⁰ and the stories transformed into something else." She also points out that channels use to produce two different serials for a day but as soon as they see they can decrease their budget by extending the durations the Prime Time 2 slot vanished. She states that "There was more variety in the second time slot, the themes and genres were detective stories and the tense thrillers. There was diversity." In the 90s when there were two different primetime slots there was a diversity in terms of genres and stories; detective stories, genres of crime and horror was available on television. The increase in durations did not have an effect the creative crew's wages. This is in fact a factor that affected the motivation of the writers. A decade ago, they were writing serials that was almost half-length in duration, and now the creative team is forced into working twice as hard than they used to. Another interviewee supports this argument: "There is not a single dramatic structure that can carry on with the required length. We cannot keep the same quality for 150-160 minute episodes each week. This leads to uniformity in storytelling." She further explains that as the writing spans

¹⁰ In 2010, a declaration that followed a protest named "Yerli Dizi Yersiz Uzun (Local Serials Are Too Long)" was signed by 97 television scriptwriters, against the working conditions in the sector ("Dizi Sektöründe Deprem: Senaristler Kazan Kaldırdı," 2017). Evidently, this protest was not effective and the lengthy episodes remained.

get shorter, quality is jeopardized. Some writers we interviewed mention that they gave up their profession because of the high tempo this job requires and because they cannot write what they aim to write at the first place. Rushing causes stress and serious exhaustion. The storylines that are planned for an entire season of a drama gets spent because of the increased demand of duration causing visible problems in the dramatic structure.¹¹

Meanwhile, producers find another way of making money out of lengthy shows. Another important source of income for producers and/or channels is the exportation of Turkish serials to foreign countries. At the moment, Turkish serials are the key televisual products marketed abroad.¹² Apart from being profitable, exportation is effective in shaping content. Turkish serials are considered as a kind of “soft power” especially in the Arab sphere, having the ability to shape the preferences, as the impact of serials abroad studied by scholars (Rousselin 2013; Yanardağoğlu and Karam, 2013; Yörük and Vatikiotis, 2013b). There is indeed a reciprocal relationship with the foreign cultures that Turkey sells content to: the industry is affected by foreign cultures as much as it affects them. The demands and expectations of audiences in the target countries for foreign sales blend into, and at times dominate the creative practices, producing stereotyped stories and characters. Channels are concerned about target regions’ audiences and approach content with this perspective. One scriptwriter who works for television serials since 2014 claims that “the content is also shaped by the target countries for sales.” She explains in order to sell serials to those countries they have to involve stereotypical stories. For example, involving great love stories, clichés that stem from the dualities like good and bad or rich and poor became requirements. It also effects the choice of actors and actresses. If an actor or actress is popular in foreign countries, they get the chance to get another role in a similar story. This also limits the options in the actor or actress choice. The boundaries of creative field are again limited with the target countries’ content expectations.

According to a scriptwriter who worked in writing one of the early examples of online originals as well as national channels’ serials states that the exportation also affects the form of the serials: “Serials in Turkey are sold abroad at a very high rate. We transfer our rights to the producer and the producer hands them over to the channel. Channel divides an episode to three parts and sells it abroad.”

Even though traditional channels intend to sell their content to foreign countries, it is not a major goal for online streaming platforms. That enables a more liberated environment for the creative crew, producers and for platform. A manager states that “Our characters swear if they need to swear. Because it is not a matter of life or death for us to sell our content to that region. If our characters need to drink alcohol they will.” An important limitation shaping the

¹¹ This situation explains the high number of cancelled or finalized TV serials. In the 2017-2018 broadcasting season¹¹ 52 television serials cancelled in the six major channels. Out of these 52 serials, 25 were cancelled before the eleventh¹ episode.

¹² There is a body of literature that focuses on exportation of Turkish content to foreign countries and its effects. Some scholars focus on the reception of Turkish serials in Arab Peninsula (Yanardağoğlu & Karam, 2013; Yörük & Vatikiotis, 2013). According to Zafer Yörük and Pantelis Vatikiotis between 2005 and 2011 more than 35.000 hours of content was exported to 76 countries (Yörük and Vatikiotis 2013a). According to the data gathered from several media sources, export revenue of Turkish serials increased 10 million dollars to 350 million dollars between 2008 and 2016. If the targets set for the year 2023 are realized, the export figures are expected to surpass \$ 1 billion (“Türk dizilerinin ihracat karnesi,” 2018). The regions that import Turkish serials the most are Middle East, North Africa, South America, Balkan Region, and Eastern Europe and Central Asia. As indicated by the industry reports, Turkish serials were exported to 50 countries in 2012 but this number increased to 142 countries in 2017. Episode sale prices increased from 500 dollars to 50-600 thousand dollars bringing a greater income in the last 10 years (Bozkuş, 2017). The president of Istanbul Chamber of Commerce Şekib Avdagiç states that Turkey is among the top five television and online streaming serial exporters (Acar, 2018).

content on traditional television channels seems to disappear on digital platforms. This is probably one of the reasons why the range of genres, styles, characters and storylines in serials produced for the digital platforms is much more varied.

CONCLUSION

Online streaming platforms are increasingly becoming an important media outlet worldwide for audiovisual content. For the past years with the introduction of VoD platforms into the Turkish market, Turkish serial industry and its practices have been transformed. The goal of this study was to reveal the external and internalized limitations which restrains the creative crew. Several questions were asked in order to understand and investigate the changing production processes of Turkish television serials and original productions.

A thorough review of broadcasting in Turkey and financial structures of conventional channels along with the interview results reveal that there are several external limitations that affect the content production practices. These external limitations are RTÜK's force on the creative content, ambiguous laws and regulations, the media monopolization, channel economies, their rating anxieties, channels' broadcasting policies and exportation of serials. It appears that these external limitations are internalized by the creative crew and lead to building a self-censorship mechanism. Even though emerging online streaming platforms have different production practices and financial structures than traditional television, self-censorship mechanisms endure in a shapeshifted way. There is a variety of genres, themes, visual style and characters in serials on digital platforms, but the creative crew are wary about the boundaries of this diversity. Indeed, there is no active and direct governmental control or monopolization on digital platforms, but internalized reflexes limit creativity, leading to lack of alternatives.

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APPENDIX A: LIST OF INTERVIEWEES

No.	Interview Date	Age	Gender	Occupation	Experience
1	12.02.2018	33	Female	Screenwriter	3 TV series, 1 platform series
2	12.07.2018	42	Male	Director, Screenwriter	2 feature films, 1 platform series (as director and screenwriter)
3	12.10.2018	31	Male	Platform Executive Producer	4 platform originals
4	12.16.2018	40	Female	Screenwriter	4 TV series
5	01.09.2019	38	Female	Screenwriter	4 feature films, 7 TV series
6	27.12.2018	43	Male	Showrunner, Director, Screenwriter	2 platform series, 2 feature films, 4 TV series (as writer); 1 platform series (as director); 2 platform series (as showrunner)
7	05.03.2019	43	Male	Director, Actor, Screenwriter	5 feature films and 13 TV series (as actor); 1 platform series and 1 feature film (as director); 1 feature film and 1 short film (as screenwriter)
8	01.01.2019	51	Male	Director, Writer, Producer	11 feature film, 1 TV series, 1 platform series (as writer); 1 feature film, 4 TV series (as producer); 14 feature films, 1 TV series, 1 platform series (as director)
9	03.01.2019	39	Male	Director, Producer, Writer	3 feature films (as writer); 3 feature films (as producer); 1 platform series, 3 feature films, 1 TV series, 1 short film (as director)
10	04.01.2019	53	Female	Creator, Screenwriter	1 platform series (as showrunner and writer)
11	29.01.2019	60	Female	Producer, Director, TV Channel Executive	2 TV movies, 6 TV series (as producer); 1 TV series (as director)
12	13.02.2019	40	Female	Screenwriter	8 TV series
13	15.02.2019	31	Female	Screenwriter	2 TV series

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Can you evaluate the projects you have done for television and online platform? Can you explain the similarities and differences between the content and the production process?
2. What do you think about the form and narrative of the serials produced for online platforms?
3. What similarities and differences do you see when you compare characters and stories in TV and online platforms?
4. Can you evaluate the impact of RTÜK on your projects?
5. Can you evaluate the fact that the RTÜK law will include online platforms?
6. How do you think the inclusion of online platforms in the law affects the creative processes and production of the serials? Could you please give examples for me to understand?
7. Is there anything you want to add?

APPENDIX C: THE CHANNEL OWNERSHIP HISTORIES

The ownership histories of six major television channel in Turkey can be examined in the Table A.1 The Ownership Histories of Major Television Channels in Turkey.

ATV	Media Conglomerate (1992-2000) Çukurova Conglomerate & Ciner Media Group & MV Holding (2000-2001) Media Conglomerate (2001-2002) Ciner Media Group (2002-2007) TMSF (2007) Turkuvaz Media Group (2007-today)
FOX TV TURKEY	News Corporation (2007-2013) 21st Century Fox (2013-2017) The Walt Disney Company (2017-today)
KANAL D	Doğuş Yayın Group (1993-1994) Doğan Conglomerate (1994-2018) Demirören Conglomerate (2018-today)
SHOW TV	Europe and America Conglomerate, Web Conglomerate, Hürriyet Conglomerate, Medya Conglomerate (1991-1993) Europe and America Conglomerate, Medya Conglomerate (1993-1994, 1995-1997) Europe and America Conglomerate, Medya Conglomerate, Doğan Conglomerate (1994-1995) Europe and America Conglomerate (1997-2000) Çukurova Conglomerate (2000-2013) TMSF (2013, 2014, 2015) Ciner Yayın Conglomerate (2013-today)
STAR TV	Özal Conglomerate (1989-1992) Star Media Group (1989-2004) TMSF (2004-2005) Doğan Conglomerate (2005-2011) Doğuş Media Group (2011-today)
TRT 1	Owned by Turkish state as an autonomous entity

Table A.1 The Ownership Histories of Major Television Channels in Turkey

APPENDIX D: CHANNEL REVENUES

RATEM's sectoral report published in 2018, the revenues of commercial communication of televisions in 2017 are listed on the Table B.1 Commercial Communication Revenues of Televisions by Revenue Types (RATEM 2019).

Revenue Source	2017
Advertising	3.415.846
Product Placement	16.225
Tele-Shopping	5.150
Other	3.771
Total Advertising Revenue	3.440.992
Sponsorship	192.850
Total Communication Revenue	3.633.842

Table B.1 Commercial Communication Revenues of Televisions (Thousand TL, Current Prices)