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Turkish Televisual Landscape and Domestic TV Fiction

Abstract

In the new multi-channel television environment which still appears as an unsettled landscape, issues of increasing domestic contents always became a crucial consideration. In Turkey, beginning with the first quarter of the 1990's, commercial television has drastically increased the need for television programs like else where in Europe. During the years, what comes out clearly, however, is Turkish television is able to offer a large number of domestic television programs, especially domestic television fiction. Today, in contrast to the case with many European countries, television fiction is overwhelmingly Turkish in Turkey. In fact, foreign penetration had never been a serious threat for the Turkish television market. However, it must be added that a large offer of domestic programme neither always indicates a diversity of content nor a creative industry. In this context, this paper will summarise the findings of a research that focuses on productive activity and capacity of Turkish broadcasters regarding domestic television fiction. The study also seeks to come to a general understanding of recent developments and new trends in Turkish televisual landscape.

Sevilay Çelenk
Ankara Üniversitesi
İletişim Fakültesi

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The Turkish mediascape has experienced unexpected and rapid changes in the last decade. The roots of these developments can be traced back to the mid-1980s, a time when European audio-visual policies were transformed as a result of trends towards deregulation. Deregulation processes in Europe have considerably affected the television industry in Turkey and encouraged commercial television channels.

Until 1990, there were only four state-controlled channels of TRT (Turkish Radio and Television Corporation). *Interstar* TV, the first privately owned channel in Turkey, ended TRT's monopoly by attempting satellite broadcasting in May 1990. One consequence of this audacious act was the subsequent establishment of 15 commercial TV channels. Within a decade, two international and four national TRT channels, as well as 15 private channels, had started broadcasting. Broadcasting Act No. 3984 was the unavoidable response to these developments, and it finally allowed commercial channels in 1993.

Today in Turkey, the 15 commercial channels and TRT1 broadcast approximately 140,000 hours per year. It is a remarkable fact that in spite of this high volume nearly all television programs in prime time are domestic productions. Imported programs like cartoons or serials, for which the target audiences are mostly children and housewives, are broadcast only in the daytime or the very early morning.

The Origin of Fiction Programs

The new multi-channel television industry has drastically increased the need for television programs. When deregulation began, a large amount of imported programs, such as serials, films and documentaries, filled commercial television schedules. At that time, the TV fiction on offer was inevitably of foreign origin, coming mostly from the United States, Brazil, or Mexico.

As time passed, the commercial channels became established institutions and their volume of Turkish programs increased. Research on viewing preferences had shown that Turkish audiences were far more interested in domestic productions -such as domestic TV fiction, entertainment programs, and studio discussions- than in imports. In fact, this observation wasn't at all new.

In the days of TRT's monopoly, television fiction became one of the most favourite offerings on Turkish television. While in the late seventies and the first half of the eighties, TRT programmed in prime time several high-profile fiction imports, such as *Dallas*, *Space 1999* and *Dynasty*, this policy changed after 1985. Increasing the share of domestic TV fiction in its schedule became a basic objective of TRT. Since the late eighties, TRT has both increased the in-house production of TV fiction and has encouraged independent companies to produce fiction. Although most of these fiction programs were at first inspired

by, or adopted from, great examples of Turkish literature, original TV fiction soon started to emerge. The popularity of domestic TV fiction meant that these programs were always given priority, especially in prime time.

Learning from TRT's experience, the commercial channels realised the importance of domestic TV fiction even before they started broadcasting, and tried to increase the time allocated to it from the outset, mostly commissioning their programs from independent production companies. The newly established TV channels have shown a general tendency to leave program development to independent production companies and act only as publisher-broadcasters because of their inexperience in various aspects of television programming. In the first years at least, their competence was mainly limited to the technical side of broadcasting. Buying independent products has also given them an opportunity to decrease production costs and increase their program choices. As a result, the number of independent production companies in Turkey has increased annually, and they have gained considerable experience. These companies produce game shows, musical entertainment programming, talk shows, and studio discussion programs. By the end of 1999, there were around 50 drama production companies in Istanbul alone.

Domestic TV fiction has strongly caught the viewers' attention and has played an important role in meeting the program requirements of major broadcasters. In 1998, the major commercial TV stations broadcast 30-35 different first-run domestic TV fiction programs every week, almost all of which were made by independent production companies. Today, in addition to TRT1, five out of the 15 commercial channels (*ATV*, *Star TV*, *Kanal D*, *Show TV*, and *TGRT*) regularly broadcast TV fiction. According to figures derived from the reports of AGB-Istanbul, these channels broadcast 4,655 hours of domestic and foreign TV fiction in 1996, 4,090 hours in 1997, and approximately 4,000 hours in 1998. A closer look at the

schedules shows that, each year, nearly 45% of this total has been allocated to domestic TV fiction. Moreover, almost all TV fiction broadcast in prime time is domestic. TV fiction imported from foreign countries is broadcast during the day, and today it mostly comes from the United States.

Domestic TV Fiction

In comparison with many other European countries, Turkish TV fiction has succeeded in shielding Turkish screens from the hegemony of both US programs and Latin American telenovelas, especially in prime time. In effect, foreign penetration had never been a serious threat for the Turkish television market. Even though imported fiction programs have always been cheaper than domestic ones, commercial channels have responded to consumer preferences and tried to help develop a domestic fiction industry.

Nevertheless, in the fourth quarter of 1998, the first signs of a crisis in TV fiction emerged, and this became a real crisis in 1999. Beginning in the last months of 1998, top-rated first-run fiction programs started to be affected by a general economic crisis. As the crisis deepened, network advertising revenues decreased due to companies in several sectors slashing their advertising budgets. As a result, networks could no longer afford the high costs demanded by the independent companies for first-run TV programs, especially fiction. As a consequence of giving priority to popular and high-priced TV stars in leading roles, fiction programs had become the most expensive programming option. Negotiations among major networks resulted in a kind of gentlemen's agreement: The networks' marketing companies -*Prime Media*, *Bimaş*, *Mepaş* and *Medpa*- agreed to apply a single tariff scale for their commercial slots which up until then had been priced individually. The agreement also meant that they would be able to act as a single and powerful body against independent production companies

and pay more or less equal, and lowered, prices for programs. A second decision was of prime importance for the future of domestic fiction. The networks started to substitute this expensive genre, especially in prime time, with relatively cheaper productions such as game and celebrity shows. As a result, even some of the most popular fiction programs, such as *İkinci Bahar*, disappeared at the end of the first quarter of 1999.

Of the four major commercial networks, *ATV* has had a more or less stable prime-time schedule because it has generally given preference to quality serials featuring stage actors rather than TV or movie stars who are paid astronomical sums. Additionally, as the owner of one of the biggest private production companies in the Turkish television industry (*Ulusal TV*), *ATV* was able to keep the costs of fiction production at a lower level. However, *İkinci Bahar*, starring famous movie stars *Türkan Şoray* and *Şener Şen*, is an exception to *ATV*'s fiction policy.

Star TV substituted first-run fiction in prime-time slots with re-runs of domestic fiction programs, and *Show TV* allocated most of its airtime to repeats of old Turkish comedies and celebrity shows. *Kanal D* started to substitute a high-rated prime-time game show called *fiuse* studio productions or program re-runs. Not surprisingly, the independent production companies have had severe problems adapting to this new situation.

This chaotic situation continued until September 1999. During this period, even the prime-time line-up of the major networks mainly consisted of fiction re-runs and variety and game shows. However, no significant change took place in daytime and late-night programming, which continued to consist basically of a range of shows for women, cartoons, and topical studio discussions. First-run domestic fiction only reappeared in the last months of 1999. These problems may appear as an inevitable result of an immature industry's fluctuations, but the companies producing fiction had been

managed fairly competently and professionally. Rather, the problems experienced by the television industry were caused by the upswing in inflation and the deepening economic crisis, not inefficiencies in the industry per se.

Successes and Failures

If we exclude the financial problems experienced by the industry in the last months of 1998, it is evident that Turkish television is able to offer a large number of domestic TV fiction programs. Compared to many other European countries, domestic fiction programs play a crucial role in Turkey. This can be seen from the Turkish top 100 list of the most watched programs. In the first quarter of 1998, four out of the first 10 programs and 28 of the top 100 were domestic fiction broadcasts. Foreign series were nearly absent from this list: The two that were on the list were in very low positions-*Police Academy* at number 86 and *Sinbad* at 91. The other leading programs were game and variety shows, and sports events like football championships and world cups.

Interestingly, the most popular movies on Turkish television are also domestic productions. Only five foreign movies, including Hollywood productions, are among the top 50 TV programs, and 12 more are even lower ranked. Even re-runs of old works of Turkish cinema seem to attract larger audiences than Hollywood movies-in all, 30 Turkish movies were among this top 100 list of the first quarter of 1998. Turkish television screens seem to be more in need of rescue from the hegemony of Turkish TV fiction and movies than of foreign imports.

However, it must be borne in mind that success in quantitative terms is not necessarily linked to qualitative aspects. A large offering of domestic TV fiction as such indicates neither a diversity of content nor a creative industry. In Turkey, it is more the result of product diversification and the production of re-combinations of highly successful fiction programs, driven by commercial imperatives.

Fiction Program Content

The stories told in domestic TV fictions essentially employ three models of relations among leading characters and lifestyles:

Lower or middle class communities acting in solidarity with their neighbourhood. This type of domestic fiction includes family comedies as well as open-ended serials.

Conflicting relations of people who, economically, belong to upper classes. It is quite common for people of upper classes to be represented as being involved in various struggles concerning power, money, love affairs etc.

Famous characters who are mostly popular stars, business people or important politicians involved in drug trafficking, mafia relations, corruption and cheating. These topics are a speciality of crime and action series.

Some fiction programs that feature a famous singer in the leading role can be considered a subgroup of domestic TV fiction. They are generally closed series that last one broadcast season, and are usually inspired by a popular song that is developed into a series resembling a long music video; e.g. *Yıkılmadım*.

In general, it is quite obvious that the social relations of traditional communities are prominent in the narratives of Turkish TV fiction. However, the priority given to the representation of these relations does not mean that these stories are preferred by TV programmers because they reflect a culture closer to a Turkish way of life. Rather, they are preferred because they represent diverse identities that enable a fiction program to draw a larger audience. Different occupations are likely to be represented in the depiction of a community; for example, teacher, postman, housekeeper, grocer, repairman, and so on, as are people at different educational levels or in different age groups. In short, this tendency has economic roots- by accumulating audiences, the television companies can raise

their profits. One limitation to this, however, is that almost all domestic fiction represents an İstanbul-based lifestyle. If we take into account that the fiction production industry is based in İstanbul, this is hardly surprising.

In contrast to television, cinematic filmmaking in Turkey is completely overshadowed by American movies. The biggest part of the problem is distribution and exhibition: Turkish movies have difficulty finding a movie theatre for their screening. However, it cannot be argued that this American hegemony in the cinema counter-balances the hegemony of Turkish fiction on TV. Rather, both areas address a completely different audience and must therefore be seen as totally independent of the other. While the audience of TV fiction mostly consists of housewives and middle-aged people, cinematic audiences in Turkey are primarily from younger age groups. Nonetheless, television does have the general effect of decreasing the number of moviegoers. Already in the 1970s, the disappearance of family theatres, as well as down-town cinemas, was attributed to television.

The Future of the Television Industry

Commercial television in Turkey is a young but fast developing industry, notably changing from one year to another. However, it is obvious that the concepts of "free competition" and "private enterprise" in television have not led automatically to product diversity in television programming in the manner claimed by the owners of private channels. This is particularly evident in the similarities in the content of television fiction. Even though TV fiction has done much more than simply survive in this very open television environment, its future is still unpredictable.

Among the new trends in domestic TV fiction, "sponsorship" is emerging as a new method of financing, particularly following the industry's economic crisis. New

developments such as the previously mentioned gentlemen's agreement forced the independent production companies to cover their expenditures with sponsorship instead of being paid in advance by broadcasters. Currently, most domestic TV fiction is being produced with the support of sponsor companies from sectors such as textiles, automobiles, banking and food. Nearly all fiction programs have sponsors whose number can range from 10 to 40 for each episode. As a consequence, TV channels are no longer expected to pay for fiction. Unless there is an awareness of the importance of further diversification regarding both the stories and target audiences of fiction programs, there is no guarantee that the savings made by Turkish broadcasters will be utilised to promote a higher quality in fiction production.

Methodology Issues: Problems in Published Empirical Research in Turkey

Abstract

This article, mainly using the positivist-empiricist theoretical framework, is an assessment of the present state of empirical research design and statistical analysis in Turkey. The main objective of the study is to illuminate the problem areas in applied and/or administrative social research and prompt concerned parties to design research in order to determine the extent of the problem and provide proper suggestions for plausible solutions. Examination of published empirical research indicates that there are widespread design and statistical usage problems, stemming from the lack of knowledge, expertise, ethic and rigor (from the standpoint of the mainstream theory), and rooted in dominant mode and relations of academic life (from the perspective of Marxist oriented critical schools in general).

İrfan Erdoğan
Ankara Üniversitesi
İletişim Fakültesi