

TURKISH PRIME TIME TELEVISION: MASS CULTURE AND TABLOIDIZATION

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Abstract

The main objective of this study is to observe the new tendencies on prime time Turkish television. Especially the main news bulletins of TRT1 and three private channels, namely ATV, Kanal D and Samanyolu TV will be analysed in order to trace tabloidization in the news bulletins. Moreover, a comparison of the rest of prime time television programmes will be drawn in order to see the changes in Turkish television, especially the effects of mass culture. Some of our findings can be given as follows: It was detected that news about celebrities, mostly female, was the most frequent news both on Kanal D and ATV. We had repetitions of the same or similar pictures one after the other with less text and information. During the week of analysis, it was observed that news on politics was the most frequent on TRT1 and Samanyolu TV. And political news generally appreciated the government's actions. As a contrast to the other channels, Samanyolu TV broadcasted news with religious content. The rest of prime time programmes on the private channels were generally Turkish dramas. Most of them were the products of mass culture. On the other hand, programme distribution of TRT1 was quite balanced.

Key Words: Prime Television, tabloidization, mass culture.

Özet: Prime Time Kuşağında Türk Televizyonları : Kitle Kültürü ve Tabloidleşme

Bu çalışmanın amacı, prime-time kuşağındaki televizyon programlarında gözlemlenen yeni eğilimleri ortaya koymaktır. En çok izleyiciye ulaşıldığı kabul edilen, saatlerde yayımlanan programların incelediği çalışmada; Kanal D, ATV, Samanyolu TV ve TRT1'in programları, kaydedilerek çözümlenmiştir. Böylece bu kanallarda yayımlanan ana haber bültenleri, 'tabloidleşme'; yerli drama, spor, müzik programları ve belgeseller ise 'kitle kültürü'nü yansıtmaları açısından ele alınmıştır. Ulaşılan bazı sonuçları şu şekilde özetlemek mümkündür: Kanal D ve ATV'de haber konuları tabloidleşme eğilimini açık bir biçimde gözler önüne sermektedir. Örneğin, incelenen tarihlerde öncelikle şöhretler ile ilgili haberlere ağırlık verilmiştir. Öyle ki, ekonomi ile ilgili haberlerin bile şöhretler ile ilişkilendirilerek verildiği kaydedilmiştir. Ayrıca haberlerde gözlenen diğer önemli bir bulgu, aynı veya benzer görüntülerin tekrar tekrar verilerek, enformasyonun sınırlı tutulduğudur. Samanyolu TV ve TRT 1'de ise, politika haberleri baskın bir biçimde yer almıştır. Bu kanallardaki haberlerde özellikle hükümetin icraatlerini savunan tek taraflı bir yaklaşım saptanmış; ayrıca, politikacıların özel hayatlarına ilişkin bilgilerin öne çıkartıldığı bir anlayışın benimsendiği görülmüştür. Diğer kanallardan farklı bir biçimde, Samanyolu TV'nunda, din ile ilgili haber konuları kaydedilmiştir. Haberler dışındaki programlar incelendiğinde ise, özel kanalların ağırlıklı olarak yerli

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dramalara yer verdikleri kaydedilmiştir. Yerli dramalar daha çok kitle kültürünü yansıtmaktadırlar. Öte yandan TRT 1’de diğer kanallardan farklı olarak dengeli bir program dağılımı saptanmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Prime time kuşağı programları, tabloidleşme, kitle kültürü

INTRODUCTION

For more than two decades television in Turkey was synonymous with the Turkish Radio and Television Corporation (TRT) which was founded in 1964. The Turkish Constitution had awarded the sole broadcasting licence to TRT. This monopoly lasted until 1990 when the first privately owned television station started broadcasting to Turkey via satellite from the Federal Republic of Germany. This was followed by other stations beaming from abroad. With the deregulation movement, the mushrooming of private channels changed the whole broadcasting scene in Turkey. At first, the Turkish public embraced the new channels because they thought that these new channels would bring diversity with new types of programmes that would be alternatives to the long running, uninspiring TRT programmes. In fact, in the first couple of years, films and types of music that had not been found suitable to be broadcast on TRT were on the screens of these new channels. At prime time debate programmes on themes considered taboo; such as homosexuality, Shi’ism the problems in South East Turkey, Kemalism etc., were broadcast one after the other. The rest of the prime time schedule was filled with foreign films, series, serials and soap-operas etc.

However, when we come to the early 2000’s new tendencies are observed on the Turkish channels. In this article, a light will be shed on prime time Turkish television. Especially the main news bulletins of TRT1 and three

private channels, namely ATV, Kanal D and Samanyolu TV will be analysed in order to trace tabloidization in the news bulletins. Moreover, a comparison of the rest of prime time television programmes will be drawn in order to see the changes in Turkish television, especially the effects of mass culture.

Programmes of The Turkish Prime Time Television

Research shows that Turkish people watch television approximately 4 hours a day (Alver and Gül: 2006). The majority of the people watch television especially after work, between 19.00-23.00, in other words, during the prime time hours. If we analyse the programmes of the Turkish channels during prime time we see that every channel first broadcasts its main news bulletin then most of the schedule is filled with contests, films and mostly with Turkish dramas such as family based dramas, crime dramas, historical dramas in the form of series or serials. Here, it is important to note that most of the dramas are products of independent Turkish producers. While in the first years of deregulation private broadcasters seemed bent on buying as many American and Latin American imports as possible, within a few years these imported films, dramas etc. were unable to compete with local productions.

Today the major discussion among the Turkish scholars about prime time television focuses especially on the main news bulletins of these channels. Most of

them point to the tendency defined as tabloidization.

Tabloidization of News Bulletins

McLachan and Golding (2000) state that tabloidization is characterized by fewer international news stories, more pictures and less text, more human interest and entertainment news stories and less political and parliamentary news, and repetitions. Ergül (2000) describes the tabloidization of the news in two ways: the increase of less newsworthy elements in the news bulletins; and the placing of popular and tabloid elements of secondary importance in the foreground. He assumes that tabloidization is something that derives from the nature of the medium. Thus, in the case of television news, the structural characteristics of television, its language and technology are the important factors that help to develop tabloidization. Some scholars state that tabloidization is an advanced form of infotainment. In other words, tabloidization is a form that joins information with entertainment. Brants (1998) who is rather concerned with the tendency towards tabloidization, offers a research tool, termed as an 'infotainment scale' and coded not only the news bulletins but all programmes for the presence of defined informational and/or entertainment characteristics in respect of their topics, styles and formats. He comes out in relief with a conclusion that in the Netherlands, the evidence 'does not point to infotainment taking over' (329) and 'tabloid television news.....is still practically absent in Europe' (323). On the contrary Blumler (1999:243) who finds Brants rather paternalistic observes the changes in television as quite natural and he writes for the news bulletins that they have been 'cosmetically revamped; news readers have

become celebrities, paid and promoted as such'. He does not criticize the changes, moreover he states that:

there may be more than one way or one television genre to inform citizens about politics, ranging from mainstream news and current affairs through call-in programs.....other hybrid infotainment formats, as well as soap operas and dramas in realistic settings that highlight current issues.

Most of the researchers who draw attention to the tabloidization of news state that the personalization of politics is an important issue that should be considered. The issue criticized is not politics being popular but more about it losing its content. Personalization of politics is mostly seen as Gencel (2004:377) puts it, 'in the news items that focus on the human dimension of politicians'. Moreover as a contrast to Ergül, Gencel(2004:376) claims that tabloidization is the outcome of the characteristics of the current media industry: especially the fierce competition between media groups for ratings, the low investment in experienced employees and the consequent decrease in investigative reporting .

Of course there are more cautious or even optimistic views concerning the tendency towards tabloidization. For example, Fiske (1992) argues that tabloid journalism can criticize dominant understandings, be subversive and offer an alternative reality to the official one. Actually in his previous work Fiske (1990:166-170) analyzed how *Weekly World News* a tabloid newspaper, achieved to be subversive.

Products of Mass Culture

Throughout the twentieth century expressions like mass culture and popular culture have been among the main subjects of many scholars. They tried to clarify the meaning of these expressions in relation to the socio-economic development of society. However these two expressions were likely to be interchanged in various contexts. Therefore the great critical theorists Adorno and Horkheimer felt themselves obliged to make a distinction between mass culture and popular culture in many of their works. For example, Adorno(1975) in his article entitled *Culture Industry Reconsidered*, defined popular culture as something that arises 'spontaneously from the masses themselves, the contemporary form of popular art'. And mass culture as a product that is 'tailored for consumption by masses' for certain purposes. In order to eliminate any further misunderstanding between mass culture and popular culture, Adorno ve Horkheimer coined a new term 'culture industry' to use instead of mass culture. In their work they argued that culture industries with their 'mechanical reproduction' manipulated the [masses](#) into passivity, and in turn the easy pleasures available through consumption of mass culture make people docile and content, no matter how difficult their economic circumstances(Zipes,1980). As Kellner puts it, like the Frankfurt School, British Cultural Studies concluded that mass culture was playing an important role 'in integrating the working class into existing capitalist societies and that a new consumer and media culture was forming a new mode of capitalist hegemony'. Both also saw culture as a 'mode of ideological reproduction and hegemony, in which cultural forms help to shape the modes of thought and behavior that induce individuals to adapt to the social conditions

of capitalist societies'. Moreover, they also saw culture as a form of 'resistance to capitalist society' and both the earlier forerunners of British Cultural Studies, such as Raymond Williams and the theorists of the Frankfurt School saw high culture as forces of resistance to capitalist modernity. Later, British Cultural Studies would 'valorize resistant moments in media culture and audience interpretations and use of media artifacts', while the Frankfurt School tended, 'with some exceptions, to see mass culture as a homogeneous and potent form of ideological domination'. This Kellner believed was a difference that would seriously divide the two traditions (Kellner,2005).

Today the attempts of distinguishing different types of culture still continue. For example, according to Türkoğlu(2004:92), mass culture should be distinguished from folk culture and popular culture asking questions such as 'who produced it' and 'for whom they produce it?'. The answers she has given are that the mass culture is used for products produced through an industrial mass production system, on the other hand folk culture is about products produced by the public for their own use. As for popular culture, it is said to be the products used and loved by everybody.

On the other hand Oskay(2004) states that 'popular culture- in other words the culture of folk - has no longer a chance to survive. Today culture has been transformed into a culture that is, uniform, mass produced by certain organizations, with criterias and values determined by central organizations. Culture that is changed in this way is not popular culture anymore but becomes mass culture'. For him many programmes on television reflect popular culture.

Similar to what Oskay says our analysis showed that during prime time Turkish channels first broadcast their main news bulletins then the remaining schedule is filled with contests, films and mostly with Turkish dramas which are the products of a mass culture. In other words, they mostly reflect the culture in the two big cities, Istanbul and Ankara where the national television channels, dailies and also the private producers are located. In reality, it is difficult to talk about the culture of Istanbul or Ankara because these cities have lost their identities mostly due to huge migrations. The original population of Istanbul has disappeared. On the other hand, the people who come from all the other small cities or rural areas first experience an identity crisis where they feel themselves neither belonging to Istanbul nor to their home towns (Oskay: 2004). Then they slowly accept this culture, pumped especially by media and the people around them. This culture unifies people with the lowest common denominator in general moral values and basic emotions - sorrow, love, hate, curiosity etc. In turn, all people help to build on and strengthen this culture as they use it. Thus, according to Fiske's explanation (1990:162) we can say that on Turkish television the parts of each programme or drama are actually the 'paroles' of the 'langue' which is in fact the product of the mass culture.

As we look at the programme ratings in prime time we see that the Turkish dramas have quite high ratings. People prefer to watch these dramas with their families. It is pleasing to see that people no longer prefer the foreign productions. Today there is a new tendency in the dramas. Dramas have started to foreground regional cultures, common Turkish history, etc. Although

there is no regulation concerning the reflection of cultural diversity etc. in the Broadcasting Law one might state that market forces have worked well in forcing broadcasters to observe cultural diversity and common history etc.

SAMPLING AND METHODOLOGY

As the sample of our study three national private television channels namely *Kanal D*, *ATV* and *Samanyolu TV* and the public service channel *TRT1* were selected. *Kanal D* and *ATV*, from different major cross-media groups were identified because of their satisfactory prime time ratings among the other channels. On the other hand, *Samanyolu TV* was chosen because it is a channel of a smaller cross-media group with an Islamic tendency. The period of analysis was determined as April 17-April 23, 2006. The prime time programmes of these channels, in other words the ones shown between 18.45 and 23.00 were recorded and analysed. The prime time programmes we had chosen to analyse can be defined as follows: the main news bulletins (except for sports news and the weather forecast), films, dramas and other programmes such as contests, sports programmes, music programmes and documentaries.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The Main News Bulletins

If we look at the duration of the main news bulletins of the analysed channels, the news on *Kanal D* and *ATV* were two of the longest, approximately 50 minutes. They were followed by *Samanyolu TV* with approximately 40 minutes. On the other hand *TRT 1* was the shortest with about 30 minutes. Table 1 presents the dispersion of news items according to the themes of the main news bulletins of the analysed

channels. The above finding is also reflected in the number of news items on each channel.

It was detected that news about celebrities, mostly female, was the most frequent news both on *Kanal D* and *ATV* (*Kanal D* n:50; 31% and *ATV* n:58; 40%). One can state that celebrities are judged more 'newsworthy' than politicians. Then comes news of crimes (*Kanal D* n:20; 13% and *ATV* n:18; 12%). This finding supports Gencel's (2004) claim: the news on these channels is generally concerned with two groups of people: the poor with their tragedies and misfortunes, and the rich, with their wealth, gossip and glamorous lifestyles. Of course, this is dangerous as it reflects the inequitable income distribution in society and which in turn can accelerate the polarization of classes. Looking at the news on politics it was possible to detect the sign of personalization. In other words news foregrounded the 'human' side of politicians. For example, reports on the Prime Minister's back trouble were given day after day on every channel.

On the whole, the reporting used in the news was not the investigative type; rather it stated that something had happened but it did not deeply delve into why and how it happened, and moreover it did not present different points of view. Thus we have repetitions of the same or similar pictures one after the other with less text and information. News on economics in the analysed week was rather low on *Kanal D* and *ATV* (*Kanal D* n:1; 0,6% and *ATV* n:5; 3,4%). There were also sensational news headlines like, 'Natashas to pay income taxes, too!'

Looking at the main news bulletins of *Samanyolu TV* during the week of analysis, it was observed that news on politics was the most frequent (n:33; 28%), followed by news on the Iraq war and military operations (n:19; 16%). Political news generally appreciates the government's actions such as the news items on the new Social Security Law or the Minister of Environment's statements about the poisonous waste found in the Tuzla district and the new Environment Law. The news on war and military operations reflected the disputes going on in Iraq and the possibility of a new war in Iran. There was also some news about the military operations against the PKK, the terrorist group that hides in the high mountains in the South East of Turkey.

As a contrast to the other channels, *Samanyolu TV* broadcasted news with religious content (n:10; 8,4%). For example, during this week the channel gave special attention to the celebrations held in Turkey on the anniversary of birth of the Prophet Muhammed. In fact, most of these ceremonies were arranged by organizations close to the government. During the week of analysis only one news item on economics was found and in short it stated how rapidly the Turkish economy had developed in recent years, in other words appreciating the efforts of the government.

When we analysed the main news bulletins on *TRT1* we found that politics was the predominant theme on *TRT1* (n:54; 42%) followed by news of the Iraq war and military operations (n: 20; 16%). The news items were not sensationalist or tabloidized like the ones on the two private channels. However, the news bulletins of *TRT1* reflected the priorities of the State and were reluctant to debate any controversial issues

on the public agenda. Predominantly, the activities of the ruling party received coverage first, followed then by news about the opposition parties.

TRT 1 also covered the national ceremonies like 'April 23rd The National Sovereignty and Children's Day' during the week analysis, reminding the public of national history. As a contrast to the commercial channels, the main news bulletin of TRT had no news of celebrities and moreover unlike *Samanyolu TV* there was no news with religious content.

Themes	Kanal D	ATV	Samanyolu TV	TRT 1	Total
Accidents/Disasters	11	3	16	2	32
Crime	20	18	17	5	60
Economics	1	5	1	14	21
Iraq War – Military Operation	12	7	19	20	58
Politics	20	15	33	54	122
Sports	18	17	6	9	49
Celebrities	50	58	6	-	115
Human Interest	10	9	8	7	34
Religion	-	-	10	-	10
Other	17	13	2	17	49
Total	159	145	118	128	550

Table 1: The Dispersion of News Items According to their Themes

Other Programmes in Prime Time Television

Looking at the prime time programmes of the selected channels, as table 2 displays, the private channels have given place mostly to Turkish dramas (*Kanal D* n:8; 57%; *ATV* n:10; 77%; *Samanyolu TV*n:8; 61%). Most of *ATV*'s dramas are the ones which reflect mass culture. For example, *Aliye* is about a divorced woman who wants to regain custody of her daughter and son from her ex-husband. She lives in Istanbul and works

hard to earn her living. *Avrupa Yakası* is actually a situation comedy depicting a middle-class family living in Istanbul. The protagonist is a journalist named Aslı, who has been educated in New York. Her conflicts with her parents and brother and also her relationship with her friends at the office are shown in an ironic way.

If we look at the dramas on *Kanal D* we see that regional cultures are reflected in many of them. For example, in *Yabancı Damat* a family living in Diyarbakır who have a baklava-making business is depicted. Their daughter falls in love with a Greek businessman. Both families of the young lovers at first try to separate them and then give up and bless the marriage. Most of the scenes reflect the people of Diyarbakır and their traditions and customs. However the regional culture is given in a modernized way reminding us of the mass culture of Istanbul and Ankara, the two biggest cities of Turkey.

On the other hand, historical dramas are also shown on *Kanal D* for example, *Kırık Kanatlar* is about the years of the Turkish War of Independence. Different districts of Anatolia are again depicted. Two young officers fell in love with two young girls. These girls who were actually relatives try to help Mustafa Kemal's soldiers and the villagers. They also help to disguise and protect a Greek soldier who was once their neighbour because they know that he does not oppose the soldiers of Mustafa Kemal.

If we look at the dramas on *Samanyolu TV* we see that most of them are rather moral and mystical dramas. For example, *Sırlar Dünyası* is about extraordinary events people experience. The moral message is usually

that if you are good to everyone, if you are patient and are a good Muslim you will be rewarded in heaven.

On both *ATV* and *Kanal D* there are talent contests like *Star Avı* and *Benimle Dans Eder misin?* In both contests, there are juries of celebrity singers and dancers. Every week each candidate comes in front of the jury and performs his/her act. Viewers vote for the best performance each week, by sending SMS messages. Both of these are the Turkish versions of foreign contests.

As a contrast, *Samanyolu TV* did not have any contests but instead showed documentaries and foreign films. *Yaban* is actually a *National Geographic* documentary programme. On the other hand, *Kimse Yok mu?* and *Mavi Rüya* are the productions of *Samanyolu TV*. In the first one, the programme team travels all around Anatolia, they reflect various places as well as the inhabitants' traditions, customs etc. In the second one again the features of Anatolia have been displayed.

Table 2 shows that the programme distribution of *TRT1* is quite balanced. If we look at the Turkish dramas on *TRT1* we can say that they reflect cultural diversity. For example, *Hayat Türküsi* is a drama where a young idealist primary school teacher travels all around Anatolia and teaches students. Most of the scenes depicted Van. The problems in education, cultural differences, the negative sides of customs and traditions are the social themes covered. On the other hand, just like on *Samanyolu TV* documentaries related with Anatolia such as *Erguvan* and *Zamanın Tanığı* are broadcast. The contests on *TRT1* are mainly lottery drawings rather than talent contests. In the analysed week we detected only one music programme called *Safalar Getirdiniz*. It is a long programme, about two hours. Turkish Art Music songs were performed. The presenter of the programme is herself a singer and she invites singers, lyric writers and composers to the programme as guests and they talk about Turkish Art Music.

Channels		Programmes of the Selected Channels							Total
		17th. April Mon	18th. April Tue.	19th. April Wed.	20th. April Thur.	21th. April Fri.	22th. April Sat.	23th. April Sun.	
KanalD	Turkish Film	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	1
	Foreign Film	-	1	-	1	-	-	1	3
	Turkish Drama Series	1	1	2	1	2	-	1	8
	Contests	-	-	1	-	-	1	-	2
	Total	2	2	3	2	2	1	2	14
ATV	Turkish Drama Series	2	1	2	2	1	1	1	10
	Music Variety Show	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	1
	Contests	-	-	-	-	1	1	-	2
	Total	2	1	2	2	2	2	2	13
Samanyolu TV	Foreign Film	1	-	-	-	1	1	-	3
	Turkish Drama Series	2	1	1	1	1	1	1	8
	Documentaries	-	-	-	-	1	-	1	2
	Total	3	1	1	1	3	2	2	13

TRT1	Turkish Film	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	1
	Foreign Film	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	1
	Foreign Drama Series	-	1	1	-	-	-	-	2
	Turkish Drama Series	-	-	-	1	-	1	-	2
	Documentaries	-	-	-	1	-	-	1	2
	Contests	1	-	1	-	-	-	-	2
	Music Programme	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	1
	Sports Programme	-	-	-	-	-	1	1	2
	Total	2	2	2	2	1	2	2	13
General Total	9	6	8	7	8	7	8	53	

Table 2: Dispersion of the Prime Time Programmes of the Selected Channels

CONCLUSION

The Turkish Broadcasting System has been a dual system for more than a decade. However, still neither the public broadcaster nor the private channels can present satisfying prime time programming. After the deregulation most of the people thought that *TRT* which is the sole public broadcaster would change its state-centric and paternalistic attitude in time, but it hasn't. The rest of the channels although named as private channels in the law are in fact profit motivated commercial channels who are running after ratings.

When we analyzed Turkish prime time television, we detected tabloidization in the news bulletins of the private channels. They reflected fewer international news stories, more pictures and less text, entertainment news stories and less political and parliamentary news and repetitions. On the other hand, news foregrounded the human side of politicians. Both *Kanal D* and *ATV* especially preferred to broadcast news on mostly female celebrities. The rest of prime time programmes on the private channels were generally Turkish dramas. Most of them were the products of mass culture.

They reflected the culture in the two big cities, Istanbul and Ankara. Moreover, there is also a new tendency in the dramas. They have started to foreground regional cultures and reflect common Turkish history, which is quite pleasing. However the regional cultures are given in some programmes as in the case of *Yabancı Damat* in a modernized way reminding us of mass culture.

When we analyzed the news bulletins of *TRT1*, it was seen that politics was the predominant theme on *TRT1*. The news items were not sensationalist or tabloidized like the ones on the other two commercial channels. However the Turkish public service broadcasting channel did not serve the public sphere any better than the commercial ones. The news bulletins of *TRT1* reflected the priorities of the State. Again the news foregrounds the human side of politicians. When we looked at the rest of the prime time programmes of *TRT1*, it was detected that the programme distribution of *TRT1* was quite balanced. There were Turkish dramas, documentaries, contests, films, music programmes and sports programmes.

Another interesting finding is that all prime time television lacked debate programmes because most of them are broadcast after 23.00.

As a last remark, we can say that at present, neither the public broadcaster nor the private channels present satisfying news bulletins and quality based, folk oriented

original prime time programmes. However, we believe that with the digital environment where there will be hundreds of programme alternatives, competition among the channels will change the appearance of prime time Turkish television. Of course, this depends to a great degree on the media literacy of the viewers.

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