

## **Response to Other Television Histories: Commercial Broadcasting in Turkey**

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Despite the growing significance of Turkish television on the global arena since late 2000s (by way of its hugely popular series among pan-Arab and Balkan audiences, its emergence as a creative hub in the region, and the expansion of the state-run TRT into Central Asia, Europe, and the Middle East), histories of Turkish television are scarce. This response serves to develop a history of commercial Turkish television by addressing key regulatory, economic and cultural dynamics that have shaped its emergence and development from the 1990s to present day.

To this end, I identify three historical phases and analyze the following key developments:

- 1) 1990-1994: Commercial broadcasting begins in an illegal fashion (signals are beamed via satellite from Europe) leading to the *de facto* break up of state monopoly. Commercial stations mushroom in absence of regulation, introducing an era of cultural liberalization whereby hitherto taboo subjects are openly discussed and cultural/political “others” are made visible. In 1994, the Parliament passes the broadcasting law and establishes the Radio and Television Supreme Council (RTUK) as the regulatory body, aiming to bring some sense of order to the airwaves.
- 2) 1994-2000: There is relative stability marked with hyper-commercialization, conglomeration and clientelism. Given the inability of the advertising market to sustain an ever-increasing number of players, broadcasters turn to cheap programming which lead to homogenization and tabloidization. In the meantime, the RTUK begins to assert itself by establishing strict monitoring policies. Direct and

indirect forms of state control create a restrictive media logic, especially against the background of the armed conflict between the Turkish army and the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) and the increasing concerns with television's impact on family values, tradition, moral fabric of the society, etc.

- 3) 2000-present: Some leading media conglomerates collapse as result of a chain reaction instigated by the government take-over of the banks they own. Their media companies remain under the control of the government, and when they are finally auctioned off, new ownership structures emerge. Nonetheless, the impact of conglomeration and clientelism continue. With the Islamist AKP (Justice and Development Party) coming to power in 2002, there emerges a new wave of authoritarianism tinted with religious conservatism. As market forces continue to shape the broadcasting logic, the industry is crippled by in/direct forms of state control and normalization of self-censorship.

Using the particular developments mentioned above, I discuss the continuities and changes in terms of the economic, political and regulatory issues that constrain Turkish television. While I acknowledge the role of corporate/commercial pressures, my particular concern here is with the state, which (still) wields a great deal of power over commercial television.

Even though the state lost direct control and ownership of television broadcasting back in 1990, it has nonetheless continued its attempts to control ownership and content. In parallel to the political, cultural concerns of the times, it used (and continues to use) direct and indirect means to remove expressions that seemingly threaten its national unity, language, and family, religious and moral values.

Be it through the broadcasting law or penal code and anti-terror law provisions, it sets strict limits on what it deems as appropriate content, and thus severely limits free expression on television. Based on specific provisions regarding the territorial and national integrity of the state, the reforms and principles of Ataturk, and the moral values of the Turkish family, the RTUK penalizes, imposes bans, and even “blacks out” television outlets for noncompliance. This has become an especially acute problem since the AKP came to power in 2002. In my talk, I will discuss examples of recent governmental “interventions” into the production process, which I hope will provide insights into the religious conservative turn and its implications on policy and practice.

Therefore some key questions I have in mind for this talk mostly center on Turkey’s contentious experiences with modernization, economic liberalization and globalization, and how state regulatory infrastructures have addressed the conflicts and challenges borne out of them.