
Audience, TV Ratings and Digital Platforms: Situating Pandemic Media Regulations in Turkey

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In this article I address how the audience consumption of mainstream television and digital media platforms have changed, if at all, during the pandemic in Turkey. As mainstream television consumption in Turkey has been steadily declining in the last two decades, digital platform subscriptions have increased, with their uses diversified (entertainment, education and etcetera). In the last two decades, the Turkish series streaming on digital platforms have wielded considerable ‘soft power’ in the global media market, contributing to Turkey’s positive image, especially in the Balkans and the Middle East. Digital streaming platforms have provided alternatives to classical means of cultural diplomacy, sometimes by promoting images of a Europeanized Turkey and other times by highlighting its cultural uniqueness and authenticity. Three significant changes mark the pandemic media world in Turkey. Firstly, despite the increase in the time spent in front of the screen and in digital platform subscriptions, the Turkish Radio and Television Supreme Council has taken measures to extend censorship rules to alternative streaming services. This has generated significant public criticism and may be indicative of an anxiety over losing Turkey’s credibility and soft power in the global world. Secondly, the use of mainstream television as a source of news on Covid-19 has increased significantly. Thirdly, the reliance on television and digital media platforms regarding news on Covid-19 have come to mark social, cultural and political distinctions in Turkey. The present discussion addresses these three changes, reflecting on how audiences’ viewing habits of mainstream television and digital platforms change and transform.

Audience, Television and Digital Platforms in Turkey

In the last two decades, in Turkey, like in many other countries, the mainstream television broadcasting has largely lost its audience to digital media. Today, there are 56 million viewers over the age of 5 in Turkey, nearly 41% of whom receive the signal via the digital platforms broadcasting over satellite and OTTs (Twentify Report 2018). The people watching ‘television content’ no longer stick to a single screen. Nor do they feel bound by the broadcaster’s content preferences and broadcast time frames. In the pandemic context, Netflix, for instance, doubled expectations, adding nearly 16 million new subscribers and reaching 183 million in the first quarter of 2020 (Alexander 2020). In Turkey, this figure is estimated to have reached 1.7 million in the same period.

Since the commercialization of the television industry in Turkey in the 1990s, television consumption has mostly consisted of watching TV serials, especially on prime time. Thus, television has mainly functioned as an ‘entertainment box’ and to some extent a state apparatus of ideological significance. In this respect, social research that aims to understand Turkish

society largely accounts for the audience' viewing habits of prime-time serials productions. Research indicates that people think that what they see on the screen is a realistic reflection of Turkish society (Dağsalgüler 2020). It is commonly stated that the serials normalize and legitimize the given hierarchies, social structures and possibly social problems, like domestic violence. Similarly, serials that unreasonably glorify the Ottoman past are often taken as historic reality (Aydın 2019), and serials that celebrate the Turkish military might are cherished by an audience indoctrinated by a nationalist ideology.¹ Pardo has analyzed how rulers 'may try to educate people to their values and vision. They may choose to be coercive or persuasive; or they may opt for one of the many possible mid-way positions between these two extremes' (Pardo 2000, quoted in Pardo and Prato 2019: 21). Overall, mainstream television in Turkey has historically created very functional illusions, myths and popular ideas that serve to govern the people. To some extent, the digitalization process has hindered these functions of mainstream television. Domestic drama productions and Turkish serials have been globally acclaimed and exported to other countries, generating significant income. Digital platforms aimed at global audiences have produced different myths and illusions regarding 'us' and alternative aesthetic forms and thematic content.

As well as an 'entertainment box', Turkish TV has historically functioned as the prime source of news and public information. In spite of the fact that the internet is now a faster, if not always more accurate, source of information, the 'stay-home' calls in the post-pandemic period have enhanced peoples' interest in mainstream television, particularly to hear the news on the pandemic and on the global scientific research on the virus. Every day, the usual broadcast stream is routinely interrupted by the editors to air the Health Minister's daily address to the nation. During the seven o'clock news, the health minister discloses the daily figures and gives advice on how to avoid the coronavirus infection. In this period, television watching habits have changed significantly, with increasing rating figures and an increase in screen time from 4 hours to an average of 8 hours (Kantar-Group M Report 2020). I contend that this change is due to the fact that the public see the pandemic as a global issue that requires national measures; therefore, they resort to mainstream television to hear several actors' views on the matter, including the Ministry of Health, the Turkish Medical Association, independent doctors and politicians.

This increase raises the question whether, in times of crisis, television remains the main source of news in Turkey and whether viewers trust the mainstream media more than digital platforms. Distrust in the digital media has become more significant in the pandemic context. Research suggests that only about a third of Turkey's population find social media to be a reliable source of information. Besides the issue of trust, the 'digital divide' between different age and socio-economic groups also explains preference for mainstream television over social media (Nalçaoğlu 2020). For instance, it is commonly known that, in the last decade or so, the government (the Presidency) has used the national television as a mass mobilizer and a

¹ On indoctrination and mechanisms of legitimation across different social, cultural and political fields, see Pardo and Prato (2019).

manufacturer of consent (Herman and Chomsky, 1988). Almost 70% of national television outlets are under strict government control; they have been dubbed the ‘pool media’. In this climate, the opposition groups have come to see the alternative media (digital platforms on the internet) as more reliable. To put it differently, although television consumption has generally increased during the pandemic, in the last decade or so, the distinction between the consumers of mass TV and of digital platforms increasingly mark certain social and political divisions in Turkey.

It is worth mentioning the role of television as a medium of distant education in the pandemic period. Distance education via television has been another important factor in the increased popularity of traditional television. In Turkey, like in many other countries, distance education has been carried out via the internet too. However, alongside the internet education broadcasts, the Turkish authorities have delivered the educational content by creating new TV channels (known as EBA TV) with the help of public broadcasting service TRT. This was done in order to minimize inequalities in the access to education for those who do not have computers or internet services at home (Mueller and Taj 2020).

To open a parenthesis, according to 2019 figures, 72% of the Turkish population have access to the internet. Of this total, 63% are active in the social media and 53% are mobile social media users (HootSuite et al. 2019). However, the use of laptop and desktop computers, which are more suitable devices for educational purposes, is still limited (48%). Use of smart phones is more common (77%) than desktops and laptops. However, smart phones are mainly used to access the social media for entertainment purposes, not for education. In this respect, it would be appropriate to refer to the mobile phone as the new entertainment box in Turkey, since mobile phones have become tiny TV sets in people’s pockets. Nevertheless, the use of television as an educational device by the Ministry of Education underlines its informative function in times of crisis.

Against this background, it is worth asking whether the division between television and digital platforms like Netflix has eroded under pandemic conditions. The order, ‘stay home’ as a measure against the spread of infection has corresponded with an increase in the use of digital media by people over 55, mainly as a means of communication, socialization and political opposition. Even if the national television outlets have been under political control, digital platforms, OTTs and video streaming media have remained impervious to political grip. Even the government’s Covid-19 news have been challenged by various opposition groups over the social media. A new regulatory scheme was introduced to handle this situation by means of a by-law issued on 1st August 2019. With this regulation, RTUK (Radio and Television Supreme Council) has assumed responsibility to regulate the internet in addition to television broadcasting.

In line with the increasing conservatism in Turkey and on Turkish ‘screens’, following a change in the rating measurement sampling method in 2012, it is generally believed that more conservative lower and lower-middle socio-economic groups matter more to the advertisers. This has practically eliminated viewer preferences of the AB socio-economic group from the

television screens. The opposition groups who have lost trust in the officially disseminated information rely more on the internet for information and entertainment consumption.² With the pandemic censorship regulations, the groups who are sceptical about traditional television screens have become the new target for content control.

Political control is not limited to information function of the media. Since television serials have become a huge industry in Turkey in the last couple of decades, their content has also been scrutinized by the government. ‘*Dizi*’ exports (Bhutto 2019) brought millions of dollars to the Turkish economy. Sold to various countries, including the neighbouring Arab states, Latin America and China, *dizis* are seen as a kind of soft power in the international arena disseminating ideologically significant images and ideas (Kraidy and Al-Ghazzi 2013, Yanardağoğlu and Karam 2013). For instance, the successful Netflix *Rise of Empire: Ottoman* was criticised by government circles because it supposedly depicted Sultan Mehmet as an occupier rather than as a ‘conqueror’. Equipped with wide and blurry laws regulating obscenity, Turkish family structure, the protection of historic Turkish figures and so on, and with regulations involving the promotion of tobacco and alcoholic products, RTUK is increasingly scrutinizing content in digital platforms.

To summarize, the fear of infection and government orders kept more people at home during the pandemic. The new censorship laws which regulate digital platforms have sharpened both political divisions and audience choices in relation to television and digital platforms. On the one hand, opposition groups tend to use digital platforms more. On the other hand, the public initially resorted more to mainstream television for news and education purposes; however, as the trust in the officially disseminated knowledge deteriorated, the reliance on digital platforms for reliable news increased. The digital media have been acknowledged to enable unmediated communication, and solidarity grew among the population. At the same time, it remains to be seen whether the Turkish government will continue to extend its control on content to the digital outlets and how it will manage the challenge of controlling digital media under conditions of rapid technological change.

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² Pardo and Prato (2019) discuss how loss of trust raises issues of legitimacy.

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