

Learning about Turkishness by satellite: Private satisfactions and public benefits¹

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Abstract

Since the early nineties, “satellite watching” has become one of the most popular pastimes in Turkish families in the Netherlands. In order to understand how Turkish satellite television affects the Dutch-Turkish cultural boundary as perceived by the immigrants, we held a series of interviews and focus group discussions. The interest immigrants take in Turkish television is a many sided phenomenon. On the affective side, young people and their first generation parents feel affirmed in their love of and affinity to Turkish people, Turkish landscapes and Turkish cultural sights and sounds. On the informational side, satellite TV has brought various surprises. Before the entrance of commercial satellite TV, the second generation was caught up in the first generation’s defensive definition of Turkishness. Part of the attractions of satellite television to young people is that it offers a much less traditional picture of Turkishness.

Introduction

When I started my research into ‘the influence Turkish satellite television on Turkish viewers in the Netherlands’, I already knew that by 1995 almost fifty percent of Turkish families in the Netherlands had equipped themselves with a satellite dish, in order to be able to watch Turkish channels. I also knew that fifty percent was a lot, comparatively, and that the mass adoption of the new technology had happened with record breaking speed.¹ I soon learned that the most popular channels on satellite were heavily commercial. What people primarily enjoyed, it seemed, was the sheer abundance of entertainment, information and infotainment on offer. The public Turkish channel, TRT-International, which is offered on Dutch cable, was often described in complimentary terms. It was called dull, dry, official and officious.

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The most difficult problem I faced was a conceptual one. It had seemed reasonable, when proposing the research, to assume some kind of relationship between Turkish television viewing and integration. But now I felt trapped. By linking the interest in Turkish television to integration, I had set up myself for a journey into that badly charted field of social and political influence. I did not know where to start. What kind of influence could I have been thinking of? Some conceptual narrowing down had to be done belatedly, but how to narrow down the influence of such a continuous firework of entertainment and information as offered by the popular channels in question? Even a very modestly priced dish, I now knew, offers a choice of at least three different commercially financed channels, whose only common denominator in this case is that they are Turkish channels. Many people don't stop at that, and buy a dish that gives them a much wider choice. All of the ten or so Turkish satellite channels offer their own variety of information and entertainment, whose only commonality is that they are in Turkish.

By stating the problem in these terms, its solution became more obvious. The central concept could only be Turkishness. And the central question must therefore concern the influence of Turkish satellite television on the 'Turkishness' of Turkish people in the Netherlands. This, of course, led to a series of new questions. For what *is* Turkishness, other than an administrative category? Any specific answer to that question consists of a more or less subjective and context dependent choice of attributes. In the anthropological literature, such features go by the name of "boundary markers" (Barth, 1969,1996; Baumann & Sunier, 1996; Vermeulen & Govers, 1996). So in a conceptual sense the question would become if and how Turkish transnational television affects prevalent markers of Turkishness in the context of Dutch society.

Between the summer of 1997 and December 1998, a total of fifty Turkish-Dutch people were interviewed about their experiences with, and their ideas about, Turkish satellite television. In the first phase of the data collection, thirty people were interviewed individually. The questionnaire contained some closed and many open questions. Its aim was to make people talk about their TV-experiences, habits and preferences, as well as about their political and cultural views. The large majority of these respondents were young adults, aged between 20 and 30, but some older and some younger people were also interviewed. The second part of the data collection consisted of focus group discussions, in which another twenty informants participated (see also Milikowski, 1999, in press; Ogan & Milikowski, 1998). In this chapter, I will use the material to take a closer look at the influence of Turkish television on two groups of boundary markers: political-cultural and social-cultural ones.

Dutchness and Turkishness

A boundary, such as the one between 'Dutchness' and 'Turkishness', consists of contrasts. Such contrasts always have an objective and a subjective part. An objective contrast is the difference in religious affiliation and tradition. The dominant tradition in the Netherlands is Christian, and so are most "native"

affiliations. The dominant tradition in Turkey is Islamic, and so are most “Turkish” affiliations. Muslims want mosques as Christians want churches. Such differences are fairly straightforward, and easy to determine. The subjective interpretation of such a difference is largely up to the parties concerned. It is possible to enlarge religious difference into a ‘clash of civilisations’ and throw up bulwarks against one another. It is also possible to treat religious difference as a fact of social life, and make provisions accordingly (Buijs, 1998; Lindo, 2000; Rath, Penninx, Groenendijk & Meijer, 1996). The first approach builds a boundary like the Berlin Wall, while the second one builds something like a garden gate.

The boundary I am interested in is far from symmetrical (Penninx, 1988). ‘Dutchness’, in general, is represented by a well-organised, affluent and liberal society with a population of 16 million people who communicate in Dutch – if not in English. ‘Turkishness’, on the other hand, is represented by no more than 300.000 (which is less than two percent) of these inhabitants, whose march through the institutions of Dutch society has only just begun. It is necessary to mention this, because it puts the boundary we are dealing with into perspective. It is Dutch society that lays down most the rules and conditions by which the game is played, and a society has many ways and means to invite or discourage participation. However, an immigrant group itself also has a considerable influence on its social and civic success in the new society. For instance, it can also choose between a barbed wire and garden gate definition of the various differences it encounters, and either encourage or discourage participation in the various institutions of the new country (Vermeulen, 1992; Vermeulen & Penninx, 1996).

When the immigrants from Turkey started on their course of settlement in the Netherlands, Dutch society was congratulating itself for having taken the worst stings out of the boundaries of class and religion most citizens had grown up with. Working class kids had begun to flock into the universities; Catholics and Protestants had shed many of the bounds and automatic affiliations formerly prescribed by their religion; and women of all backgrounds and denominations had successfully fought against the rules, customs and beliefs that hindered their personal and collective emancipation. It had become a widely shared conviction that inherited identities – notably those of class, gender, religion, ethnicity and political affiliation – should not constrain individual lives. This conviction is written in the first article of the Dutch constitution, which states that ‘all who are in the Netherlands are treated equally in equal cases. Discrimination on grounds of religion, philosophy of life, political persuasion, race, gender, or on any ground whatever, is not allowed.’ Of course, the constitution also makes provisions to guarantee the classical civic rights and freedoms of organisation and expression. But in the dominant contemporary consciousness, the concepts of progress and fairness were very strongly associated with individualisation.

This made for a considerable difference with the new immigrants. Many Turkish families found the egalitarian free-and-easy behaviour of the Dutch offensive, and desired to protect ‘Turkish culture’ against the alien intrusions of the new environment. So how would Turkish television affect this state of things?

Its popularity raised several anxieties in the Netherlands. One fear was that Turkish television would lead to an even stronger preoccupation with Turkish affairs, at the cost of participation in Dutch social and civic life. Another fear, sustained by a controversial study from Germany (Heitmeyer, Müller, & Schröder, 1997), was that Turkish television would brainwash people into anti-liberal and anti-integrationist attitudes. The assumption behind this latter fear was that that even if Turkish audiences in the Netherlands would not intentionally embrace such 'non-western' values, they could not help being injected with them just by watching Turkish programs. It is easier now than it was then to see that this assumption was not only outdated in its conception of media-influence, but also ideological in its conception of Islam and Turkishness. At the time Turkish satellite television came in the Rushdie scare was still fresh, and fears of a new wave of political totalitarianism in the form of Islamic fundamentalism had been stirred up during the Gulf war.

Now that eight years have past since the first Turkish dishes were installed, it is evident that these fears have been unfounded. Turkish immigrants, though indeed watching a lot more television from the country of origin than do immigrants from Morocco and Surinam, and strongly identifying with other Turks (Cadat & Fennema, 1996), *also* take a closer interest in Dutch civic life and participate more actively in Dutch institutions (Fennema & Tillie, 1999). It is not a matter of either or, it seems. The explanation given by Fennema and Tillie is that civic interest and behaviour is a cultural resource in itself. By this reasoning, the political content of peoples convictions is less important than their inclination to organise and participate as a method to get things done (see also Putnam, 1993).

Ideological Turkishness

In the course of my research I was often struck by the partisan nature of people's reflections on Turkishness. This is perhaps less surprising when one takes Turkey's problems into consideration. An important element of nationality is the location of a country's borders, and those of Turkey are contested, politically as well as military. A second point of serious national disagreement concerns the secularist foundation of the Turkish State. In the Atatürkish order of things, the organisation of the Islamic religion belongs to the domain of the state, with the army watching against transgressions. From this particular perspective, alternative forms of religious organisation can be easily conceived as threats to the integrity of the state. This is also a divisive issue among Turkish people in the Netherlands (Lindo, 2000). Against the background of these and other conflicts, it is easier to understand why definition of Turkishness raises some anxieties. I will illustrate this nervousness with two examples.

The first example comes from my interview with Mr. Ali Yalman, whom I visited in his home in Amsterdam. He is in his forties, married to a Turkish woman, and father of three children. Yalman is electrician by training, but spends much of his time in a neighbourhood centre, helping Turkish kids with their schoolwork. He also volunteers as a coach of the football team of this 8-year-old son. Yalman is an

enthusiast, of Turkish television and of much else. He proudly shows me his state of the art electronic equipment, which includes a new sophisticated satellite dish. When you press the number of any of a hundred and twenty channels on the remote the dish starts searching the sky for you, and picks up the desired signal within seconds. It costs a packet, he says, but what do you expect, it is the best on the market! After this demonstration my host starts on a lecture on Turkey and its glories. It is all there in the book he shows me. See? These are the dates, and these are the proper maps. It is important that I get this stuff right, he says, because he has noticed that the average Dutch person is completely ignorant about the subject. Also, talking to other Turks could easily set me wrong, since many Turkish people talk political and/or religious nonsense. Hence the lecture, which will hopefully inject some sense in me.

The fear that I would get the wrong ideas about Turkishness by talking to certain people, or by visiting certain meetings, is what many of my Turkish informants had in common. In the summer of '98 I visited a rally organised by the Dutch and German branches of Milli Görüs (National Vision), a Turkish Islamic organisation. I was interested to go there, because Milli Görüs, a group that does not agree with the Atatürkish conception of state secularism, had recently attracted a lot of political attention as a fundamentalist threat. I wanted to see what would happen at that all-day meeting in the Amsterdam Arena, the football Stadium of Ajax, holding 50.000 people and rented out during the off season for cultural manifestations. The guards and the sellers at the ticket boxes were at first somewhat suspicious of our motives. But after having explained that our interest in the affair was purely academic we were let in and allowed to enter one of the entrances marked 'women', leading to a women-only section on the second rung. The stadium was rapidly filling up with families, many of whom had come from Germany. In several respects the spectacle was new and extra-ordinary to me. I had never seen so many women with headscarves in one place. When the times for prayer were announced, the people put their food boxes away, climbed a flight of stairs, rolled out their prayer mats and knelt down side by side in the corridors of the stadium. All of this was unfamiliar to me. Yet the atmosphere of the rally was also, in a sense, familiar. What was going on in the Stadium reminded me somewhat of the communist Summer Festivals that I had visited with my family when I was little. People picnicked, met friends, listened to singers, and waited for the high moment of the political speech, which would be celebrated with rounds of applause. What also contributed to the feeling of familiarity were working class atmosphere of the present rally and the feeling of 'united we stand' that it gave off.

But the response of my companions, a Turkish graduate from the University of Istanbul, and an American professor with strong ties to Turkey was very different. They were shocked and offended by the goings on. According to them, this rally was a disgrace to Turkey and its people, and my responses only went to show how naive I was about things Turkish. They did not trust me to make any further judgements for myself and gave up translating. There was no need for me to understand the speeches, I was told,

because these were all nonsense. Instead, my companions offered me their own judgements and interpretations. The Welfare Party had just been banished, and rightly so. In Turkey such a meeting could never be held. All these headscarves, and all this praying in the corridors – this was not normal Turkish behaviour. What business did the Dutch Government have to allow such a meeting to take place? And so on, and so forth. Just entering a Turkish scene, it seemed, was enough for my academic companions to be stung into a highly ideological, political partisan, mode of information processing. So how would the Turkish satellite affect such a politicised scene?

Television talk

‘It is just television, you know’, an informant said when I asked her to show me a program she liked. She couldn’t understand the academic fuss. When she switched on the TV-set I saw what she meant. What came on was a well-known game show that looked as if it had been copied from Dutch television – or the other way around. Being a bilingual, and liking that kind of program, my informant used to watch both, until the Dutch Wheel of Fortune was cancelled. Another woman told me that she preferred to watch *As The World Turns* on satellite, because on Dutch television it lagged two years behind. Popular films, also, are shown much earlier on Turkish than on Dutch channels. That Turkish television dubs where Dutch television undertitles is seen as a draw back by some people, who prefer a native speaking Robert de Niro to a Turkish speaking one. But to those who are less literate in Dutch, or less literate in any form, the dubbing is most welcome. To one young girl watching a movie on satellite was a compromise that relieved her of the burden of translation. ‘Now I can watch a film with my parents without my father asking every minute what is going on.’

All the same, most of the people I have talked with are for one reason or another critical of the television culture on satellite. An often-heard complaint is that these channels are too glaringly commercial. Advertisements pop up everywhere, preferably at what are from a viewer’s perspective the worst moments. No program is safe from commercial intrusions, which are timed to grab people’s attention at all costs. It is not funny any more, a respondent complains. ‘You are watching a football match, and when the ball goes out a second window immediately opens to show a commercial. It is impossible to concentrate that way. Where is the ball? Where is the car? It drives you crazy.’

According to a number of respondents, Turkish satellite television is also ‘too commercial’ in the sense of cheap and silly. There is too much violent infotainment, too much gossip posturing as news, too much attention for popular stars at the cost of serious information, they say. But others like the satellite for that very reason. ‘When I was a kid we used to watch TRT with my grandparents’, a girl says. ‘It was all serious dull stuff, about the state and the government.’ She has had her fill of it, she says, and welcomes the light touch of the commercial channels.

The commercialisation of Turkish television culture has affected the public face of social life in yet another way (Oncü, 1995; Staring & Zorlu, 1996; Tekinalp, 1996; Tokgöz, 1996). Under its influence, the political and religious identities of channels have become less and less visible. ‘For example, Kanal 7 is supposed to be an Islamic fundamentalist channel, but I don’t see much difference’, an informant says. Young people don’t mind, even if they notice; they take television politics less seriously anyway. Older people are often more critical of this particular change. One informant told me that her aunt, who is in her seventies, refuses to watch ‘the satellite’, because the lack of political seriousness and predictability offends her. In her view, a channel should distinguish itself from the competition by its selection and coverage of news. Commercialisation, however, works in the opposite direction. Just as happens elsewhere, Turkish commercial television channels are driven to compete over audiences, advertising and sponsoring money. As a result, political and religious distinctions disappear into the background. The implicit message is that such difference is all very well, but should not interfere with general audience appeal. And just as elsewhere Turkish audiences have responded in kind and now zap between channels more freely (Ang, 1996).

Ethnic-cultural difference after migration

Cultural minorities are understandably more anxious about loss of identity than are cultural majorities, and the Turkish immigrants were no exception. Like others before them, Turkish immigrant families have done their best to re-establish the mainstays of life as they knew it (Böcker, 1994), and to protect themselves against the onslaughts of “Dutch culture”, which was associated in particular with its post sixties features. In doing so, they became in some respects more Turkish than they had been at home. The boundaries were defensively drawn, and they were heavily patrolled. The focus of the defence was on issues relating to the organisation of sexuality, gender and family, which is where traditional and post-traditional values often clash (Barth, 1996; Baumann, 1996; Gillespie, 1995). Growing up as a Turkish person in Dutch society was not easy. Girls in particular used to be closely watched, and punished for transgressions (de Vries, 1987). Many considered this unpleasant, or even unfair. But they often lacked the knowledge and authority to question the rules, or the assumptions behind it. As a result, “being Turkish” could become a prison with no acceptable exit. Turkish girls certainly did not want to become “Dutch” if that would imply losing their Turkishness. They wanted it both ways: to be more free and equal, and to be Turkish too. In the past, their parents could maintain that such a combination was impossible. But now Turkish television tells different.

Various stories told by young women attest to the helpful role of Turkish television in getting their points across. One girl gleefully recounts how she has got her mother to acknowledge the possibility that she might have a boyfriend. My informant had carefully prepared the scene. That evening, the rights and wrongs of sexual relationships before marriage would be the subject of a talk show on the satellite, so she

had said: mum, let us watch this program together. A women-only audience would be best, she had judged, because the presence of her father might just tip the scales to her disadvantage. The viewing occurred in silence. ‘My mother did not open her mouth once. But she took it all in. And the next day, when we were in the kitchen together, she asked: do you have a boyfriend?’ Though such a strategic use of the medium is rather special, many stories do contain an element of ‘enlightenment’ brought about by satellite television. That Dutch television features similar viewpoints and behaviours in abundance is well known, but in the eyes of many Turkish parents this only affirmed the essential difference between these cultures. Within such a ‘two cultures’ framework, seeing a Turkish actor acknowledge his homosexuality on television has the opposite effect of seeing a Dutch actor doing so. The same goes for other customs and viewpoints had had acquired the status of boundary markers. Turkish commercial satellite television has made several informants more aware that the Turkishness they grew up with was in fact a very defensive definition of Turkishness. ‘My parents have stood still while most people in Turkey moved on’, a respondent said. ‘The reason is that they were afraid of the Dutch. They were afraid that they would lose their children.’

The good, the bad and the indifferent

So what is the bottom line? Am I proposing that, in contradiction to common sense beliefs, Turkish satellite television exerts a *positive* influence on social-cultural integration in the Netherlands? A colleague asked me this question recently, and after some hesitation I answered yes. Because that *is* in fact the headline version of what I’ve been arguing in the above. Yet I am not satisfied to leave it there, and will use the present opportunity to discuss some of the problems raised by this particular headline. The first problem concerns the definitions of integration and culture. Since I don’t know how my readers understand these concepts I will briefly explain how I understand them. The second problem concerns the notion of television effects. In an earlier part of this chapter, I have taken others to task about their dated and ideological assumptions regarding the influence of television. Am I now saying that television *has* a big influence, but that fortunately in this case it is a good one? These questions are the subject of this final section.

What do people understand by cultural integration? Most often, they understand by it that sharp distinctions fade away, either because a minority gives up some its distinct customs and beliefs, or as the result of a more mutually conceived transaction, whereby the culture of the dominant majority also changes somewhat. What these perspectives have in common is that they both depart from what some authors have called a romantic conception of a national culture. In this conception, sharing a national culture means sharing a particular set of traditions and ideas. The alternative conception of sharing a national culture focuses on institutional participation. What is shared here is the institutional framework, not the beliefs and interests such institutions serve to bring together. Though these conceptions are

associated with different viewpoints on integration policy,² they are not mutually exclusive as such, and both have something to contribute to the issue of Turkish satellite television.

If we look at the issue from the institutional perspective, the first observation to be made is that freedom of information and communication is an important national institution, though by no means an exclusively Dutch one. That this freedom has ultimately been respected, disregarding the fears of bad alien influence, means that Turkish and Moroccan cultural tastes have been de facto accepted as part of the contemporary Dutch cultural scene. Many Turkish people have been fearful that their dishes would be outlawed somehow, which would have confirmed their sense of being second class citizens (Gomes, 1998). From the institutional perspective, the acquisition of acceptance is a form of integration in itself. This may sound like a rather abstract point, but it must be made to put my cultural argument in its proper perspective.

This cultural argument is not that Turkishness and Dutchness will cease to exist as categories denoting certain different customs, beliefs, or skills. A good example is language. When people watch a lot of Turkish television their Turkish will remain fluent, or even become more fluent, as has happened to members of the second generation. A command of the Turkish language does not of course preclude that people are fluent in Dutch also. But it does signify a difference between Dutchness and Turkishness, since hardly any other inhabitant of the Netherlands speaks Turkish. Islamic holidays are another example. It wouldn't surprise me if these holidays will get a push from seeing them celebrated on TV, as is also happening to Turkish popular music. Indeed, many informants have told me that the special affinity they feel to Turkish people, Turkish landscapes and/or Turkish cultural sights and sounds is affirmed by what they see on Turkish television. My argument, in sum, is not that distinct cultural features will fade away or vanish under the influence of commercial television. In some respects, they may even become more prominent.

What I do think is that Turkish commercial satellite television helps to reduce cultural difference to more manageable proportions. During the last decades, several factors have conspired to lend a Berlin wall-like aspect to the Dutch-Turkish cultural boundary. On the international scene we have seen efforts to replace the ideological frontiers of the cold war with an equally encompassing 'clash of civilisations' between the West and the Islamic parts of world. This view of things has a high scare potential, not least in Turkey itself, whose very future is predicated on the proposed frontline. In such an ideologically charged context, the contribution of commercial television could be to take some sting out of the fight. It is a strange world where Pampers and cosmetics have the last word on any subject, but considering what the alternatives are such cultural complacency has its merits. On the Dutch national scene, the choice of boundary markers distinguishing Turkish from Dutch culture was partly affected by circumstances that no longer prevail. While many of the older generation of Turkish immigrants had no formal education to

speak of, the large majority of their children graduate within the Dutch educational system, some of them on the highest levels (Crul, 2000). An additional difference is that, other than their parents, most members of the second generation have grown up in a city. These are cultural changes in their own right (Bruner, 1972; Luria, 1974). Similar developments, with similar cultural effects, can now be witnessed to go on in Turkey itself.

This leaves me with the question how much power we may grant television to influence people's outlook and behaviour. In such general terms, this question may well be unanswerable. So it is fortunate that the influence of Turkish television can be explained in a rather more down to earth fashion. Of course it is true that most people do not change their lives and outlooks just because people on television tells them to. But it is also true that certain forms of edification are actively sought and appreciated. In her study of Italian families in Belgium, Michielsen (1991) found that many women loved RAI Uno because it allowed them to explain Italy to their children. Gillespie (1995) bears witness of the gratifications obtained from watching Indian films and soaps by "Asian" families in the UK. Turkish satellite television in the Netherlands is, I think, welcomed for comparable reasons. The opportunities it offers for closeness and communication is evidently appreciated. At the same time, these popular channels address certain subjects and legitimate certain changes that are probably not so unwelcome anyway. Few parents are so rigid in their beliefs that they wouldn't rather give in on some issues than risk a break with their children. And few children have such a bad relationship with their parents that they would prefer an angry conflict to a peaceful solution.

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¹ Turkish immigrants established several records by one stroke, according the Veldkamp Survey held in 1995 (See Veldkamp 1996a, 1996b). They were the most eager adopters of the satellite dish (leaving the Moroccans far behind), champion TV-watchers (34 hours per week on the average) and champion watchers of television from the country of origin (80 percent of the viewing time). But note that these figures were based on self reports. Also, they may refer to the number of hours the television set is on rather than to the number of hours it is really attended to.

² This was well demonstrated during a recent debate about integration in Dutch parliament. The debate had become necessary in view of the public excitement following the proclamation of a multicultural drama by politically influential liberal publicist The author contended that integration had failed and that Dutch liberal culture would not survive unless citizens woke up to defend it. Interestingly, the majority of the Dutch parliament countered this move from the romantic side by placing itself on an institutional position.