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Alevi Television Networks: Structural and Representational Limits in Covering Discrimination

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Summary

Alevi television networks in Turkey emerged in the early 2000s as important platforms for representing the beliefs, practices, and political concerns of Turkey's Alevi community. These networks marked an unprecedented moment of visibility for a historically marginalized group, offering a media space for Alevis to define and defend their identity in public. However, this visibility came with significant constraints. Despite their oppositional origins, many Alevi television outlets have become entangled in the very power structures they once sought to critique. The result is a tension-laden media field where discrimination against Alevis is selectively acknowledged, strategically reframed, or outright obscured.

This entry examines the structural and representational limits of Alevi television networks—particularly Cem TV—in covering anti-Alevi discrimination. While these networks have empowered many Alevis to publicly express their identity, they also reproduce dominant nationalist norms and downplay long-term structural violence against Alevis. Drawing from ethnographic research and media analysis, this entry critically analyzes how Alevi television both challenges and reinforces Turkey's hegemonic state ideology.

Structural Foundations and State Alignment

Cem TV, the most widely viewed Alevi television network, was founded in 2005 by the Cem Foundation. From its inception, it has maintained a delicate balance between representing Alevi interests and remaining within the bounds of the Turkish state's definition of national and religious identity. The Cem Foundation promotes an interpretation of Alevism as "Turkish Islam," effectively excluding Kurdish Alevis and aligning itself with the state's longstanding denial of ethnic pluralism.

This ideological alignment constrains Cem TV's editorial autonomy, particularly when

covering controversial incidents. The network is known for avoiding direct criticism of the state and instead framing Alevi grievances in terms that are legible—and acceptable—within state discourse. This is evident in how Cem TV discusses issues such as the legal non-recognition of cemevis, Alevi places of worship. While the network consistently advocates for official recognition of cemevis, it avoids connecting this demand to the broader history of state-sponsored discrimination and violence against Alevis.

The Yazgılı Incident: A Case of Silencing Through "Presentist" Coverage

The limits of Alevi television's coverage became especially clear during its reporting on an attack against a Kurdish Alevi family in Yazgılı, a provincial town in Turkey, during Ramadan in the 2000s. Unlike Sunni Muslims, most Alevis do not fast during Ramadan—a difference that has historically made them targets of sectarian hostility. In Yazgılı, the family was harassed for not participating in sahur (pre-dawn meal) and endured nights of violence, culminating in an attack in which their windows were smashed and they had to hide in closets. The local military eventually intervened.

Cem TV's coverage of the event was marked by what can be defined as an "unsettled narrative." On the one hand, the channel initially framed the incident as sectarian violence, echoing past massacres in places like Sivas and Maraş. On the other hand, it also broadcast reports minimizing the incident as a mere neighborhood quarrel. This ambivalence reflects the station's "presentist" strategy of highlighting current issues like the cemevi recognition problem while detaching them from the historical continuity of violence against Alevis.

This temporal framing avoids assigning long-term culpability to the state, focusing instead on present-day administrative shortcomings. It allows Alevi networks to appear critical without directly challenging the ideological foundations of the Sunni-nationalist state.

Ethnic and Gendered Exclusions

Cem TV's refusal to fully engage with the Yazgılı incident was shaped not only by its ideological constraints but also by ethnic and gendered hierarchies. The targeted family was Kurdish Alevi—a group doubly marginalized within both Turkish nationalism and mainstream Alevi discourse. Reporters and Cem Foundation officials dismissed the family's account as unreliable, citing their Kurdish identity and alleged political affiliations with the Kurdish movement. In practice, the family's ethnicity was weaponized to discredit their testimony and sideline their narrative from official coverage.

The silencing of the family was also gendered. Male community leaders and reporters held discussions on the family's porch, minimizing the violence and warning them not to speak out. Female family members attempted to voice their pain and connect the attack to a broader pattern of violence but were shut down. Inside the house, in women-only spaces, the story of suffering—described by the family as a "massacre"—was more freely shared. Yet this testimony never made it to air.

Psychologizing as a Form of Depoliticization

In Istanbul, back in the Cem TV newsroom, the reporters' skepticism toward the family took another form: psychologizing. Producers suggested that the family's traumatic response had compromised their credibility, portraying them as emotionally unstable rather than politically targeted. This tactic, which replaces political interpretation with therapeutic framing, allowed the network to sidestep discussions about ethnic and religious violence. It became a euphemism for denial.

Such psychologization resonates with broader critiques of how media depoliticize structurally marginalized groups by casting their experiences as individual psychological crises. In this case, portraying the family as traumatized served to obscure the long history of state-enabled sectarian violence.

Strategic Protest Coverage and the Prioritization of Recognizable Grievances

Despite minimizing the Yazgılı attack itself, Cem TV covered the ensuing protests organized by Alevi associations across cities like Istanbul and Ankara. This was a strategic move: it allowed the network to maintain its claim to represent the Alevi community while redirecting attention to more "manageable" grievances—especially the legal status of cemevis.

By focusing on the cemevi issue, Cem TV shifted the narrative from structural violence and ethnic exclusion to a legally actionable, publicly palatable demand. This shift was not accidental. Since the 1990s, the non-recognition of cemevis has become a central Alevi demand, and the AKP government's failed "Alevi Opening" in the 2000s put the issue on the national agenda. Cem TV leveraged the protest momentum not to amplify the Yazgılı family's voice but to underscore this officially tolerated grievance.

This strategic redirection also shows the influence of news temporalities. Journalistic routines prioritize current controversies over historical continuities. Cem TV reporters used this presentist orientation to construct a version of Alevi suffering that foregrounded ongoing administrative issues over state complicity in past violence.

The Production of an "Official Victim"

Through this strategic framing, Cem TV produced an “official victim” figure that could be safely incorporated into the national imaginary. This figure was implicitly Turkish, urban, and moderate—compatible with the state’s ideal of a non-disruptive minority. Kurdish Alevis, with their layered histories of exclusion and political dissent, were excluded from this imaginary. The Yazgılı family’s insistence on connecting the attack to past massacres—Maraş, Çorum, Sivas—was too destabilizing for the state-aligned narrative Cem TV sought to uphold.

In this way, Cem TV contributed to the ethnicization of Alevi identity in line with Turkish nationalism. It rendered Kurdishness suspect and incompatible with Aleviness, and thus erased Kurdish Alevis from the televised version of Alevi experience.

Conclusion: The Paradox of Visibility

Alevi television networks, particularly Cem TV, exemplify the paradox of minority media operating within hegemonic structures. On the surface, these networks provide Alevis with unprecedented public visibility and symbolic inclusion. Yet this inclusion is conditional and constrained by ideological, ethnic, and institutional limits.

The Yazgılı case reveals how media platforms rooted in marginalized communities can still reproduce the silences and exclusions of dominant power structures. By adopting presentist framings, psychologizing victims, and adhering to state-sanctioned definitions of Alevi identity, Cem TV exemplifies how minority media may uphold the very ideologies that marginalize their audiences.

Ultimately, Alevi television’s capacity to represent discrimination is limited by its structural ties to the state and its investment in producing a “legible” minority identity. While offering valuable platforms for cultural expression and some degree of critique, these networks also underscore the complexities—and compromises—involved in seeking recognition without resistance.

References & Further Readings

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