Alevi Television Networks: Media and Alevism

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Summary
Alevi television networks, created by and for Turkey's Alevi community, have become central to the public articulation of Alevi culture, religion, and politics. Emerging in the early 2000s, these channels appeared amid shifting media policies and a political environment that combined limited cultural pluralism with neoliberal market reforms. This entry examines their historical emergence, ideological diversity, and sociopolitical implications. It considers how state-driven "disciplined liberalisation" and neoliberal deregulation enabled Alevi media, how channels like Cem TV, Yol TV, and TV 10 shaped different visions of Alevism, and how the objectification of Alevi culture on TV has transformed identity and visibility. Ethnographic insights reveal how Alevi audiences navigate the tensions between empowerment and assimilation.

Keywords: Kimlik Mücadelesi, Televizyon Kanalları

Disciplined Liberalisation and Neoliberal Opening

Following the 1980 military coup, Alevis began to be recast within a state-defined cultural pluralism that Kabir Tambar terms "disciplined liberalisation." Alevis gained public visibility, but only if they affirmed Turkish-Islamic heritage and did not challenge dominant national narratives. Simultaneously, neoliberal reforms in the 1990s dismantled the state broadcasting monopoly. Private channels flourished, often broadcasting from Europe, enabling marginalized groups-including Alevis-to access new media

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platforms. This environment, coupled with rising Alevi activism (e.g., the 1990 Manifesto of Alevism), laid the groundwork for community-run television.

Emergence of Alevi TV Networks

A watershed moment came in 2004 when Kanaltürk aired "Muharrem Sohbetleri," marking the first national broadcast of Alevi religious content. Over twelve days, Alevi religious leaders (*dede*s), intellectuals, and activists appeared on-air to explain Alevi beliefs and discuss longstanding prejudices during the Alevi sacred month of Muharrem. Its success emboldened Alevi groups to launch their own stations. Cem TV, founded in 2005 by the Cem Foundation, became the first Turkey-based Alevi TV network on Türksat. It aired music, news, religious programming, and broadcast the weekly cem ceremony, transforming a private ritual into a public event.

Other networks followed. Su TV, launched in Germany, offered a more leftist and oppositional stance. Internal disputes led to the creation of Yol TV (2006) and Dem TV (2007). Yol TV, backed by the European Alevi Alliance (AABK), promoted pluralism and memory politics, gaining popularity among diverse Alevi communities. Dem TV emphasized Kurdish Alevi concerns and later gave rise to TV 10, which had broadcasts in Zazaki and aligned with Kurdish and socialist struggles. By the 2010s, the Alevi media landscape included ideologically diverse voices, supported by transnational diaspora networks.

Diverging Ideologies

Cem TV aligned closely with state narratives, presenting Alevism as part of Turkish-Islamic culture. It downplayed ethnic and theological diversity, reinforcing a folkloric and nationalist image. While popular among Alevis seeking mainstream recognition, critics accused it of marginalizing Kurdish Alevis and conforming to state agendas.

Yol TV, in contrast, promoted a pluralist, leftist vision of

Alevism, highlighting human rights, secularism, and ethnic diversity. It became a critical voice against the state's attempt to depoliticize Alevism. Its license was revoked in 2016 under emergency rule, reflecting the limits of tolerance for oppositional media.

TV 10 similarly prioritized marginalized Alevi voices and was popular for broadcasting in minority languages. Like Yol TV, it was shut down with the same emergency rule in 2016. Meanwhile, Cem TV continued uninterrupted, underscoring how ideological alignment with official politics shaped media survival.

Objectification and Media Representation

Televised Alevism required codifying and simplifying rituals and beliefs, turning Alevism into a publicly legible object. This process produced visibility but also risked assimilation. For instance, the cem ritual, traditionally intimate and fluid, was reformatted to resemble Sunni mosque services, reinforcing hegemonic religious frameworks even while asserting Alevi presence.

Terminological shifts illustrate this transformation. The term "cem" became standardized through media, replacing older terms like "muhabbet." Alevi TV helped create a catechism-like body of knowledge, enabling Alevis to explain their faith in nationally recognizable terms. This shift from oral, lived tradition to scripted, media-ready content reconfigured religious transmission and identity.

Audience Reception: Between Empowerment and Assimilation

Ethnographic research shows that many Alevis experienced Alevi television as empowering. Older generations recalled hiding their identity out of fear. With the rise of cemevis and Alevi media, they felt more confident and less vulnerable. Viewers appreciated having media content that could counter prejudices and misinformation.

However, not all reactions were positive. Some felt that televised Alevism diluted or distorted traditional practices. Urban-born Alevis often found the televised representations inauthentic or alienating. The very act of institutionalizing Alevism through media was seen by some as antithetical to its ethos.

A poignant example comes from a father-son exchange: the son, unsure how to articulate his Alevi identity at work, was told by his father to “say we are like the ones on Cem TV.” Despite disagreeing with the channel’s portrayal, the father saw its utility in providing a reference point. This highlights how media visibility served pragmatic needs even when it failed to represent lived experiences fully.

Audiences did not necessarily align with the ideological agendas of networks; they valued the channels for offering legitimacy and visibility. As one scholar analogized, like Egyptian women selecting relatable scenes from TV dramas, Alevi viewers engaged with televised Alevism selectively, embracing parts that resonated with their histories of discrimination and silence.

Conclusion: Visibility and Its Discontents

Alevi television networks transformed the community’s public presence, offering a platform to assert identity and challenge marginalization. Enabled by state liberalization and market reforms, these networks navigated a fraught terrain of visibility and control. Their ideological divergence reflects deeper debates within Alevism about recognition, pluralism, and assimilation.

While media visibility empowered many Alevis, it also carried risks. The post-2016 shutdown of Yol TV and TV 10 illustrated the fragility of oppositional media under authoritarian pressure. Cem TV’s survival demonstrated how alignment with official narratives can secure institutional longevity at the cost of political critique.

Ultimately, the legacy of Alevi television lies in its dual role:

it has been a tool of empowerment and a site of contested representation. It challenges us to consider whether marginalized groups can shape their image on their own terms or whether public visibility always entails negotiation with dominant norms. The story of Alevi TV underscores that media representation, while vital, is never a neutral ground- it is always a battleground for recognition, authenticity, and survival.

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