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Exit and Voice Revisited: the Challenge of Migrant Media

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Abstract

This paper discusses the implications of transnational media production and diasporic networks for the cultural politics of migrant minorities. How are fields of cultural politics transformed if Hirschmann's famous options 'exit' and 'voice' are no longer constituting mutually exclusive responses to dissent within a nation-state, but modes of action that can combine and build upon each other in the context of migration and diasporic media activism? Two case studies are discussed in more detail, relating to Alevi amateur television production in Germany and to a Kurdish satellite television station that reaches out to a diaspora across Europe and the Middle East.

Keywords: migrant media, transnationalism, Alevis, Kurds, Turkey, Germany

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Exit and Voice Revisited: the Challenge of Migrant Media

In 1970, economist and political scientists Albert O. Hirschman published a small study that was to have a lasting influence on the social sciences. Exit and voice, he claimed, were the two alternative modes of action that those dissatisfied with the performance of different organizations, including that of nation-states, could pursue. Ever since, scholars across the social sciences have been concerned with trying to determine what prompts one or the other course of action, and the relationship between them. Like Hirschman himself, most take as a given that exercising the option of ‘exit’ will put an end to any attempts to exercise that of ‘voice’. Yet, as this essay argues, the study of contemporary diasporic mass media might force us to rethink the relationship between ‘exit’ and ‘voice’. Furthermore, thinking through this relationship with regard to migrant media and diasporic activism opens up interesting perspectives on the possibilities for cultural politics under contemporary conditions of globalization. How are fields of cultural politics transformed by ‘exit’ and ‘voice’ no longer constituting mutually exclusive responses to dissent within a nation-state, but modes of action that can combine and build upon each other in the context of migration and diasporic media activism?

In a follow-up article focusing more specifically on exit and voice in relation to the state, Hirschman describes exit as a prevalent feature of what anthropologists once called stateless societies: in case of conflict, members detach themselves from the collective and regroup, by joining a different collective or forming a new one (Hirschman 1978). As long as exit seems like a readily available solution to settling conflicts, the contribution of voice will be limited, he suggests. (ibid:95) Why should members of a social formation risk opposition if they could easily leave it behind? In this regard, Hirschman describes the effects of emigration on nation-states in the 19th and 20th century as beneficial from the point of view of political managers and representatives of the state: with exit in the form of out-migration as an outlet, those disaffected are less likely to resort to voice and demand political change. This effect, Hirschman claims, carries over into the countries that receive immigrants: ‘...new immigrants tend to be, at least initially, relatively unvociferous members of society’, thus reducing social protest in both sending and receiving countries (ibid:102).

However, even a cursory look at political conflicts and social protests in 21st century Western Europe and the Middle East suggests that migration offers no easy solution to the problems of representatives of the state, as Hirschman tended to believe. From England’s Brixton riots to violent immigrant youth protests in France, from Kurdish protests in Greece and Germany against the capture of nationalist leader Abdullah Öcalan to the more recent

Muslim cartoon-protests in Denmark and elsewhere: the message has been driven home to so-called receiving states that immigrants often do not leave prior affiliations behind, and engage in different kinds of transnational or diasporic politics. Transnational migrant activism is increasingly obfuscating the line between external and internal politics (Østergaard-Nielsen 2003), a line that Hirschman and others not too long ago took as a given. Just as importantly, former sending states similarly have to confront the fact that emigrants are not just providers of economic remittances, but are developing new ways to voice their dissatisfaction with the political state of affairs their in former home countries. Migrant media, ranging from locally produced radio shows to internet portals and satellite television, provide the starkest example of ‘voices’ that express their dissent even after the act of exit from a nation-state (Karim 1999).

Migrant media are often described as a form of minority media that allow minority members to use media technologies for ‘internal’ communication purposes, in order to protect and promote ethnic and cultural identities (Cottle 2000, Riggins 1992, Husband 1994). However, there are few contemporary migrant media projects that do not also have ‘external’ ambitions and effects, in the sense of critically ‘speaking to’ majority social and political formations of which they form or have formed a part. Many of them voice their dissent explicitly with the aim of promoting political change. When it comes to the politics of representation among minority groups, the struggle to ‘represent oneself’ thus cannot be divorced from the hegemonic discourses and projects of dominant majority surroundings. Finding a ‘voice’ is therefore a complicated process – Hirschman hinted at this when he described voice as a ‘messy’ option of dissent, a graduated phenomenon ‘all the way from faint grumbling to violent protest’ (Hirschman 1970:16). Hirschman conceptualized voice and exit as two mutually exclusive alternatives – voice as the path pursued by those who do not leave and instead promote transformation within the state. But migrant media represent a voice that emerges *after exit* – often still directed towards the very country that migrants have left behind. Globalization not only presents new ‘exit pressures’ to states, it has also profoundly changed the conditions for voicing political dissent, for political activism.

Nation-states such as Turkey, who once thought to rid themselves of political opposition via exiling those who most radically voiced dissent, now find themselves confronted with a strange phenomenon: it is under conditions of exile and diaspora that some dissatisfied groups are able to articulate opposition more forcefully than from ‘within’. ‘Exit’, for them, has not been the alternative to voicing political opposition, but in some respects the precondition for being able to raise their ‘voice’.

This essay discusses two examples of migrant media production in Western Europe that attempt to voice the concerns of dissenting minorities, both of them in relation to their former home country Turkey. For both Kurdish nationalists and Alevi groups abroad, residing outside of Turkey has opened up new opportunities for critical activism and self-representation that would have been unthinkable from within, and that have repercussions for the Turkish state, its nation-building project and its politics vis-à-vis minorities (Navaro-Yashin 2002, Kosnick 2007).

Migration from Turkey

In the 1960s and early 70s, out-migration from Turkey constituted a mass phenomenon that could not easily be described as a political response to conflict within the country. The labour-recruitment treaties that Turkey signed with different Western European countries were designed as temporary measures, and almost all of those who went abroad for a stint in the booming economies of the recruiting countries expected to return. Yet the confluence of economic and socio-cultural hierarchies in Turkey meant that a disproportionate number of labour migrants came from culturally marginalized groups in the country, most notably Kurds and Alevis who were denied the rights to cultural self-expression and political organizing. While most of them would still not see their decision to work abroad as a political one, successive military coups in Turkey also produced smaller waves of political refugees, either actively exiled or seeking to escape repression. This proved to be of particular significance to the development of Kurdish nationalism in the diaspora (Van Bruinessen 2000).

As has been well documented, temporary sojourn turned into permanent emigration for many, after recruitment was suddenly stopped with the oil crisis and economic recession of the 1970s. In the decades that followed, former 'host' states such as Germany have had to come to terms with the fact that they had factually become countries of immigration, and migrants and their descendants have progressively come to see themselves as part of Western European polities (Soysal 1994, 2000). Yet, increasing engagement with the country of residence has not necessarily weakened migrants' interest and involvement in country of origin affairs, as earlier migration theories tended to predict (Malkki 1992). Quite the contrary, in many instances the greater scope for political organizing and expression that Western European receiving countries offer has allowed migrants to address country of origin issues in novel ways. In the case of migrants from Turkey, this transnational activism is particularly visible among groups such as the Kurds and the Alevis, but has also been described for Sunni Islamic groups (Ogan 2001, Ogelman 2003, Østergaard-Nielsen 2003, Jonker 2002, Schiffauer 2000).

Kurdish migrants, mostly from Turkey but also Iran, Iraq and Syria, form a considerable presence among immigrant populations in Western Europe. It is estimated that up to one Million ethnic Kurds have migrated as labor migrants and political and/or economic refugees to Europe since the 1960s. Their numbers are difficult to establish, since their countries of residence register them in terms of citizenship rather than ethnic background. For many Kurds in Europe, however, national identity and ethnicity constitute key issues of political mobilization. This is also the case for Kurds living in the areas claimed as Kurdistan, but the nation-states of which these areas form part have been actively suppressing separatist ambitions, with Turkey at the forefront of countering even feeble attempts to achieve cultural recognition as a minority group. As will be shown, the emergence of a Kurdish diaspora and late 20th century developments in communication technologies have produced a new form and practice of Kurdish nationalism. The activities around the Kurdish satellite station MED-TV reveal the potential of diaspora media activism to seriously challenge the territory-based cultural politics of the Turkish state.

Kurdish mobilization around issues of identity and sovereign statehood have inspired Alevi migrants as well. Estimates of the numbers of Alevis as a religious minority in Turkey vary widely, depending on the respective interests of sources, with the majority of claims placing their percentage around 10 to 20 percent of the population (Vorhoff 1995). Alevi organizations in Western Europe claim that their percentage among migrants from Turkey is even higher, given the confluence of regional and political factors in the migration process, with figures of at least 25%, or 500,000 people in Germany alone. Even though, many Alevi migrants were active in leftist political organizations since the 1970s, often as expatriate branches of political parties in Turkey, it was not until the late 1980s that organizing on the basis of Alevi identity took off (Sökefeld 2003:143). While not oriented towards a nationalist agenda, the demand for cultural recognition as a religious group both equal to and different from the majority of Sunni Muslims in Turkey was and is a central part of Alevi organizing in migration contexts. The analysis of Alevi migrant media reveals a different aspect of 'voice' in relation to the dominant cultural politics of nation-states. Despite having access to new media for public articulation in the migration context, Alevi migrant media reveal the difficulties of intervening in the hegemonic discourses of nation-states that position Alevis in different ways as a problematic minority group.

Media Regulation in Turkey

The Turkish state has a history of tight control over print media and broadcasting, having maintained a state-monopoly on broadcasting until the 1990s. Control has been most vigorous and repressive with regard to ethnic and religious minority issues in both print and broadcasting sectors. Even after the introduction of private broadcasting, Turkey's constitution, laws and broadcasting regulations all converge to guard and enforce the 'indivisibility' of the country. As article 5 of the constitution states, it is the primary aim and responsibility of the state to protect this indivisibility, and the unity of the Turkish nation. Attempts to assert even basic cultural rights for the Kurdish minority in the country have been severely reprimanded and at times violently suppressed as alleged assaults on Turkish national unity. Efforts to establish Kurdish media in the country have shared this fate. Violence against journalists and media organizations in Turkey occurs with greatest frequency in relation to reporting on politically sensitive issues such as Kurdish separatism and state actions against it (UNHCR 2001). As Amnesty International has reported, several journalists have been tortured in police custody, or have 'disappeared' (most likely been murdered) in the 1990s. Between 1992 and 1996, 14 journalists who reported on the human rights abuses in Turkey's Kurdish regions have died or 'disappeared.' Most of them worked for Kurdish-oriented newspapers such as *Özgür Gündem* (free agenda), *Özgür Ülke* (free country), and *Yeni Politika* (new politics), which were subsequently banned for Kurdish-separatist sympathies (Amnesty International 1996).

Since 2001, constitutional amendments and legal reforms have taken place, particularly with a view to Turkey's EU membership negotiations. Yet, in its 2004 report on the human rights situation, Amnesty International states that freedom of expression and of as-

sociation are still severely curtailed, particularly when it comes to targeting allegedly 'separatist' or 'divisive' statements and activities. (Amnesty International 2004).¹

The emergence of private, commercial broadcasting in Turkey began to reveal limitations to state control over the mass-mediated articulation of opinions and positions. By way of satellite broadcasting from abroad, Turkey's laws and regulations were circumvented, and in 1991 the satellite station 'Magic Box' reached out to viewers in Turkey via Germany. The state monopoly on broadcasting crumbled in its wake, setting off the so-called *televizyon patlaması*, the television explosion of the 1990s.

But new forms of control have been instituted that apply for broadcasts on Turkish territory. Since 1995, the newly created Higher Board for Radio and Television RTÜK (*Radyo ve Televizyon Üst Kurulu*) imposes temporary or permanent broadcasting bans whenever channels and stations are deemed to have reported 'separatist propaganda'. Its members are nominated by the government, and up until 2004 had to include army representatives. Thus despite the increased openness of the new mediated public sphere that has emerged as a result of private broadcasting, minority interests such as those of Kurds and Alevi are still difficult to voice in mass mediated circuits of communication within Turkey.

Kurdish diasporic media

Conditions for Kurdish media activism nevertheless changed dramatically with the arrival of the satellite television station MED-TV, a broadcasting project based outside of Turkish territory and thus much more difficult to control by state forces.

Beginning to operate in 1995 with its studios in Belgium, different types of programmes produced in Sweden and Germany, a license provided by the British Independent Television Commission ITC and a transponder hired from France Telecom, MED-TV was from the start conceived as a transnational diasporic project with a Kurdish nationalist agenda.² Satellite broadcasting offered a way to simultaneously challenge different state prohibitions in the territories claimed as Kurdistan and to reach Kurdish diaspora populations in the Mediterranean region as well as all over Western Europe. The station was a tremendous success. One of the chief organizers behind MED-TV, Hikmet Tabak, has described the reactions of Kurdish audiences when the station began to broadcast:

“MeD-TV hit the airwaves spectacularly. ... The word spread like wildfire and every Kurdish person was eager to get to a television screen. In the cities people rushed into cafes, in the villages everybody gathered at the houses of

¹ Such allegations are also raised frequently in relation to statements that refer to the 1915 massacre of over one million Armenians in the Ottoman Empire as a genocide, a characterization that the Turkish state fervently disputes.

² *MED-TV's* name was derived from the Meder people who are believed to have lived in Mesopotamia 4000 years ago, and whom Kurdish nationalists regard as their ancestors (Eberle 2000). The name is thus a direct challenge to state-condoned historiographies in Turkey that trace their line of ancestry to Turkic populations in Central Asia (Hassanpour 1998).

those with a satellite dish. ... The Kurdish people were amazed at MeD-TV, as if they had not known television before. Kurds were singing in Kurdish. It was a revolution. Thousands cried with joy.” (Tabak 2001:160)

On the website of MED-TV, the Kurdish-nationalist newspaper *Yeni Politika* was quoted, stating that sales of satellite dishes in the eastern province of Elaziğ had increased by 40% during the first six weeks since the channel had started its test broadcasts (<http://www.ib.be/med/med-tv/impact/satsales.htm>, visited on April 29, 1999, published earlier as an article in *Yeni Politika*, May 14th, 1995).

The Turkish state did everything in its power to prevent the station from being able to function. As Tabak has described, state representatives contacted telecommunication companies who might provide a transponder even before the MED-TV staff had spoken to them, warning the companies that the terrorist PKK organization (*Partiya Karkeren Kürdistan*, Workers' Party of Kurdistan) was behind the channel. Such claims could indeed not easily be refuted. Though MED-TV always claimed political independence, it also gave room to PKK positions, often inviting PKK officials to explain their views (Eberle 2000).

Turkish state representatives also lobbied the respective Ministries of Foreign Affairs in the countries involved, which in turn applied pressure on different telecommunication ventures. When MED-TV eventually did manage to lease a transponder from French Telecom and obtain a license from ITC, the Turkish press initiated a protest campaign, denouncing the channel as a terrorist project. But it was Turkish protest at the highest political level which proved to be most effective.

Tansu Çiller, Turkish prime minister at the time, went to visit her counterpart John Major in London to have the ITC license revoked. After the transponder lease was up, France Telecom did not renew the contract, and MED-TV was forced to lease from Portuguese Telecom, obtaining only a three-months contract. Turkey's president Süleyman Demirel went to Lisbon and publicly asked that the contract be withdrawn. The contract was not renewed, forcing MED-TV to start another search, ending with a contract with the Polish Telecommunications Agency PTS. Pressure from Turkey this time led to a straightforward cancellation of the contract. In the summer of 1996, MED-TV was off the air for 45 days, before another contract could be signed with an American-based company. However, Belgian police raided the studios of the station and arrested staff members and guests, confiscating archives and computers. The station's bank accounts were temporarily frozen. The Turkish Interior Minister publicly claimed joint responsibility. Another problem arose when Turkish police and gendarmerie forces began to raid houses in Turkey which had their satellite dishes turned in the direction of the Intelsat signal that transmitted MED-TV.

“The police were trained to identify who was watching MeD-TV. Turkish television viewers were pointing their antennas to Eutelsat at 10 Degrees East, or Turkish Sat at 45 Degrees East, and because Intelsat was at 18 Degrees West, our viewers were easily identified. They were arrested and their antennas shot at. Kurds begged us to change the satellite because of the risk using this transponder meant for our viewers.” (Tabak 2001:168)

MED-TV switched again, this time hiding behind another company which signed a contract with Slovak Telecom, allowing the station to have its programming transmitted again via the Eutelsat satellite. In July 1997, Turkey was able to jam MED-TV's satellite signal for 23 days. In September 1998, a Slovakian political delegation announced the cancellation of the contract during a visit to Turkey, forcing the station to switch once more to an American satellite connection. But the final blow was dealt to MED-TV when the British ITC revoked its license in April 1999. The ITC had repeatedly diagnosed violations of its regulations such as calls to violence and 'hateful speech' during MED-TV's programmes.

As stated, MED-TV was made possible by a combination of different kinds of local knowledge and financial capital, national broadcasting regulations in different states, and transnational media infrastructures. Given its transnationality, it is not surprising to find that after MED-TV's demise, a new station was quickly founded and began to broadcast, this time as Medya TV, based in Paris. In February 2004, the French authorities closed it down. Yet only one month later, a new satellite station, Roj TV, started broadcasting from Denmark. While the Turkish state continues with diplomatic pressure to have the station shut down³, significant changes have begun to take place within Turkey.

Turkish state forces eventually came to realize that they could not stop the production of Kurdish-nationalist television abroad, and neither could they effectively prohibit and control the reception of such programmes via satellite dishes in Turkey. As a result, the Turkish state has begun to change its stance on the public use of Kurdish languages, formerly strictly prohibited in all public contexts including schools and the media. In the context of the debate on how to gain membership in the EU – who had encouraged Turkey to grant cultural rights to Kurds – the government began to discuss radical policy changes. On November 15, 2000, the *Turkish Daily News* quoted deputy prime minister Mesut Yılmaz of the center-right Motherland Party (ANAP) as saying that the unity and integrity of Turkey had to be preserved, but that

“The real threat to the unity of the nation is the broadcasting and brainwashing of Millions of our citizens by separatist organizations. Unfortunately, we cannot prevent this through fines and bans because of advances in technology. The state should use its mind and see that we have no other way of preserving our values.” (Mesut Yılmaz quoted in the *Turkish Daily News*, 15 November 2000)

The challenge of new communication technologies

The arguments now emerging from Turkish government circles and state officials were in stark contrast to the policies enforced since the beginnings of the Republic that were to en-

³ Turkey's current prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan went on a state visit to Denmark in November 2005 and demanded that the station should be closed down by Danish authorities.

sure cultural and linguistic homogeneity. To regard Kurdish spoken by a sizeable part of Turkey's population as simply a neutral fact rather than a problem to be eradicated was a first step towards the recognition of ethno-cultural differences in Turkey. Without Kurdish satellite television, making use of the freedoms and loopholes of Western European media regulations, this process might not have begun. Similarly, Iran has begun to produce programmes in the Hawrami language of local Kurds, after the government became aware of the influence of satellite television.⁴

Apart from the impact on state politics that Kurdish satellite television has had in Turkey and Iran, it has also fulfilled important functions in promoting the standardization of Kurdish dialects, moving Sorani and Kurmanji closer together and expanding their vocabularies (Fatah 2003). Though a transnational medium, it thereby engages in a classical task of nation-building, drawing Kurds into a national linguistic community, albeit a diasporic one (Curtis 2005). Satellite television has also given a public, transnational platform for Kurdish leaders and intellectuals, who now visibly claim to speak for and to Kurds world-wide.

Political mobilization has become more public and instantaneous, though it is only complementing the more clandestine communication routes which link Kurdish activists and sympathizers across different localities. MED-TV, Medya and Roj could/would not openly call for violent protest or other forms of illegal action, but, as one PKK sympathizer and local media activist in Berlin stated in an interview: "One phone call, and we have ten thousand people on the streets within a matter of hours." The instant protests all across Europe that followed the capture of PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan gave evidence of the dense communication structure among diaspora Kurds. The need to evade state persecution – even outside Turkey's territory – has contributed to this structure not merely being top-down.

Östen Wahlbeck has described the operation of transnational social networks among diasporic Kurds in Britain and Finland, pointing to the frequency of transnational contacts across Europe and the importance of communication technologies for members of a diaspora who retain and sometimes newly forge strong identifications with a deterritorialized 'Kurdish nation' (Wahlbeck 1998).

The successful operation of MED-TV relied on such identifications and networks, and on the transnational cooperation they were able to facilitate. While Roj TV objects to be seen as the continuation of MED-TV or any other Kurdish satellite television station⁵, audiences and analysts certainly see Roj as a successor project. The speed with which new Kurdish migrant broadcasting ventures could emerge in different European locations suggests close networking among groups and individuals located across the continent, enabling

⁴ Relative Kurdish autonomy in Northern Iraq has allowed the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) to start Kurdistan TV in 1998, also available online at <http://www.kurdistan.tv/>. The Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) features the satellite station Kurdsat, available online at <http://kurdsat.netro.ca/kurdsat>.

⁵ In an e-mail sent to and published on [Kurdish.media.com](http://www.kurdmedia.com), 18/02/2006, 'Clarification from Roj TV', <http://www.kurdmedia.com/news.asp?id=11413>, accessed 21/03/2006. Such distancing seems wise in terms of possible attempts to shut down the station on the basis of alleged infringements and violations committed by MED-TV or Medya TV.

the re-channeling of financial contributions, of broadcasting expertise and locally produced programmes from one European city to another. In the course of research on locally produced migrant television in the city of Berlin, the producer of a Kurdish programme on Berlin's open-access station explained to the author that activists from at least four different European countries had pooled their resources in Belgium to make MED-TV possible, and that programme contributions were similarly coming from different directions.

The example of Kurdish broadcasting in Berlin, local yet at the same time linking up with other Kurdish media activists across Europe, shows how local practices can tie into and promote transnational media activism.⁶ Kurdish satellite television owes its existence to an intermeshing of different scales of political practice – local, national, and transnational – that could not happen without the emergence of new media technologies and linked communicative networks. This intermeshing of scales is what renders Kurdish diasporic nationalism so effective – it is impossible for the opposing states to effectively target all localities of activism, and impossible also to target all communication links between them. New mass media technologies in the context of diaspora networks have thus enhanced public visibility, flexibility and range of movement for non-state and anti-state actors, making it much more difficult for state governments to squash public 'voices' of protest. The cat-and-mouse game between MED-TV and the Turkish state is a case in point.

Alevi migrant media

The case of Kurdish satellite television might suggest that mass mediated migrant 'voices' are mainly a matter of escaping direct repression and obtaining access to appropriate communication technologies. Yet, even on MED-TV, the question of what Kurdish dialect the representatives of Kurdish nationhood should speak was hotly debated. The station broadcast in different languages and even included Turkish, due to the fact that a part of its targeted audience could not speak any of the Kurdish dialects.

But the problems of *how* to articulate one's voice, once given the opportunity to do so, are not merely of a linguistic nature. Looking at the example of Alevi migrant broadcasting in Germany, the importance of questioning the representational character of 'voice' comes into view. Albert Hirschman acknowledged that the 'voice' option of dealing with dissent presented far more problems than that of 'exit':

⁶ Apart from broadcasting, print and non-public forms of communication, the internet plays a growing role, ranging from public portals to chat rooms and newsgroups with restricted access and membership. It is difficult to gain an overview over the wide range of internet sites and forums dedicated to Kurdish issues. What can be said, however, is that its contents elude the control of state forces even more so than satellite television does. Larger portals seem to have contributors from across Europe, and web content is often presented in various languages, Western European, Turkish and Kurdish dialects. It is evident that the internet allows organized Kurdish groups to 'jump scales', to form new political alliances translocally and to reach out to new publics (Smith 2001). Television remains crucial, though, since low rates of literacy, high costs of computer technology and lack of internet access constitute a major impediment to participation among Kurdish populations, as they do elsewhere in the Middle East (Sakr 2002).

“It is a far more ‘messy’ concept because it can be graduated, all the way from faint grumbling to violent protest; it implies articulation of one’s critical opinions rather than a private, ‘secret’ vote... Voice is political action par excellence.” (Hirschman 1970:16)

As was seen above, in the context of a deterritorialization of political conflict ‘exit’ can also form part of a strategy of political action. But more importantly for the concept of ‘voice’, it is not just the intensity of protest or the political nature of ‘voice’ that renders the concept ‘messy’, in Hirschman’s terms. While much of the literature on immigrant minorities and media assumes that access to and representation in the mass media is what guarantees a diversity of viewpoints and voices in the mediated public sphere, the precise nature of such representation is rarely explored.⁷

As I have discussed elsewhere (Kosnick 2004, 2007), the assumption that any public statement made by a member of an immigrant group will form an ‘authentic’ representation of the ‘voice’ of that group is highly problematic. It glosses over the distinction between representation as ‘speaking for’ as an act that implies a political sense of delegation, and representation as an act of ‘depicting something’ (Spivak 1988). Beyond the representative character of all communicative acts that cannot but operate with signs to signify and construct meaning, the concept often also entails a sense of representation as ‘speaking for someone,’ a sense that implies a political mandate.

Collapsing these two dimensions of representation in the context of immigrant minority media means to ignore the potential heterogeneity and power differentials within immigrant/ethnic groups that are treated as collectives. But what is more, a focus merely on access and visibility also ignores the difficulties for subaltern minorities to articulate ‘voices’ that can register in differently situated public discourses as ‘critical opinions’. Such critical articulations depend not just on the possibilities for raising a voice, but on the mass-mediated discursive contexts within which they appear as one voice among others. In order to make themselves heard, subaltern migrant groups often have to resort to very strategic politics of signification, so that their positions will be taken seriously in the dominant discursive contexts at which they are aimed.

Alevi migrant media are a case in point. As for Kurdish migrants, the Western European migration context has provided Alevis with new possibilities for organizing and opportunities for ‘going public’ vis-à-vis a range of different audiences (Sökefeld 2003). Marginalized as a religious minority in Turkey which allegedly practices an ‘improper’ form of Islam, the differences that separate Alevis from Sunni Islam are very differently valued in dominant Western European perspectives on Muslims (Mandel 1989, 1990). Elements such as the absence of veiling and explicit religious dress codes, the rejection of

⁷ Scholars and political analysts have interpreted representation mainly in the sense of access and visibility, as evidenced in European initiatives like ‘More Colour in the Media’, a network supported by the European Commission Community Action Program to Combat Discrimination, and in academic publications such as Cottle 2000, Frachon and Vargaftig 1995, Husband 1994, Riggins 1992.

Sharia law and emphasis on tolerance and diversity allow Alevis to represent themselves as more 'benign' Muslims in a climate that is increasingly marked by fears of Islamic extremism (Bunzl 2005). Yet, as will be shown, Alevi media activists are similarly concerned with their perception in the eyes of Sunni Muslims, both in the diaspora context and in Turkey.

While Alevi migrants have no satellite television presence, many organizations and smaller local groups are active on the internet and in contexts such as open-access television, particularly in Germany. Open-access television stations exist in all of the urban centres that have substantial immigrant populations from Turkey, such as Berlin, Hamburg or Frankfurt.

In Berlin, a range of different Alevi groups has been producing amateur programmes at the local Open Channel (Offener Kanal Berlin, OKB), aimed at both German and Turkish immigrant audiences (Kosnick 2004). The OKB charges no fees for the use of its equipment and studio facilities, and provides technical support to its so-called 'users', in order to keep access barriers as low as possible. Furthermore, the channel refrains from interfering with programme contents: anything that remains within the limits of the German constitution, does not contain commercial advertising and is produced by users themselves can be broadcast.⁸ This is in keeping with the basic Open Channel mission to increase pluralism and diversity in mass-mediated public spheres, a mission shared by open-access channels all over the country. Open Channel migrant broadcasting therefore provides an interesting case study for analyzing the 'voicing' of critical opinions under almost ideal conditions of non-interference and access to mass media production and distribution facilities.

Despite low access thresholds and non-interference, even a context like open-access television cannot ensure that Alevi migrants will 'speak in their own voice'. Alevi migrant media producers do not simply 'raise their voice', as if what Alevis had to say was a straightforward function of their belonging to an Alevi community that 'speaks for itself'. The analysis of Alevi programming and conversations with their producers instead reveal a multiplicity of 'voices', some of which even appear to be contradictory. This multiplicity can be understood only if both the particular situation of Alevi migrants as a subaltern minority and the different dominant discourses in which they seek to intervene are kept in mind.

Two examples of Alevi 'voices' are briefly introduced here: too briefly to do more than give an indication of the problems that 'speaking for oneself' can entail for subaltern migrant groups (I have analyzed Alevi media programmes in more depth in Kosnick 2004). The first 'voice', which can be found in similar form across a range of different Alevi programmes, is aimed towards an audience of Sunni Muslims, who constitute the majority population in Turkey as well as in the Western European migration context. The intention

⁸ I have discussed elsewhere the different kinds of restrictions that the channel has imposed to curb the increasing volume of religious programming, and its reaction to the September 11th events in the United States, which both combined to discourage many immigrant producers from using the Open Channel facilities (Kosnick, 2007).

of representing *Alevilik* to this audience is to dispell common stereotypes of Alevis and to establish the equality of Alevi belief with Sunni orientations under the roof of Islam.

In a Turkish-language Alevi programme broadcast on the OKB in 1998, the question of Sunni perceptions of *Alevilik* was at issue:

“Now we want to present to you some misconceptions that are widespread among the people (*halk*), and will try to learn about them from the most knowledgeable sources, if you permit, esteemed viewers. As you all remember, we have had a radio station for some time, Köln Radyosu. ... In a recent broadcast there, there was a Sunni sister (*bacı*) who called, and this is what I heard from her: ‘... I slaughtered the animal to be sacrificed (*kurban kestim*) and gave some meat to the Germans, some to the *kızılbaşlar*⁹, that is to the Alevis. Now I wonder, did I do injustice to the sacrifice?’ How sad that we hear such dangerous fatwas, using modern technologies. Of course it is not the sister who should be blamed, she has been taught like that. But so we will hear today from our dede [male spiritual leaders among the Alevis, K.K.] how it is that the Alevis and Bektaşî actually sacrifice their animals, listen closely.”

Like many other Alevi programmes, the broadcast is aiming to respond to Sunni stereotypes of Alevis, implicitly addressing as its audience a Turkish-speaking population that is hostile, or at least unfamiliar with Alevi beliefs and practices. The producer of the programme *Kırk Budak* explained it as an effort to find common ground with Sunni Muslims:

“I think the importance of our programme for the Turks here is this: we try to make ourselves known to those people that come from Islam, those who call themselves Muslim. We tell them, yes, there are differences between us, but there is only one Islam and only one right way! Let's find this way together, this is why we explain ourselves to them. Let's stop the enmity between us.”

Another broadcaster who represents a different Alevi organization at the Open Channel concurred with this aim when it comes to Turkish Muslim audiences:

“We want to make people see those beautiful, nice dimensions of *Alevilik* that they don't know about. And definitely, even among those who know of us, we think there are some prejudices. To remove the prejudices, I don't know, the slander that has been leveled against Alevis, well, things like *mum*

⁹ The term *kızılbaş*, 'redhead,' has become a widespread pejorative term for Alevis in Turkey. It emerged in the early 16th century Ottoman Empire as a label for heterodox Muslims.

*söndü*¹⁰, not distinguishing between mother and sister and such, to stop this ugly slander that people have picked up, there is a need for these broadcasts. We want them to learn about Alevilik not from others, not from the media of the state, not from the Alevis that are on the side of the state, but from the real Alevi people, from those who struggle for the original Alevilik!”

Yet, when it comes to addressing German non-immigrant audiences, very different aspects of Alevilik are highlighted – particularly those that distinguish Alevis from Sunni Muslims. The same producer justified a different agenda for German-language broadcasts:

“Now if I say to a German or a European, there are twenty Million Alevis in Turkey. ... they will wonder, who are those people. But if they are told what Alevilik is about, see, it is this, it is liberal in its religious beliefs, it wants to build schools instead of mosques in the village. It is laicist, it respects human rights. ... There is no division between men and women ... See, the Alevi woman does not wear a headscarf. She dresses any way she wants to. She is free. When I say that, they ask, does all of that exist in Turkey, in an Islamic state? They don't know that ...” (Büyükgöl, interview June 1998)

In their German-language programmes more generally, Alevi organizations stress the criteria that make them different from Sunni Muslims: women not wearing headscarfs, not praying in mosques, women and men intermingling in religious ceremonies. The very dimensions which among Sunni Turks tend to be interpreted as morally suspect and non-Islamic are perceived differently and positively by German audiences. They effectively present Alevi beliefs and practice as a kind of Islam that in the German context tends to be interpreted as progressive and tolerant.

Would the real Alevi please stand up – and speak up? Mainstream accounts of migrant media are ill equipped to deal with strategies of articulating a ‘voice’ that are as divergent as those presented above, because they often implicitly assume that any public utterance made by a member of a migrant group will represent it in the double sense of ‘speaking for’ and ‘presenting’, authenticated by virtue of his or her ethno-cultural membership.

The double orientation toward fellow migrants and non-immigrant audiences in Alevi media productions highlights the representational challenges which subaltern migrant media producers can face in their work. Marginalized for different reasons in both Turkey and Germany, Alevi producers focus much of their attention on countering the negative attitudes they suspect their audiences (migrant and non-migrant) to harbor. Marginalized on different grounds in relation to the cultural politics in Turkey and Germany respectively, they feel the need to engage with the dominant horizons of meaning in which they see their different audiences embedded. Seeking to intervene in dominant stereotypical discourses

¹⁰ Literally: ‘extinguishing the candle’, an expression which refers to the alleged sexual looseness and hidden polygamy stereotypically thought to characterize mixed-sex Alevi gatherings.

which reproduce their marginalization, the problem of how to represent their own difference differently takes center stage. Representations of Alevi identity are thus created strategically by migrant producers, using the very semiotic material that forms part of their audiences' ideological horizons in an attempt to re-signify.

What complicates this project of semiotic intervention is its transnational location in the margins of not just one but two nation-states and their arenas of cultural struggle. Veering between a multiculturalist lense that focuses on the allegedly more 'benign' nature of Alevi Islam in Germany, and a dominant Turkish perspective that tends to regard Alevi religious practices and beliefs as unislamic, Alevi migrant media appear somewhat confusing. It is only by taking into account the transnational dimensions of their cultural positioning in Western Europe that this apparent confusion can be resolved. Alevi migrant television programmes are intended by their producers as strategic interventions into different national fields of cultural struggle where the dominant terms have already been set, casting Alevis in each as a different kind of problematic minority. The interesting question is how migrant media 'voices' grapple with the *collusion* of these fields in the migration context.

It would be reductive to assume that diasporic minority media function only as public spheres in exile, with the main aim of voicing criticism directed at former countries of origin. As the example of Alevi broadcasting shows, migrant media can combine different orientations and strategies of representation, often prompted by nation-state related hegemonic discourses that form the background against which migrant media producers have to articulate their 'voices'. Thus, while it might be more difficult for state representatives to silence unwanted criticism that is circulated through new technological forms and media practices, diasporic media activism still faces the problem of how to escape the hegemonic reach of nation-states: not just in terms of managing to go and stay public, but in terms of how to voice criticism and address different publics in dominant media environments that powerfully marginalize or vilify minority concerns as a matter of 'common sense'.

For migrant broadcasters partaking in these different, colluding fields of cultural politics opened up by national histories and migration trajectories, the challenge and ambition is to intervene and produce alternative representations that will signify differently. Difference, articulated from almost always subaltern positions within these colluding fields, can mean tactical interventions into dominant discourses, switching strategies of alliance-building, or attempts to create new common ground with audiences that is beyond contention. The study of migrant media can reveal a wide range of representational practices that articulate difference and 'reconcile' multiple cultural struggles in different ways. What it does *not* support is an argument which posits mediated migrant 'voices' as a simple addition to the pluralism or diversity of public spheres at local, national or transnational levels.

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