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There is no permission to love in our Urfa: media, youth identities and social change in Southeast Turkey

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VoR (Version of Record)

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Algan, Ece. 2019. "There Is No Permission to Love in Our Urfa: Media, Youth Identities and Social Change in Southeast Turkey". figshare. <https://hdl.handle.net/2134/23800>.

“There Is No Permission to Love in Our Urfa”

Media, Youth Identities and Social Change in Southeast Turkey

Ece Algan

Abstract

Today media are central to young people’s experience of modernity and identities everywhere in the world – not only those who are educated and live in the centers, but also those with little or no education who live in rural areas, ghettos, and the periphery. My research in Southeast Turkey illustrates how integral media are to the everyday lives of young people in Şanlıurfa. This research, however, does not necessarily suggest that the introduction of a new medium or programming content is drastically transforming their lives. Rather, as I show in this article, the media activities of the youth in Şanlıurfa are linked to much wider social change in Turkey, which we must understand in order to see the role media play in their lives, and their perceptions and experience of change. On the one hand, national, transnational and global media increase intergenerational tensions by pointing out the disparities that exist between the young people’s realities in Southeast Turkey and those of other young people of the same generation living in the west of the country. On the other hand, local media and new communication technologies give them an opportunity to articulate youth identities shaped by and negotiated through both globally-induced socio-economic changes, as well as centuries-old patriarchal and tribal structures.

“We are not even allowed to love here. Please write what we are going through. Make our voices heard because we can’t make them hear”, cried Mehmet U, a 16 year-old Turkish boy in love with a girl whose father is marrying her off to her cousin. All the other young men who, along with Mehmet U and I, had gathered at a small neighborhood patisserie in one of the ghettos of Southeastern Turkish city of Şanlıurfa¹, nodded in agreement. Despite being devoted to ethnographic work, I have always been skeptical about ethnographers claiming to make people’s voices heard, and I even questioned our ability to do so. I would have never thought I would be asked by my informants to do just that.

However, as I engaged in researching local media consumption and production in Southeast Turkey, I was struck by how young people were using local radio and phones in order to bypass traditional and religious pressures that prevented them from dating and experiencing their gender identities and sexualities. What's more, they were able to hear each other's voices, share stories of resistance, and critique societal norms through their participation via call-in local radio stations. This article, based on the media ethnography I conducted among local media professionals and frequent media participants and users in Şanlıurfa, examines how young people utilize media in their everyday lives in order to make sense of the larger socio-cultural changes that are taking place in their city, in Turkey, and in the world. Today media are central to young people's experience of modernity and identities everywhere in the world – not only those who are educated and live in the centers, but also those with little or no education who live in rural areas, ghettos, and the periphery. My research in Southeast Turkey illustrates how integral media are to the everyday lives of young people in Şanlıurfa. This research, however, does not necessarily suggest that the introduction of a new medium or programming content is drastically transforming their lives. Rather, as I show in this article, the media activities of the youth in Şanlıurfa are linked to much wider social change in Turkey, which we must understand in order to see the role media play in their lives, and their perceptions and experience of change.

Rethinking the uneasy relationship between media and social change

As Debra Spitulnik (1993) insightfully observed, “Probably the most general – and most difficult – question about the place of mass media in modern societies is their implications for fundamental and irreversible social and cultural change” (p. 307). From the early media effects tradition to later models that acknowledge media's indirect effects, mass communication scholars have been eager to find causal relationship between media and how we are influenced by it. Even though Daniel Lerner's (1958) classic *Passing of Traditional Society*, which illustrated that modern media can modernize traditional societies, has been highly criticized, we can still find unproblematized, easy equations between media and social change in communication studies, especially in the communication for development field – for instance the assertion that the entertainment-education media will foster social change (Singhal 2007, p. 266).² However, rather than predicting long-term social change instigated via media as a result of short-term campaigns or programming, I agree with Stig Hjarvard's (2008) suggestion that “the task before us is instead to try to gain an understanding of the ways in which social institutions and cultural processes have changed character, function and structure in response to the omnipresence of media” (pp. 105-106).

Tackling the relationship between media and social change, therefore, requires us to take a broader approach. We need to consider media's role in shifting identity politics and media's ability to facilitate interactions among communities, nations, societies, and regions to map social and cultural dynamics in question. Such an approach should neither equate the term social change with development nor see media simply as agents through which the change occurs. As Tufte (2008) has argued, the drivers of today's change processes emerge as a result of global processes, such as transnational advocacy networks, which emphasize issues of citizenship and bottom-up globalization practices (p. 36). Moreover, Hemer & Tufte (2005) remind us that development is no longer a process reserved for 'developing countries,' and that Pieterse's (2001) critical globalist concept of "world development" indicates a paradigm shift in the field of 'communication for development and social change.' We must account for the power geometry in current development, change, and cultural globalization processes (Gumucio-Dagron and Tufte 2006).

Therefore, following Featherstone and Lash (1995) and other globalization scholars, in this article I use the term *social change* to mean not the development of societies but rather a sociocultural process that emerges "as the global begins to replace the nation-state as the decisive framework for social life" (p. 2). As Ekecrantz (2007) argues, "Globalization forces us not only to focus more on *transnational* phenomena in general, but also to highlight *social change and difference*, which are almost unprecedented in pace and scope and directly and indirectly caused by globalization processes" (p. 171). Scholars have increasingly taken a trans-societal perspective on social change, seeing it as taking place not through national institutions but as a result of global forces and global cultural flows, including media (Appadurai 1990; Friedman 1995; Pieterse 2001; Robertson 1995). Springing from this approach, we often see an emphasis on new media's role in aiding global processes of socioeconomic change, as in the examples of NGO activities and larger global social movements, being highlighted as great examples of the global bypassing national institutions.

Transnational media, such as satellite television and other forms of new media, indeed allow people to experience their identities in many more levels than it was possible before. As Straubhaar (2008) states, "these layers of identity are articulated with a variety of media, such as television and the Internet, but not in a simple sense of being primarily influenced by media" (p. 11). However, today older forms of media, such as local television and radio, can also weaken the stronghold of national institutions as the main framework through which we imagine our identities, because these media allow people more easily to articulate their identities in ways that are familiar, acceptable and accessible in their community. Therefore, conducting media ethnographies can help us understand how media facilitate what Tufte (2008) calls the *new patterns of identification* on multiple levels at the same time – such as the local, national, regional, and global.

Even though this research approaches social change from a trans-societal perspective with an emphasis on the role of global cultural forces, it aims neither to replicate “those global media studies, where globalization was used as a starting point, as a key theoretical concept, and a key conclusion” (Rantanen 2008, p. 34), nor to understate change, as Straubhaar (2008) believes some globalization hypotheses do. Instead, this study focuses on the local both in terms of people and their media experiences while underlining the importance of connecting media use in its geographic and historical specificity in order to understand the transformation of everyday realities and lives in that particular locale.

Conducting media ethnography in Şanlıurfa

As young people turn to media to make sense of larger socio-cultural change and negotiate their place in the world, they seek and create ways of expressing themselves, using media in unique ways that shed light on struggles, changing realities, and larger economic, political and social structures that shape everyday life and identities. An ethnographic approach, which allows us to situate media as an intricate part of these dynamics but not an ultimate determinant of them, can uncover the dialectical relationship between global, national and local forces at play (Algan 2009 and 2003a). As Spitulnik (1993) argues,

Although anthropologists have just begun to look at the various political, social, cultural, and linguistic dimensions of mass media, they have in some way already bypassed many of the debates within media studies. Perhaps this is because they implicitly theorize media processes, products, and uses as complex parts of social reality, and expect to locate media power and value in more a diffuse, rather than direct and causal, sense. (p. 307)

Therefore, media ethnography emerges as the best methodological approach to deconstruct and make sense out of some of the complex relationship between social change and globalization. This study uses it to examine how youth in Şanlıurfa experience their agency and articulate their identities, which are increasingly influenced and reshaped by global cultural values and national media’s glocalized interpretations of those lifestyles.

This essay draws from the media ethnography I conducted in the city of Şanlıurfa using a multi-sited research approach that moved “out from the single sites and local situations of conventional ethnographic research designs to examine the circulation of cultural meanings, objects, and identities in diffuse time-space” (Marcus 1995/1998: 79). I traveled to Şanlıurfa three times with the goal of understanding the role of local media in people’s lives and the impact of global, national and local forces on their interpretation and use of media: twice during 2001, spending a total of three months, and once in the summer of 2007, spending five weeks there. I conducted formal in-depth interviews with



Young women are learning to make crafts in Yakubiye CATOM
(Multi-purpose Community Center)

local media owners, managers and DJs; and both formal and informal in-depth interviews and participant observation with many young men and women whom I met at Harran University, internet cafes, shops and other public places. I also recorded several days of radio programming to observe audience interaction on local radio and conducted in-depth and focus group interviews with young women who attended the Multi Purpose Community Center (ÇATOM) in Yakubiye (one of Şanlıurfa’s ghettos), which provides training programs for women and young girls in literacy, health and family planning, maternal and child health, nutrition, home economy and income-generating activities.³

Between rural and urban: Şanlıurfa

The city of Şanlıurfa, which is inhabited mostly by people of Kurdish and Arabic descent, is located 30 miles from the Syrian border in the least developed (according to the standard socio-economic signs of development) Southeastern Anatolian region of Turkey. The city, which has a population of around half a million, has undergone very rapid growth and urbanization just in the last two decades due to the Turkey’s integration into the global economy and government development projects. Therefore, despite my initial expectations of finding a small, ancient city in the rural Southeast with little or no connection to the rest of the world, Şanlıurfa turned out to be a city with modern, concrete apartment buildings and schools, several nice parks that families enjoy on the weekends, many small businesses, a busy downtown with several state and municipal

buildings, restaurants, internet cafes and both modern and traditional shopping areas. A couple of new neighborhoods reminded me of those in İstanbul. A local pharmacist pointed to a modern street in one of those neighborhoods with five-to-six-story apartment buildings and neon lights coming from shops on the lower levels. “If you had come ten years ago, you would have found empty fields in place of these neighborhoods and half the population we have right now”, he told me. Even in the squatter home (gecekondu) neighborhoods such as Yakubiye and Eyübiye, shabby houses were transformed into more stable concrete buildings, were given title deeds as well as schools, water and electricity, and were integrated into the city. The modern white buildings of Harran University, built in 1992, reached out from the outskirts of Şanlıurfa’s southern edge toward the vast yellow fields of Harran. New apartment buildings were being built, and so was the tallest building in the city, which is a hotel with approximately 500 beds. Since the arrest of Abdullah Öcalan, the leader of the separatist Kurdish Worker’s Party (PKK), both domestic and foreign tourists had begun to visit the city again, although the increase was small compared to two decades ago when there was no armed conflict between the military and PKK militants.

In Şanlıurfa, development was apparent in many ways. For instance, during my stay I never witnessed a water service stoppage or serious power blackout (except an hour-and-a-half blackout when it snowed). The people I talked to admitted that less than a decade ago they had many infrastructural problems, such as a lack of reliable running water. The increase in local capital was obvious in the recent construction of many modern department stores, apartment buildings, shops and supermarkets, which were very popular, especially among women. Every man carried a cellular phone attached to his belt, and internet cafes were full of young men enjoying computers. In addition to the impact that the nationwide economic change caused in Şanlıurfa, the Southeast Anatolia Project (its Turkish acronym is ‘GAP’), a state development project, also contributed to drastic changes, not only in Şanlıurfa’s economy and urban infrastructure, but also in its socio-cultural characteristics. By bringing irrigation agriculture to the plains south of the city, the GAP project increased agricultural production and profit, initiated industrial development, and caused people to relocate due to increased opportunities and the construction of a series of dams. As a result, this ancient city received a large number of immigrants from the many rural villages and towns of the region and expanded to accommodate two brand new upscale neighborhoods – which housed expensive furniture, appliance and electronic stores, among other businesses – in addition to many new ghettos.

I was quite impressed by the city I saw and openly expressed my impressions to the people of Şanlıurfa whenever they asked my opinion of it. Soon I realized, however, that almost every young person I encountered did not share the same feelings, even though they were pleased to hear that I thought very highly of Şanlıurfa. One of the DJs I met, DJ Mahmut, who works for Güneydo u Radyo ve Televizyon, echoed many others when he said that:

Şanlıurfa seems developed to you, but it's only an appearance. The important thing is the change in the mindset [which is lacking here]. For instance, there are many girls I know but I can't hang out with them freely. However, they still think I have many girlfriends. I'd like to take my sister to a movie or café, but I cannot. They would think she is my lover. (DJ Mahmut, personal interview, February 16, 2001)

Despite the new and modern neighborhoods, public spaces such as parks, internet cafes and fast food restaurants, and better educational opportunities, young people felt they could not utilize Şanlıurfa's places freely. On the contrary, they felt trapped in the mindset of a city they did not see as the modern urban place outsiders like me saw. I kept hearing from them: "We have no social life here;" "We can't be free like you are in the west [of Turkey];" "You don't know Şanlıurfa's traditions"; and "There is a tribal system here." The more time I spent in the city talking with them about their experiences, the more I saw life in Şanlıurfa through their eyes. I saw the role local radio and phones played in young people's struggle to have a "social life." The government policies on the ethnic conflict in the region, rural to urban immigration prompted by the conflict, and the GAP project and its introduction of irrigation agriculture in the province all have impacted the cityscape in many different ways, but these changes left the problems of the youth either unanswered or worsened. Moreover, a number of forces changed the city's small but progressive urban character, including the increasing power of the local government with its reactionary, conservative and religious agenda; disparity in wealth; the increasing power of landlords gained through irrigation agriculture; and martial law that was in effect on and off until 2000.

Today Şanlıurfa is inhabited mainly by two different social groups and an expanding youth population. On the one hand, there are the new immigrants who struggle to adapt to modern life in the city while maintaining their rural lifestyle and religious traditions. On the other, the city has a rooted, secular, urban population, which is relatively wealthy and educated. As a result, the young men and women of Şanlıurfa, especially those who are relatively new to the city and live on its fringes, strive to experience modern ways of living in this urban environment and to interact freely with each other – despite the restrictions of traditions deeply rooted in the tribal and feudal social structure of the region, which have existed for centuries.⁴ As Bülent Okur, a journalist who ran the Doğan News Agency in Şanlıurfa during my research there, explained the social and cultural change that took place before and after the 1980s:

It was a wealthy urban society back then. Villagers lived in the villages and the urban lived in the city. There used to be costume balls, 7-8 movie theaters and other places that families can go together. Families used to go to the movies together. Throughout the last 25 years, this urban structure has deteriorated. I think it is mostly due to the immigration from the villages. The villagers could not become urbanized, but the urban became rural. We can add the powerful reign of the Virtue Party [the conservative, religious party that governs the municipality] to that,

and the closure of the movie theaters one by one. There is now one movie theater that university students go to. There are no restaurants that families can go. There are some café houses that students go to, but since they are under the control of the “Virtuous” gentlemen, they serve no alcohol. So, the social life has suffocated. (Bülent Okur, personal interview, February 17, 2001)

The Şanlıurfa municipality was run in 2001 by the religious and conservative Virtue (Fazilet) Party members, and since then it has been run by the equally conservative AKP Party⁵. Another local journalist, Özcan Güneş, owner and editor-in-chief of Şanlıurfa Radyo Televizyon (ŞRT), was in agreement with Mr. Okur and many others about how Islamic revivalism began in Şanlıurfa and how religion was used against the uprising of PKK (Kurdish Workers Party):

The government officials who were assigned to this region, especially in the 1980s, used religion to fight against terror. In the other provinces, such as Diyarbakır, this didn't work much. In Urfa, there was not much terror, there has never been much, either. However, the weapon that the government used is now directed to itself. Its regime is in danger. On the one hand religiosity, and on the other hand feudal structure took the social life backward to a degree that almost destroyed it... (Ö. Güneş, personal interview, February 21, 2001)

When the PKK gained power, support, and visibility as a Marxist organization and workers' party in the region, the state and governments of the time followed a policy that aimed to counteract their leftist ideology with religious and rightist ideologies, support for nationalist youth groups, and funding for religious schools, organizations and leaders. The fear of communism during the cold war era contributed to the Turkish military and state's drastic measures nationwide, and their reactionary but flawed policies not only resulted in military coups but also in a deepened conflict between secularists and Islamists that empowered the religious parties and local governments. The increasing power of local religious leaders and political authorities, which have adopted the Islamist discourse and ideology, created numerous constraints on several aspects of social life in Şanlıurfa, especially women's participation in the public sphere. Establishments that serve alcoholic drinks as well as restaurants and movie theaters where both women and men could go were closed as a result of the social pressure that growing religious sentiment caused. In addition, participating in those spaces was not a routine part of the daily lives of the new residents of the city who migrated from the rural areas. Thus, those urban spaces increasingly vanished from the new landscape of the city. Today, women in the city of Şanlıurfa – even though they worked in the fields along with their husbands prior to settling in the city – are discouraged from working in businesses, especially restaurants, cafes and other shops, where they can be exposed to many people. Very few young women work in their fathers' businesses. I saw no women working for the local media stations during my research.

In many other cities in Turkey, it is common for women who migrated from rural areas to the city to adopt the headscarf and long trench coats to be able to mediate between private and public spaces (İlyasoğlu 1998) and between traditional and modern (Macleod 1991). Even though the new urban style of veiling and conservative clothing are also embraced by women in Şanlıurfa, it does not provide free access to the city, because the unequal male-female relations in the private sphere are perpetuated through religion, traditions, tribal and patriarchal culture. Since they no longer live in a small town or village among families that belong to the same tribe and have close kinship ties with each other, women are expected to stay at home and not leave without a male chaperon or older women's supervision – like a mother or mother-in-law – and appropriately modest clothing and headscarf. Religion is heavily used to enforce these patriarchal practices. For instance, some of the young girls I met at the ÇATOM told me that it is a sin for a woman to walk alone on the streets without a chaperone and that they would burn in hell if they did so.

Şanlıurfa's semi-feudal tribal structure, which is the strongest in the region, perpetuates a centuries-old tradition of loyalty to a prominent family, landlord and/or tribal head. This structure mandates that marriages occur within the extended family in order to strengthen it and thus, the tribe. While marriages are common between families of the same tribe, most marriages occur between the children of two brothers within the same family, and marriages between the families of different tribes are very rare. This structure not only minimizes the input of the young in choosing their spouses but also prohibits dating and relationships for both men and women and severely punishes people suspected of having such a relationship, sometimes even leading to their murder in the name of tradition and family honor. As a result, almost everyone ends up in an arranged marriage with a cousin or relative with whom they grew up and have no romantic feelings toward. This is a key part of the social context in which the young people of Şanlıurfa turn to local media.

Turkish media as a marker of difference

The Turkish media environment underwent a significant transformation in the 1990s, which deepened the intergenerational conflict between the youth and their families. The Turkish state monopoly in radio and television broadcasting was broken as a result of media liberalization, globalization, and the infiltration of satellite and other new communication technologies. Within less than a year Turkish broadcasting changed from a couple of state-owned-and-controlled radio and TV broadcast channels (TRT) to 16 national commercial TV networks and almost 2000 local radio stations nationwide. Commercial TV and radio channels quickly began broadcasting programs that mimicked their Western counterparts, which gained immediate popularity with Turkish audiences tired of the formal, elitist and old-fashioned state broadcasting. These new channels, especially radio

stations, offered a special emphasis on audience participation and attracted many listeners with their live interactive broadcasting style in which the audience was able to participate by sending messages via fax, telephone, mail and e-mail to express their appreciation for the new programming and voice their opinions on current political and social issues. This media environment created a new democratic forum for many Turks, especially those living in urban centers, to freely challenge the hegemony of state authority and the official ideology, at least during the first half of the 1990s (Algan 2003b).

While audience interaction and communication with radio stations slowed during the second half of the 1990s, the popularity of these radio channels continued and the number of both local and national channels increased. Networks broadcasting from urban centers, especially İstanbul,⁶ reached most of the country and illustrated realities of life and new trends from the nation's urban center of İstanbul. TV dramas modeled after telenovelas and comedies modeled after American sitcoms depicted mostly urban Turkish people living in their beautifully decorated apartments, wearing fashionable clothing, working in nice offices, leading modern lives just like their global counterparts. The transition from a highly didactic, controlled, and technically humble state broadcasting system to a commercial one led young people living in the geographical periphery of Southeast Turkey to see the disparity between their own realities and those in the western part of the country. In some of the new sitcoms and TV series, for instance, mothers worked in office jobs alongside men and they made important decisions regarding family and finances; teenagers used personal computers, freely dated, threw birthday parties and attended school dances; and unmarried female university students traveled freely and even got pregnant without being rejected by their families and friends.

In Southeast Turkey, however, most young girls are not allowed to go to school for more than a few years, if at all, and most boys only attend elementary school. Not only do young people lack any social space to experience their gender identities and sexualities as they can now see represented from İstanbul, but they are also expected to obey traditional ways regarding their education, work, and marriage. In this context, since their launch in the mid-1990s, local commercial radio channels in Şanlıurfa have functioned as a vitally important site for young people – who can now see the extent of the disparity between their lives and those in the west – to vocalize their dissatisfaction with the status quo and traditions. Young people call in to discuss arranged marriage practices, bride price, *berdel* – the cross-marriage of male and female children of two families – and other traditions that prioritize marriage among relatives, as well as restrictions on women's education. In addition, local radio has functioned as a social space for them to experience various aspects of their youth identities by sharing cultural works they create, such as songs and poems, and by pursuing romantic relationships via sending songs and messages to each other (Algan 2005).

Love Line: Radio and the politics of love

Dating over the radio gained publicity and popularity soon after the first commercial radio station of Şanlıurfa, GAP FM, began broadcasting in 1993. The radio's manager, Tezel, founded a fan club called *Love Line* (Sevgi Hattı Fan Klubü), where members read their love poems, requested songs, and presented their views about love-related topics on the air over two hours on Saturdays and Sundays. She charged 500 TL (around \$10 at the time) as a membership fee, which was actually a donation for Mehmet Saçlı Elementary School. In return she sent listeners a membership card, which provided discounts for certain shops. She had over one thousand members consisting of not only the young people of Şanlıurfa but also people of different ages and backgrounds from other provinces, such as Siirt and Ordu, and even from across the border in Syria. Tezel remembers that a teenage girl who was not allowed by her father to become a member – because he thought that she was trying to become a prostitute – brought him to the station to prove him wrong. This club and program were so popular that one of my informants said the entire city tuned in to the show and that “you couldn't see any open TV sets during the time the show was on” (a fan of the show, personal interview, February 21, 2001).

When two young people who came to register for the fan club met at the radio station, fell in love, and carried a romantic relationship via GAP FM, the station's popularity soared. After many months of messages and song exchanges, these two people, who were known on the radio by the code names Red Microbe and Bahar, decided to get married. When Bahar's father refused to permit it, Red Microbe did what is common in the region despite its occasional fatal ending: he kidnapped her with her permission. What was unusual was that he called the radio at every stage of the kidnapping. Tezel said that the station had to change its regular programming so she could learn what was happening and let the listeners know. When Red Microbe and Bahar realized the strong support they were getting from the people of Şanlıurfa, they decided to take refuge at the radio station. When Bahar's father heard where they were, he invaded the radio station with his relatives. Via radio, Tezel was able to summon not only the police but also a big crowd who came to rescue the lovers. With the community's support behind them, Red Microbe and Bahar were able to get married.

While the story of Red Microbe and Bahar is not a common one, this program, *Love Line*, was influential for providing young people the “social life” they wanted to have by creating a vibrant youth community and allowing young people to pursue romantic relationships. Through song requests, poems and messages they express feelings for their love interests over the radio. However, not every radio-mediated relationship or innocent song request ends happily. Consider the case of Hacer, who did not even have a romantic affair on the radio, though her name was heard many times, is widely known in Şanlıurfa and stokes fear among many who try to subvert Şanlıurfa's strict norms on relationships. Wanting to experience love freely like others seemed to do on the radio, and to live

a life like the independent and rich women on TV, Hacer escaped from home, but she was found by the police and returned to her family (Faraç 1998, p. 26). According to them, her honor had been damaged. The family murdered her, and she became a victim of honor killings.⁷

Most young girls I talked to were afraid of sending songs to someone toward whom they had romantic feelings, out of fear of being recognized and labeled a bad girl. One of Tezel's short radio plays, which became very popular and was repeatedly requested by listeners, depicts girls' fear of sending songs over the radio. The play was called *Dedo Aski* (which means Dedo's love or a young man's love) and depicted two lovers trying to communicate secretly through radio and telephones. From memory, Tezel told me listeners' favorite lines of the play:

Dedo: Girl, I sent a song for you last night, didn't you listen?

Hatice: How could I miss?

Dedo: Then, why didn't you respond?

Hatice: How could I? What if my brother finds out? I was afraid he would kill us both. (from Tezel's radio play, *Dedo Aski*)

Despite possible consequences, secret romantic love expressed through song requests and telephones is common. There are a few stories like Red Microbe and Bahar's, but most romantic relationships pursued over the radio end either because



I was DJ Murat Buyukler's guest for his program, Sugar Microphone, at Radyo Rempo in Şanlıurfa.

the fathers do not allow marriage or the couples decide to break up themselves. Social custom constricts possibility. As one of my informants explains,

Urfa's traditions, customs and manners are very different. Our east is not like the west. For instance in the west⁸, two people can get married as they like if they love each other or they can live together. However, it's not like that here. There is no permission to love in our Urfa. You can't even talk to a girl. She cannot come near me and talk to me. Why can't she? Because if relatives or neighbors see her, they either badmouth her or gossip about her. So, it's shameful here [for a girl to talk to a man]. (M. Ulaş, personal interview, February 22, 2001)

Hacer wanting to live a life like girls on TV and M. Ulaş' belief about how lovers can live together without marriage in the west of Turkey suggest that the new commercial TV channels have shaped young people's imagination about life in İstanbul and other cities. What is significant in M. Ulaş' assessment is his generalization of small number of people's experiences in big cities as the common practice of relationships in the west of Turkey. It reflects the fact that the new commercial TV channels had created edgy programming with lots of intricate love and crime stories and upper class lifestyles mimicking American TV series as a way to appeal to audiences tired of TRT's depiction of respectful, "civilized", nuclear families. This began to change, however, in the early 2000s, when new dramas appeared that depicted average, traditional Turkish families and dealt realistically with their struggles negotiating traditional and modern. Once networks realized how this programming boosted ratings throughout Turkey, especially in rural areas, they even began introducing storylines that depicted some of the realities in the east. This introduced a different set of image into the nation's collective imaginary.

Courting via SMS messages and reflecting on local radio and social change

When I returned to Şanlıurfa in the summer of 2007, my interactions with young people showed that even though many seemed to have a more nuanced understanding of the disparity between their lives in Southeast Turkey and those in the west, they still longed for a social space of their own and continued to utilize new technologies to create and maintain that space. Since 2003, they had been deprived of the opportunity to call-in and be on air to directly voice their opinions or share their songs, poems and messages. Local radio was struggling economically, and Şanlıurfa's station owners and managers met and made a decision to only allow messages and song requests through SMS (Short Message Service) text messaging. Operating costs had risen due to the strict enforcement of royalty payments for songs broadcast, but they learned from radio stations outside the region how lucrative SMS could be.

In the summer of 2007, young people were still actively sending their messages and song requests for their love interests through text messages via cell phones. At first I was concerned that women would not be able to interact as much, but I immediately found out that there were not many women left in the city without cell phones: when men began obtaining newer cell phones, they gave their old ones to their sisters and daughters. When I did my fieldwork in 2001, women were accessing the stations using their home phones, which restricted their participation in the evenings. In 2001, they did not have any cell phones but every man carried one, and they functioned as must-have status symbols of manhood. In 2007, lack of access to a mobile phone was not an issue for women, but rather having enough money to afford making phone calls and sending SMS messages was. DJs voiced young women's complaints about their love interests not sending enough minutes to them as a gift and how infrequently, for that reason, they were able to send SMS messages to the radio stations.

Another frequent listener complaint regarded DJs not reading their SMS or shortening them and changing the meaning of the messages as a result. DJs read the messages after each song they played and frequently apologized if they had a hard time reading the message or if the message arrived partially. Fully aware of their long-ago established matchmaker and facilitator roles on air (Algan 2005), they were very respectful of the messages and quite diligent about reading them. Most messages were song requests for their love interests, but some were direct messages that voiced relationship disappointments and problems. Dissatisfaction with their lives and the status quo, desires to leave Şanlıurfa for a better life elsewhere, and feelings of loneliness were other topics that often surfaced. The main difference I observed between participating via call-ins and SMS messaging was the curtailment of interaction with the DJs and the sharing of their cultural production through poems, songs, etc. Up until 2003, DJs frequently ran call-in shows and games encouraging discussions on topics that mattered to the young people of Şanlıurfa. Even though such programming does not exist anymore, young people still use the radio to pursue their romantic relationships despite the local radio stations' restricting all communication to SMS messages.

Due to the existing patriarchal and tribal structures, radio continues to constitute the safest haven for young people to do what they believe their generation should do and pursue love. By doing so, they are part of more widespread phenomena. As Edmunds & Turner (2005) argued in their article on global generations and social change, "the forces commonly associated with globalization are also forces that increase intergenerational tensions within nations and intra-generational affinities between nations, thereby contributing to the new (global) generation becoming activated against its predecessor's passivity" (p. 572). Interactions via local radio in Southeast Turkey have illustrated the ways in which young people are active in matters that pertain to their own lives. Instead of obeying their parents, they choose to engage in romantic relationships over the radio with the hope of ending up in a marriage based on love instead of one arranged by family.

The variety of media channels and programming young people have access to – from national television and its mix of domestic, foreign and glocal programming, to transnational programming like the Kurdish and Arabic language channels consumed via satellite – allow them to see who they are and how they fit into their own community, Turkey, the region and the broader world. On the one hand, national, transnational and global media increase intergenerational tensions by pointing out the disparities that exist between their realities in Southeast Turkey and those of other young people of the same generation living in the west of the country. On the other hand, local media and new communication technologies give them an opportunity to articulate youth identities shaped by and negotiated through both globally-induced socio-economic changes, as well as centuries-old patriarchal and tribal structures.

As this study shows, media alone do not instigate social change but they can be instrumental in giving people an avenue to articulate their unique realities and multiple identities and to express what kind of social change they strive for. In Şanlıurfa, social change has been taking place as a result of various local and national institutions and state development projects attempting to integrate Turkey into the global economy. Young people’s lives are affected by these initiatives both in rural and urban areas. They find themselves deprived of education due to existing patriarchal and tribal structures, but still expected to compete in a new capitalist economy that they are not equipped even to understand. They are more aware of their identity differences with the west and strive to lessen them by dressing, acting and behaving like the teenagers in İstanbul. Local radio makes it easier for them to experience their gender identities and sexualities, and to pursue romantic relationships because it allows them to date without any face-to-face encounters and thus, to obey the local traditions and Islamic restrictions on pre-marital relationships. Media ethnography is an excellent method to grasp these realities and contribute to a more comprehensive and nuanced look at media’s place and role in social change more generally. Ethnographies can also be instrumental in cautioning us against the sweeping claims of grand narratives regarding the power of media as the main agents of social change.

Notes

1. The title ‘Şanlı’ (meaning *Glorious*) was given to the city by Atatürk to honor its residents for their courageous defense of the city during Turkey’s War of Independence. Even though Şanlıurfa is the city’s official name, residents often use its original short name, Urfa.
2. According to Adams (2006), recent work that aims to re-evaluate media’s role in social change increasingly emphasizes how entertainment-education remains a top-down project and the long-term effects of such projects are weak with their success being dependent on the local infrastructure to support such changes.
3. For more on the ÇATOM activities and their influence on women in the region, see Fazlıoğlu (2003) and Harris & Atalan (2003).
4. For more on the struggles of young people, especially women, against strict traditions, see Faraç (1998), and for the impact of the GAP development project on the people of Şanlıurfa, see Elmas (2004) and Faraç (2001).

5. After the closure of the Virtue Party in August 2001 due to their active and positive stance on the wearing of headscarves in government buildings and state institutions, the party members founded AKP and retained their power in the province.
6. İstanbul has always determined the cultural agenda in Turkey. The country's print media, music and film industries have always been centered in İstanbul, a city not only located in the northwest or European side of Turkey, but which also mimics and appropriates culture from the West. After the 1990s, when the state monopoly in broadcasting was broken, İstanbul also commanded the broadcasting industry with many new commercial broadcast networks airing throughout Anatolia, the Asian part of Turkey.
7. Honor killings or custom murders are the names given to the murder of a woman by the male members of her family as a result of a family judgment that she damaged the honor of the family. Honor killings are common in Southeast Turkey and until recently used to be treated as low-level felonies by the courts. Custom and tradition are taken into consideration by the courts as circumstantial evidence supporting a lighter sentence for the person chosen to carry out the killing. A new bill passed in April 2003 prohibited any decrease in sentences for honor killings, however such murders still continue and sometimes girls are forced to commit suicide. The main reasons for honor killings are "the involvement of a girl in an affair with a man despite parental disapproval, bearing an illegitimate child, leaving her husband and escaping with another man, becoming pregnant outside marriage, being a prostitute, etc." (Women 2000, p. 449). However, a simple conversation between an unmarried woman and a man can be considered an affair and an act that damages the woman's virtue and thus, the family honor as well.
8. Many young people I talked to compared the west and the east based on their understanding or sometimes direct experience with life in the western part of Turkey. First, I thought they referred to the Western countries, but my questions confirmed that they only referred to the western part of Turkey, especially İstanbul, whose social life is reflected in domestic soap operas and dramas reflecting various aspects of life in İstanbul are shown on private TV channels.

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