

DIASPORIC MEDIA AND IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION IN THE TURKISH COMMUNITY IN AUSTRALIA

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Introduction

I'm going to talk about a project which I'm working on exploring the use of old and new media by the Turkish community in Melbourne. As most of you would know, Australia is a nation of immigrants, and the Turkish migrants who began arriving in Australia in the late 1960s, were the first major wave of Muslim immigrants. The next major Islamic group to arrive were the Lebanese in the later part of the 1970's. Lebanese migrants and their descendants now make up the biggest Muslim ethnic group in Australia.

The Turkish community mainly settled in Melbourne (Fontaine and Kaymakci, 1996: 3, Abidi, 1996), the Lebanese in Sydney, and while other Muslim immigrants who have arrived more recently come from Bosnia, Somalia, Indonesia and Malaysia, much of what passes for discussion of Islam in Australia really only refers to the experiences of the Muslim Lebanese. Turks and other groups are frequently conflated with the Arabic Lebanese in an undifferentiated mass known as Muslim-Australians.

Islam in the media

If we look at mainstream Australian media over the last five years we see that much of Australia's rich heritage of ethnic diversity is being subsumed into the single, simple term: Muslim-Australians. But what does this mean for those citizens and residents who are being ascribed this identity label whether they choose it or not? To find out how the mainstream 'othering' (Dunn, 2004: 336) discourse around Islam in the west has impacted on some young Australians, I recently conducted some research with young people of Turkish descent living and studying in Melbourne. Their perceptive and often unexpected comments about the mainstream and diasporic media available to them, as well as their efforts to locate themselves in a multicultural society as Australians, Turks and Muslims reveal much about the processes of identity formation taking place in a media saturated world.

Diasporic media

The development of globally distributed diasporic media cultures is enormously enlarged and expanded since the advent of satellite television and radio and the ubiquity of the internet and world wide web, which have rendered international communications cheap, convenient and virtually instantaneous. The implications of this increasing transnationalism include the possibilities of dual or multiple identifications amongst immigrants and their descendents, creating tension between the 'old' hard loyalties (singular, exclusive, mainstream) and the flexible attachments of transnational people (Aksoy, 2006: 944).

It may be useful to view the kinds of interpersonal relationships and affiliations which are emerging in transnational context as networks. Thus they are not dense, interconnected, strong

ties between bounded groups of individuals, but rather looser, ego-centred personal networks of both strong and weak ties, each constituting an individual's personal network, unique and unmappable to any one else's network.

Such are the hallmarks of modern relationships (Boase and Wellman, 2006: 16) and not coincidentally they are also the hallmarks of modern networked technologies, which allow for the production, transmission and consumption of information in peer based networks which subvert the dominance of traditional large and centralised organisations. Such networks seem peculiarly suited to flourish in the global expansion of diasporic communities, where individuals are tied by kinship, language, religion and interest to widely separated geographical communities and nations.

Cheap options such as email, online chat and plummeting international telephone call costs can increase the frequency of keeping in touch with distant kin and friends. Media use and appropriation of technologies may then be seen as part of the practice of individuals and groups in negotiating roles, memberships and affiliations within and between complex multicultural societies.

The research project

I'm going to turn now to my research with a particular group of Muslims of Turkish background. This research is part of a larger project examining media use amongst the Turkish community in Melbourne. For the purposes of this paper, I will examine some of the findings from a series of group interviews conducted with University students of Turkish descent studying in Melbourne, along with the results of one on one interviews with key producers of Turkish language media in Melbourne. The groups included a mix of Turkish born and Australian born respondents, as well as some who identified as Kurdish ethnicity and Alevi religion besides the Sunni Turkish majority. All were fluent in both Turkish and English and while some had a third language (either Kurdish or an Asian language learnt at an Australian school), only one had made any study of Arabic.

The generation gap

Discussion in the group interviews covered topics such as generational differences, religious and cultural identity, patterns of associationalism within the Turkish community, links to family overseas, media use and making a place in Australian society. Much other research has noted the importance of differences between the generations within immigrant communities as a cause of friction or of social and community breakdown. What is interesting coming out of this current research, is that there is almost no difference between the second generation young people (that is young people born in Australia to parents who migrated from Turkey) and young people born in Turkey who have arrived here as teenagers, compared with their parental generation. First and second generation Turkish-Australians have more in common with each other in terms of their sense of identity, belonging and place in the world, than they do with their elders of the parental generation. As one Turkish born Kurdish youth said 'I feel more Australian.'

This is illustrated in the connectedness of Turkish youth with peers in Australia, Turkey and Germany, through SMS, email, online chat and webcams. All the respondents in these interviews reported that the internet was their first resource both for gathering news and current affairs information and for communicating with friends and family. Online chatting through sites such as MSN and text messaging are their preferred means of keeping in touch

with peers both locally and internationally. In many cases the communication is with cousins, through ‘chatting and phones and texting’, illustrating that generational change is a world-wide phenomenon. Young people also function as intermediaries for their parents, showing them how to chat online, checking the email for their parents and setting up webcams and the like.

- Overseas [communication is] definitely email for me. Here probably mobiles, even though over the net as well. MSN has become increasingly popular these days.
- I think the easiest way is through the Internet. I use Skype or MSN to speak with our families almost every night
- I mean yeah the only [Turkish] thing I would look up is stuff for football, like my dad might want to know what time the game is on or something like that.

Changing media practice

The rapid recent fall in the cost of international telephony has also had an impact on communications patterns between the migrant community and home land, with much more frequent telephone contact now occurring. The recent introduction of satellite television services into Australia from Turkey has also had an effect on the media consumption habits of Australian Turks, and again a generational pattern is apparent in the change. The following comments are reflections on the older generation:

- with the satellite dish, our community has completely stopped watching English TV.
- They’ve stopped improving their English now.
- Its nice, it relieves their homesickness that they may have for the general community, but its terrible in terms of integration

While for the younger generation:

My sister refuses to get it. She says my brother in law is just gonna be watching that and she’s gonna be switched off from the Australian news.

While the older generation are hooked on subscriptions to Turkish TV, and read Turkish newspapers, even though they are some days out of date by the time they arrive, the younger generation unanimously state that their first resource for getting information is the internet.

The presenters on a Melbourne based Turkish language radio program have definitely noticed a change in the media consumption habits of Turkish speakers since the introduction of satellite television and internet. The following comments relate to the changing patterns of media use:

[Young people] haven’t made it [radio consumption] a habit either. I mean you’ve got the older people who’ve got habits, its habit to them every day, three o’clock, they put their radios on [for the Turkish language program]. If you’re brought up in that sort of atmosphere, you sort of gain that habit as well, but if you’re not, people just don’t really care.

People doesn’t read much newspapers. Not even in Turkish, they say there are 70,000 Turkish [people] in Melbourne. But the amount of newspapers that they publish in Melbourne [is] not more than 2,000 [copies].

Of course, since 2000 we’ve got six or seven channels from Turkey, ... and 24 hours radio and ..., some of our listeners actually don’t listen to [local]... radio, because they can easily ... get the information from Turkey But still I can say that almost ten years ago, ..., the Turkish program was the first. Our rating was the top [for foreign

language broadcasts in Australia]. For example ninety percent of the Turkish community used to listen to Turkish radio at least once a week. And eighty five every day. And five years ago, ... the latest research, ... we were second top language group.. ...Because of the TV channels, the radios and the internets, of course we lost some of our listeners.... But its still popular. And then we got another, at least ten years actually. But after ten years, after the first generation, who knows?

And even with the availability of satellite broadcasting, videos remain an alternative media source:

There is also video shops. They record the program in Turkey, they bring it here and you can rent for one dollar or two for one dollar for most popular program and some movies. People who haven't got satellite TV, they use that to watch TV. ...and because of the time difference most popular programs in Turkey comes on night time [here], 3 o'clock, 3.00am. So people still buy the video, watch it in [their] own time.

Representations of Islam

In terms of Australian produced media, the construction of identities ascribed to minority groups may be as actively resisted as they are passively accepted. Although the mainstream media look to the imam of one of the Lebanese run mosques in Sydney, for comment, describing him as the "Mufti of Australia", Mehmet, a respondent in this research project, reveals a different reading:

he's not a big man, you know, as a Turkish we don't accept him as our mufti. He's nothing to do with the Turkish Muslim. But ... they talk about him: 'mufti say this, mufti say that.' We totally feel bad about it. He doesn't represent [Turkish people]. The media, the prime minister shouldn't ... take him as a person to talk about these things. They are looking for something, as we believe, to show that the Muslim are bad, to show these people [in a bad light]. When Australians talk about Muslim, if I say, I'm Muslim, they will straight away think about that mufti, or the terrorist, you know, because all these things are made by Australian media, I believe.

There has also been a very clear attempt in mainstream media at the construction of a link between a reified Islamic homogeneity and a cultural tendency to violence and criminal behaviour (Akbarzadeh and Smith, 2005: 4; Poynting et al., 2004: 46). Again Mehmet reads this very clearly:

especially ... after the September 11, they are looking [at] the Muslim, the Turkish, very different. Its hard to explain but we do believe the Australian media is not independent to look after the Muslim. If any Muslim do anything wrong, they call him a Muslim, he's named as a Muslim, but if any Christian does the same thing, they never call him a Christian. They do have bias on that, we strongly believe that.

Religious and cultural identities

For the Turkish young people that I spoke to, their Turkish identity was much stronger than their Muslim identity. In fact, although some (but not all) of the young people identified their religion as being Islam, they were at pains to separate the Turkish community from other Islamic communities and to identify with cultural practice rather than religious tradition.

But still actually the Australian media should know that Turkey is secular country and Turkey is not a typical Muslim country. ..., the culture may affect ... individual's beliefs as well. For example, the practice of Islam is sometimes different from other Muslim

countries. Because the culture affects the individuals life, behaviour and everything. Even if they are Muslim.

As one respondent nicely summed it up: “I don’t know what religious values are. I just think that everything we do is cultural, rather than religious.” It was clear from discussion of actual practice, however, that Islamic rituals and behaviours still play a part in these young, secular Muslims’ lives. Nor is untangling cultural practice from religious belief actually necessary in order to understand what it is that people value in their lives. Another respondent noted that: “that’s still continued, the henna night, the night before ... the girl gets married. The traditions are kept but not necessarily in a religious way. Just for the sake of doing it.”

It is also clear from these discussions that these Turks believed that Australian Arab Muslims, unlike themselves, may well be more devout, practicing Muslims and that constructions of “Muslim-Australians” which appear in the media may well be applicable to those ‘other’ Muslims.

Conclusion

So using Islam as a category to describe social groups in multicultural societies seems to me to be problematic. Especially when the view of mainstream media is that Muslim Australians are Arabic speaking and are united by religious practice. As research in London found “Turkish interviewees come from an Islamic country, but for few of them is being a Muslim central to their self-image.” (Aksoy, 2006: 933). My research conducted with Turkish-Australians found they were similarly disinclined to put their religious identity ahead of cultural, national and linguistic identifiers.

For young Turkish people of the first and second generation, their sense of belonging and identity is formed through a complex mix of widely dispersed family and friends, locally based dense social groups of ethnically diverse peers, and an Australian community of Turkish migrants who keep in close touch with the older generation and who stand in for the extended family left behind in Turkey. It is clear that for these young people, cultural or ethnic identity is much stronger than religious identity. Although they spoke articulately about preserving their heritage and language and the traditions which they would follow when getting married, these were seen to be firmly Turkish traditions, with cultural rather than religious significance.

Their use of internet, mobile phones and satellite TV links them to a globally dispersed network of family, friends and strangers united by Turkish culture, history and language. But they are surrounded by mainstream Australian media production practices which continue to simplify complexity. Individual reading and viewing activities, however, are able to negotiate and deconstruct such practices to produce more meaningful social identities amongst those whose lived experience continues to fail to be reflected in the mainstream media.

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