

# CRIME AND MEDIA: THE WORLD OF 'REALITY SHOW' AS A MORAL FRAME OF REFERENCE

**Suç ve Medya: Ahlaki Bir Referans Çerçevesi Olarak 'Realite Show' Dünyası**

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## ABSTRACT

Crime and transgression has become an important factor which is portrayed by the media outlets. The genre called crime reality show situated within the genre of reality show in the media in recent years has a special place in popular cultural world of meaning. Those who are accepted as protagonists, confessors, interrogators, victims and vigilantes are among the major actors in crime reality shows which function as constructing various different cultural and sociological frames of reference. The purpose of this article is to answer to the following questions: What does the crime reality show narrative tell us about contemporary Turkish culture? What are the implications of such a genre in terms of producing a televisual morality? What are the dynamics between socially irresponsible imagination and the idea of moral panic constructed via sensibility guided reasoning? In this paper, we argue that the crime reality show genre in Turkish television employs communicative strategies which are based on mediatization of morality as well as a new trend called prudentialism.

### Key Words

Crime, reality show, morality, culture of fear, prudentialism, risk society.

## ÖZ

Suç ve suçlu davranışı medya mecraları tarafından ele alınan önemli bir unsur haline gelmiştir. Medyada son yıllarda sıkça rastlanan bir tür olarak 'reality show' (gerçek şov) içinde yer alan 'suç reality show' (crime reality show) popüler kültürel anlam dünyası içinde özel bir yer tutmaktadır. Suçlananlar, itirafçılar, sorgulayıcılar, kurbanlar ve kaçaklar gibi aktörlerin yer aldığı suç reality show türü çeşitli kültürel ve sosyolojik referans noktaları inşa etme işlevini göstermektedir. Bu makalenin amacı şu soruları cevaplamaktır: Suçla ilgili reality show programlarında rastlanan anlatı türleri bize neyi ifade etmektedir? Bu televizyon türünün televizyon ahlakı açısından ima ettiği unsurlar nelerdir? Sosyal olarak sorumsuz olan bir tahayyül etme biçimiyle duyu temelli ahlaki panik olarak adlandırılan kültürel eğilim arasındaki dinamik nedir? Bu makalede, suçla ilgili reality show türünün Türk televizyonlarında bazı iletişimsel stratejiler kullandığı, söz konusu stratejilerin de ahlakın medyalıştırılması ve yeni bir eğilim olan ihtiyaççılık üzerine dayandığı iddia edilmektedir.

### Anahtar Kelimeler

Suç, 'reality show', ahlak, korku kültürü, ihtiyaççılık, risk toplumu.

## Introduction

Transference of fear and self-loathing to an authoritarian vessel. It's catharsis.

True Detective, Episode 3, 2014

Similar to small communities gossiping about deviants, crime reality shows reveal characteristics reflecting

'major social and intellectual changes of the time' (Gellner 1985: 5). The purpose of this paper is to address the following questions: What does the crime reality show narrative tell us about contemporary Turkish culture? In this paper, we argue that the crime reality show genre in Turkish television employs a series of communicative

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strategies deriving from a web of dispositive, which consists of the idea of moralization, responsabilization, and prudentialism. The mediatization of morality, we argue, opts for employing a sensibility-guided moral reasoning instead of a rule governed moral reasoning (Gilligan 1988). In this paper we also aim at providing a series of evaluations about politics of moralization in Turkish society as part of the mediatized world, symbolized by a genre promoting itself as a forum for public discussion.

In this paper, rather than offer a detailed content analysis about the genre in question, we will use an eclectic strategy in order to gain an understanding of meaning making conventions in crime reality shows overlap with certain 'discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions' which are known as 'dispositifs' (Foucault 1980:194). We assume that the crime reality genre selected for this paper needs to be deciphered so as to identify implicit and explicit statements interwoven in a text where the cultural sphere is accepted as a resource for creating moral values for people. We argue that risk-taking and prudentialism emphasized in the crime reality shows constitute a dispositive through which one can understand 'politics of becoming' (Connolly 1999). We also consider the question of moralization via mediatization in the Turkish context: How do the crime reality shows form a cultural forum in which discussants, audiences, participants, guests, and others take the overlapping roles of confessors, inter-

rogators, offenders, victims, and vigilantes?

The program under consideration is one of the popular shows on TV: *Müğe Anlı ile Tatlı Sert*. The following analysis is based on a sample of 12 shows recorded and taped from September 10, 2012 to May 14, 2013. It is broadcasted at 10:00-12:00, five days a week. The analysis offered below will also cover a short history of crime reality shows in Turkey, which show variations in terms of format and conventions<sup>1</sup>.

### **1. Pictures From Ardent Fluctuations Of Cultural And Social Life In Turkey**

Contextualizing a TV program requires offering a comprehensive outlook for the cultural, political, and social fluctuations, ruptures, and juxtapositions between different phenomena. A society with pre-modern, modern, and postmodern characteristics tends to erupt in unexpected outbursts and crises, depicted by different media outlets, reflecting a linguistic diversity which is yet to be examined through innovative methods. The conceptual caveat preferred for this paper necessitates the exploration of relationships between discursive and non-discursive elements in Turkish society.

When the European powers labeled the Ottoman Empire 'the sick man of Europe' during the First World War, the metaphor of illness was re-appropriated by the modern public culture. The military takeover in 1980 gave priority to discourses of 'wiping out illnesses' from the society. When the normalization process began after the civilian government came into power, the discourses of fear also led to the popularity of mental health which

was a significant marker related with individualization. Ideological sentiments were important in the sense that they were a potential cohesive force in society; yet popular culture created its own apparatuses in a Foucauldian sense, in terms of healing itself via non-political means. After all, the free market economy directed individuals to make their own choices in 'civil' society, which offered various (il) legitimate opportunities.

Individuals are expected to take proper care of themselves within the framework of existing free market conditions; the social welfare state is no longer there to finance and to ensure the well-being of the population; the prudent, responsible, self-managing and ethical political subjects have been given this responsibility. The transition from welfarism to prudentialism (Inda 2006; O'Malley 2004) has led to the responsabilization of individuals for their own risks, including unemployment, health, poverty, security, crime and so on. It can be seen as a practice producing individuals who are responsible for their own destiny, with the assistance of a variety of private enterprises and independent experts, the indispensable actors of the free market economy (Kaya 2013).

The increasing visibility of poverty, crime, and deviance through the media brought about discussions of 'protection' and 'securitization'. The need for security led to giving priority to discourses which emphasize the themes such as 'you feel insecure because of criminals out there', instead of messages such as 'feeling insecure is an outcome of low wages'. It was easier and less political for the media outlets to portray outcasts, potential crimi-

nals, various kinds of transgression, and constant voyeuristic scenes from everyday life.

## 2. The Mediatization of Fear And Crime

Social and cultural crises, which bring about a semiotic vacuum, need interpreters. Literary, scientific, and commonsensical narratives, which guide people towards different kinds of transmogrification and confession, are the major ingredient for media outlets. As Hawkins vividly notes, 'in the realm of docu-soap and reality TV, we are not being invited to manage the self, to reflect on ways of being; rather to spectate on simulated ethical crises' (2001: 413). When the necessity for re-establishing a moral center increases, the mediatization of moral codes becomes more visible, exemplified by crime drama, soap opera, television serials, call-in shows, and talk shows. These practices form different versions of subjection, which is itself a code for moral existence.

The reality shows, as the main inquiry of this study, emerged in particularly USA in the end of 1980's and has been one of the most significant leverage of TV channels since 1990's due to its increasing potential of rating and revenue. Comprehending the reason behind why this genre emerged and succeed to survive gives notable clues about the content and the context of reality shows. The media corporations which were in financial crisis and had difficulty to produce high budget documentaries or other scripted formats has utilized reality show genre in order to finance themselves with relatively easier productions. This need of rating and profit has diminished the concern of presenting a serious or

informing content, rather lead media production content to be more sensational and entertainment-based.

Undoubtedly, television, as one of the most prevailing cultural form, has become a resource for promoting the principles of neo-liberal governance and individual. Televisual ethics imposed on audiences through reality shows define the boundaries between normalcy and transgression. In contemporary television culture, it is possible to find a subgenre of reality TV show on almost any issue, including dating, lifestyle, job, makeover, crime or health. Their common point is that they present a series of guidelines for living, which may be considered as a voyeuristic panacea for cultural pollution. These guidelines that preoccupy the reality TV programs actually aim to teach the individuals about being a 'good' worker, parent, partner, patient, consumer, and particularly citizen.

Thus, crime reality shows in Turkey manifested themselves in such a context of valorization of transgression with the aim of providing a forum for the audiences seeking for a reflection about the reality. What seemed to be real, though, was only possible by the formation of a collective revelation and condemnation.

### **3. Love to Hate Watching The Crime Reality TV In Turkey**

As is noted above, Turkish society has been witnessing the interplay of social and cultural phenomena reflected in media and everyday life. The rise of individualization emphasized earlier is interpreted as the self-made citizenship promoted with the self-made success stories (Örnek 2006). The media outlets started covering the stories of such self-made individuals as super-

subjects as part of the process where governmentality was coincided with vulnerability of others.

The privatization of broadcasting in Turkey started in 1990 with the establishment of *Star 1* as the first private TV channel and then rapidly continued with the emergence of channels such as *Show TV*, *HBB*, *Kanal 6*, *TGRT*, *Kanal D*, *ATV*, *Samanyolu TV* etc. (Adaklı 2001). Therefore, it is notable that the transformation of Turkish media system within this process has not only taken place in political economy, but also in its content. The popularity of this kind of crime-based reality show declined as it was replaced by more dramatic life story shows. In these programs, members of the public were able to present their life stories allowing the audience to comment on others' lives. However, the most radical format change became with the emergence of more global formats, such as *Big Brother*. Although the surveillance-based content of these shows was totally new for Turkish audience, *Biri Bizi Gözetliyor* (Turkish version of *Taxi Orange*) or *Orada Neler Oluyor?* (translated as 'What is happening there?') achieved great ratings success. For many years, there have been various adaptations of these formats such as *Gelinim Olur musun?* (Would you be my daughter-in-law?) which was a popular show worldwide.

In 2000s, the crime-based TV shows began to target those who do not work (retirees, housewives, and the elderly), that is, the vulnerable groups in society. Some of the popular examples of this kind of programs were *Kadının Sesi* (*The Voice of Women*), *Serap Ezgü ile Biz Bize* (*Serap Ezgü is with Us*), *Suç ve Ceza* (*Crime and Punishment*),

*Sizin Sesiniz (Your Voice)*, as well as other day time television show programs like *Sabahların Sultanı Seda Sayan (The Sultan of the Morning, Seda Sayan)* and others which began to focus on cases of missing people or other domestic issues including violence within the family and all of these TV programs have been presented by female hosts, who portrayed themselves as strong, determined, courageous, protective and heroic ways.

#### 4. Televisual Morality In ‘Müğe Anlı İle Tatlı Sert’ (Mats): A Movement to Confess

The subject of crime has been always appealing for Turkish TV producers and their audience. MATS, (*Sweet and Sour with Müğe Anlı*) which is anchored by an ex-magazine reporter, Müğe Anlı, was first broadcasted on ATV in 2008. The program, which could be considered as a crime-based reality show, focuses on unsolved criminal cases, such as murder, fraud or kidnapping. The program also presents itself as a service provider for those victimized due to the actions of others. From time to time, the producers of the program collaborate with the police authorities to find missing babies, children, teenager and even adults.

When it started, the program covered the activities of potential criminals and transgressors. Since its beginning, the program was listed among the most popular 20 TV programs, and is still on air, being broadcasted in one of the most watched national TV channels, ATV. This channel is owned by the Çalık Group, which is known to support the current government. The three hour long program is on the air every weekday between 10:00 am and

13:00 pm, covering between five and ten cases, each day. The process of coverage and investigation starts with an appeal by a member of public concerning an unsolved case such as murder, missing people, fraud etc. Then, the case is explained in detail by a group of people who share their information and views on the case. According to the host, Müğe Anlı, the cases, which are investigated in the show, are selected from among thousands of applications, based on the criteria of their importance and interest. The investigation process includes, first, the participation of victims themselves, their relatives, witnesses and suspects. During the process, all participants, regardless of their role, are interrogated and investigated ‘in the pursuit of the facts’. In order to resolve the case, the producers may interview ordinary citizens so as to uncover their private lives, considered necessary. Then, the reporters go the scene of the incident in order to investigate the case or talk with other witnesses. These video footages are shown as short clips called VTR (Video Tape Recordings), by the hosts of the show. Additionally, another type of VTR which summarizes a series of unresolved cases, is aired just before and after commercial breaks.

The ambiance of the program provides the viewer with a strong visual impression, which is supported by strategies such as a testimonial structure, where the participants (victims, protagonists, transgressors, and lay people) and the experts (one lawyer, one psychiatrist) are invited to participate. Müğe Anlı, the anchorwoman of the show is never hesitant about expressing her own views, when it comes to warning her guests not to make an-

ti-government comments, reminding the audience that she is never 'objective' and telling the audience that they are providing a service for the public. She justifies revealing immoral acts or social ills of the society, which she blames not on police negligence, but on moral decadence and irresponsible behavior. She invites different people who claim to have witnessed a certain incident or an act to resolve the case. While a witness is expressing his observations about the incident, other potential witnesses are allowed to address the audiences via phone, and present themselves as having more credibility compared to the people in the studio, which may lead to a lengthy and heated exchange of words.

In a self-celebratory mood, the host of the show constantly reminds the audience and the viewers that they should 'get a grip of themselves to know what is really happening out there'. The audience is never allowed to criticize the officials responsible for resolving the cases of missing people or other suspicious acts. On the contrary, the participants and the audience are invited to show their respect for the government authorities, are portrayed as doing their best to serve the people. In other words, the show does not present itself as a forum where different ethical positions can be entertained or evaluated by the guests or participants.

In the following analysis, we will refer to a Foucauldian approach to the delineation of the linkage between different elements of a dispositive, that is, different webs of statements, propositions, and discourses. Foucault seeks to show how 'discourse is an action', how 'discursive formations define

and limit strategic possibilities'. There are many types of statements within a discourse – qualitative descriptions, interpretations, reasonings by analogy, etc. Foucault opts for describing the statements as forms of succession, forms of coexistence, and procedures of intervention (Foucault 1973). The analysis of the statement as functioning in discourse does not question what is actually meant by what is said, but rather questions how the things said exist where and when they do (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1983: 51).

Thus, the repetitive statements, warnings, types of information, inquiries, and other forms of discursive adopted in the program provide the references for statements, as well as representing an associated field in which different markers are inter-related, based on the rules of formation. For example, the way in which the witnesses and participants have been asked what can be considered a testimony is a result of a tendency to use individuals' experience to make moralized arguments. For example, on one of these shows (2.10.2012), while the host of the show invites a married woman to share her observations about the case (missing person), she is warned against 'encouraging flirtatiousness between men and women'. The host accuses the witnesses of lying, referring to contradictions in the various messages provided during the show. After the acts of individuals, are described, they are discussed by witnesses, who may also be warned by other members of the audience. On the very same program, one member of the audience sends an e-mail questioning the lifestyle of the mother: "if she had loved her children, she would not have



left them, she would not have in such a conversation with other men.” Or, in another case, the framing of ‘a good mother’ can be expressed in very blunt terms, as Müge Anlı condemns the mothers who let their children collect candy from other houses during the religious holidays, stating that “If you give birth, you should keep your child right beside you. Some people should be banned from giving birth (spoken as a command)” (30.10.2012). On another occasion, she alludes to institutions, the nature of which is taken for granted: “We have a standard type of family in our minds” (15.04.2013). Thus, what can and cannot be expressed is determined by the ultimate authority of the commonness of society, which limits the appropriation of other possibilities. This view is also supported by her statement: “When I see everything, I draw a path (for audiences) saying we should do this and this but we should not do this or that” (14.5.2013). Such high levels of moralized statements or enunciations form certain modalities in a discursive formation.

Defining the boundaries of normalcy is achieved through clear cut rules, over which a semantic struggle is forbidden. In MATS, this can be exemplified through the ways in which the show rests on the symbolic authority of the state, which is glorified through the support and achievements of its representatives. Responsible individuals would be always protected by the state. If individuals took some responsibility for the common good deeds, state institutions would also respond positively. In one of the episodes, Müge Anlı states that “The state cannot be kept busy for just two chickens; we should solve some problems by

ourselves.” (01.04.2013). In another scene, the relationship between individuals and the State, and the extent of their respective responsibility, are constructed discursively. A victim asks “Where is the state?”, but Müge Anlı responds with the argument that “If we do our share, then the state would help us” (01.04.2013). This sequence of statements, then, reflects a pattern in which responsible individuals are the state’s only interlocutor; however, this situation does not allow for citizens to seek political or social rights. Promoting a self-help culture helps the audiences to appropriate discourses about responsible individuals who are subjected to the rules of the game; unity and integration are necessities for a peaceful society. It is assumed that all citizens share the same values, as the following statement indicates; “We are people who protect and have trust in our homeland, our nation.” (02.10.2012).

Instead of employing a wide array of ethical claims, the MATS opts to rationalize a sensibility-guided moral reasoning (Gilligan 1998) based on the ethics of care. That is, instead of using a rule governed style of moral reasoning which presents individuals as independent from each other, the sensibility-guided style moral reasoning presents individuals as interdependent. The interactions direct what is to be done while the welfare of others and preventing others from coming to harm are central considerations (Krijnen and Meijer 2005). The ability of MATS to assemble a range of discursive markers, combining moral panic, the culture of fear, and pop criminology serves to create a cognitive map for a cathartic moment aiming to glorify

a community without non-normative elements.

### Conclusion

The example of crime reality show genre in the Turkish media provides us a web of discourses and institutional preferences which constitute a 'dispositif' à la Foucault. We have explored the ways in which the mediation of morality through crime reality show (the MATS) are positioned within a complex array of voices and statements deriving from moral panic, prudentialism, the culture of fear, and therapy. In particular, we have addressed the following questions: Which strategies are used by the Turkish media to intertwine discursive claims, with the result that crime and deviance have been defined as part of a process called responsibilization? What are the main characteristics of the moral reasoning which underlies the crime reality show in question? What are the extra-discursive implications of reproducing a linkage between self-responsible individuals and fear of crime?

In this paper, the analysis shows that in the MATS, the discursive features of talk shows and trauma drama have been employed to such an extent that the subjects never understand the degrees to which they are subjected to the authority of claims produced in the show. As Foucault (1980) argues, the heterogeneous elements that make up a dispositif can be understood more systematically as rationalities and technologies of government. In modernity, all forms of government have attempted to 'rationalize' themselves, to account for the 'authority of their authority'. Thus, the case of the MATS, investigated in this paper, presents us

a series of messages by which the politics of culture can be dissipated into categories which enforce their own truth claims and 'regimes of truth' in a routinized and normalized manner.

Turkish society has been witnessing a series of social and cultural upheavals reflected by significant genre formations since the 1980's, in which the neoliberal governance imposed on society its own views of appropriate conduct. The so-called framework about *crimes and misdemeanors of citizens* has been interpreted within the understanding of a culture in which responsibility is considered to rest with individuals. The transformation of the welfare state practices into a series of voluntary and philanthropic schemata has consistently been related to the rise of Islam, as well as moralization in everyday life. The illnesses or malaise defined by the media have been presented in a context in which a series of panacea have been also portrayed as culturally and collectively accepted by the whole society. From a cultural studies point, it is important to decipher the nature of these cultural symbols and myths which have allowed the media to re-adapt and re-articulate ambivalent features of traditional and post-modern ingredients, and thus propose such a hygienic world view.

The crime reality show, in this context, emerged as a genre defining itself as a service-provider and a moral code maker, which, it has been claimed, was previously lacking in Turkish politics. The questions regarding authenticity in Turkish society have always been an enigma waiting to be resolved. In other words, the track of modernization created dif-



ferent approaches to authentication, which were variously based on laicism, Islam and nationalism. The process of defining a moral code has become an issue for contradictory voices, each declaiming or de-legitimizing the other. The media, in this context, have opted to play the role of participant as well as author, to claim the truth on behalf of defining and/or moral crises and social malaise. The self-made individual, as the new hero of the media, has become a rejuvenated figure which has spread across different television genres: Medical doctors advising women about overcoming their physical and psychological problems; therapists advising everybody to 'think positively' despite the hardships in their lives, self-appointed experts becoming authorities on finding the inner voice in the power to improve lives; all of these have reproduced and legitimized a media culture in which it was possible to fully and clearly acknowledge the identity of vulnerability. The final conclusion was that subject should display public responsibility for their own safety and well-being. The MATS contributed to constructing and normalizing a culture of confession and fear by claiming that the participants who are in some way deficient have a duty to reflect on themselves, a process which reproduced a didactic approach of modern culture. An individual who is considered to be 'at risk', it is claimed, is clearly assigned a passive and a dependent role (Skeggs, Wood, and Thumim 2007).

Thus, the subjects exposed to, and experiencing different personal or social problems in their lives are prescribed a series of remedies to increase their prudence, awareness, and

responsibility. In this way of thinking, the subjects with various deficiencies are defined as non-normative people who lack the intellectual and emotional resources necessary to make choices or to deal with adversity. However, the combination of dispositive of fear and morality within the same argumentation does not help individuals to realize their potential to become equal subjects in relation to others. In fact, the discourses as well as sentiments have a negative impact on the views of transgression, which is consequently seen less in terms of social causation. In respect of social causation, a series of political organizations, institutions, and decision making processes shape conditions within which different individuals act within the boundaries of normalcy and deviancy.

In Turkey, it is important to conduct more detailed analyses and descriptions which reflect on the ways in which the media has become a vehicle offering a degree of certainty for those looking for guidance on various types of ills or dysfunctions in society. The crime reality show creates its own verisimilitude and invites people to define social problems within the framework of malaise at individual level, and thus prioritizes problem-solving at the levels of victimhood. When the neo-liberal regimes of governmentality define crime in terms of a potential loss, then, security becomes a commodity to be marketed by the media (Zedner 2007). The crime-reality show genre, then, becomes a vehicle by which the identity of vulnerability is transmitted via the dispositive of fear described in this paper. If the virtues and vices of individuals are defined as a series of acts to be marketed and sold, the con-

sequences would be devastating for the audiences. Thus, we reject the idea that audiences should be presented as self-pitying individuals exposed to regimes of truth. The drive to increase individuals' sense of inferiority and insecurity would eliminate the possibility of their discovering paths for emancipation at the social and collective levels. History offers us credible evidence about the possibilities for individuals who are not dependent on such superficial proselytizers as the ones described above.

#### NOTES

- 1 The content analysis of the MATS was based on twelve episodes which covered fifty one unresolved cases: missing adults (33), missing children (5), homicide (6) and others (fraud, natural disaster victims, family problems).

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