Kurds and their cultural crossroads : Kurdish identity, media and cultural production

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Abstract

Kurds have come to occupy an increasingly important position in the contemporary Middle East, notably in the struggle against Islamic State (is). This has brought about an increased presence of Kurds in global media. At the same time, the Kurdish media landscape in the Middle East and in the diaspora has developed rapidly. The timing is thus appropriate to reconsider Kurdish media and cultural production in the light of the recent political, cultural, social and technological shifts. In this editorial introduction to the special issue on Kurdish media and cultural production we reflect on this growing field of research, focusing on three questions: How do media and cultural production contribute to contemporary (discourses on) Kurdish movements, and vice versa? How can we explain the emergence of a Kurdish mediascape in the Middle East and Europe theoretically and methodologically? And, what is the relevance and potential effect of this emerging Kurdish mediascape for the existing politics of media at the national and international level? We give a brief overview of the current state of research on Kurdish media and cultural production and discuss the articles in this special issue and how they contribute to a stronger understanding of the relations between media, culture and society in the Middle East.

Introduction

Media and communication technologies have played a vital role for Kurds, the largest ethno-political minority in the Middle East. The majority of the Kurdish population lives in Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria, the four nationstates with borders with Kurdistan, the non-state territory of the Kurdish people, over which a series of armed conflicts took place following World War i. Kurds have come to occupy an increasingly important position in current conflicts in the Middle East. As the whole world watched the battle over Kobane, the Syrian town between Islamic State (is) and Kurdish fighters in late 2014, attention to the Kurds' ongoing struggle for their own homeland and identity grew. This special issue on Kurdish media and cultural production came forth as the increase in Kurdish media and the representation of Kurds, especially Kurdish fighters, in global media during the initial stages of fighting against is, has increased. This increased media presence, partly a result of the changing role of the Kurdish movements in the region from fighting for autonomy to being part of an international coalition against a 'common' threat, has affected both the production and reception of transnational Kurdish media.

Until recently, Kurdish media was studied in terms of community-building practices around which the de-territorialized national community organized; this compensated for the lack of territorial unity. The driving question informing

such scholarship is whether and how new media and communication technologies
contribute to the reproduction of national culture across state borders
and how these technologies contribute to the political mobility of Kurds in the
Middle East and in the diaspora.

In this special issue, we examine again the contemporary Kurdish cultural,
media and aesthetic practices in the context of the shifting geopolitical situation
in the Middle East and the new role that Kurds have assumed for
themselves in the region. We argue that while Kurds have been studied quite
extensively, especially in the fields of international relations, peace and conflict
studies, linguistics, transnational studies and sociology, the construction
of Kurdish national identity in a transnational, cross-border context needs to be addressed by
taking into account the role of media and communication
technologies and cultural production. The available academic accounts
on Kurdish media and cultural production have looked at how these practices mutually
shape national identities, media and culture; they are regarded as 'tools'
for Kurdish awakening and as 'reflections' of changing Kurdish identities, and
focus methodologically on the various political, linguistic, technical, financial
and logistical obstacles that have long hindered the construction of a sustainable
Kurdish media and cultural landscape. Recently, Internet technologies and political events in the
Middle East have heralded a new phase in research on
Kurdish media and cultural production, as Kurdish media now increasingly
find a place both online and within state structures.

This special issue aims to make a much-needed intervention in Kurdish
media and cultural production at a time when the political and cultural landscape
of the Middle East is rapidly changing. Three interrelated questions guide
our scholarly intervention in this special issue: How do media and cultural production
contribute to contemporary (discourses on) Kurdish movements, and
vice versa? How can we understand the emergence of a Kurdish mediascape in
the Middle East and Europe theoretically and methodologically? And, what is
the relevance and potential effect of this emerging Kurdish mediascape for the
existing politics of media at the national and international level?
When diaspora Kurds in Europe launched the first Kurdish satellite tv station
in the early 1990s, 'exercising deterritorialized sovereignty' (Hassanpour
1998: 66), it sparked a renewed interest in Kurdish media as a case study
among scholars of global and transnational communication. Yet even before
the spread of satellite channels, scholars had noted the power of media, particularly
print media, in fostering Kurdish national identity, in a way similar
to Anderson's (1983) connection between the rise of print capitalism and the
spread of nationalism in Europe (Hassanpour 1992). In the following sections,
before introducing the contributors to our special issue, we offer a concise
overview of the current state of research on Kurdish media and cultural production.

Print Media
Hassanpour (1992; 1996) provided the earliest and most detailed historical
overview of print culture in different parts of Kurdistan. Printing in the Kurdish
language started outside Kurdistan (in Cairo, Istanbul and Baghdad), probably
because of a lack of government support in Kurdistan and because a majority of

the Kurdish nationalist elite were in exile. The history of Kurdish print media, including newspapers and magazines, reads very much like a sociopolitical history of Kurds and the obstacles they faced in different states since the late nineteenth century. As a result, Kurdish print media have been used as a key source in historical studies on the Kurdish resistance and national 'awakening' (see e.g., Strohmeier 2003; Tejel Gorgas 2014).

Radio and Television Broadcasting
Kurdish radio and television broadcasting have received significantly more attention than print media. There have been very few studies that focus specifically on Kurdish radio broadcasting apart from Hassanpour (1996), who discussed radio in different parts of Kurdistan as well as the Kurdish diaspora.
Like radio, Kurdish television broadcasting has developed very differently in the Middle East than it has in the Kurdish diaspora. The first restricted Kurdish television broadcasts started in Iraq and Iran in the 1970s (Hassanpour 1996; Zimmerman 1994) and developed particularly in Iraqi Kurdistan after the first Gulf War when the region became more autonomous (McKiernan 2006; Sheyholislami 2011). Most scholarly attention, however, has been devoted to Kurdish satellite television, which emerged in the 1990s and gave an unprecedented impulse to Kurdish media culture, as it circumvented the restrictive media policies of Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria. Understood as the first Kurdish mass media, the Kurdish satellite channels such as med tv and later Medya tv and Roj tv have been studied particularly for their contribution to pan-Kurdish identity, nation-building capacities and the role of diasporic engagement in the Kurdish struggle (see, among others, Çoban 2013; Hassanpour 1998, 2003; Kosnick 2008; Soğuk 2008; White 2000). In addition, a number of scholars have studied the Kurdish satellite broadcasts through the lens of the diplomatic challenges they have posed, particularly between Turkey, the European Union and the United States (Ayata 2011; Sinclair and Smets 2014). While the bulk of studies have considered the aforementioned satellite channels operated by diaspora Kurds, some researchers have examined the channels launched by Iraqi Kurds, such as Kurdistan tv and KurdSat, which are said to have a more global reach (Sheikhani 2004; Sheyholislami 2011). Most recently, Kurdish television broadcasting has been studied in reference to changing media and linguistic policies in Turkey in the context of its European Union accession negotiations. This has resulted in the launching of a state-run Kurdish channel in 2009 (trt Kurdî, previously trt-6) and more tolerance for Kurdish broadcasts in general (see Öpengin 2012; Smets 2016; Tunç 2013; Yeğen 2009).

Online Communication
Much like satellite television, online communications have been heralded as a means to overcome restrictive state policies. While the usage of Kurdish was initially limited to a few websites and discussion groups (Romano 2002), since the early 2000s there has been a vast increase thanks to a better Internet infrastructure in different parts of Kurdistan, and the development of Kurdish fonts (Sheyholislami 2011). As in the case of television broadcasting, most studies on Kurdish online communications approach it from the perspective of nation-building and 'long-distance' nationalism (see particularly Eriksen 2007). Mills (2002) argues that the Internet can even facilitate the maintenance of 'cybernation' for dispersed Kurds. Some studies adopt

a users' perspective, and look at how members of the Kurdish diaspora develop national identities through the use of Kurdish websites (Candan and Hunger 2008), or how new media technologies reinforce territorial identities (Van den Bos and Nell 2006). In recent years, studies have gradually moved beyond the somewhat romanticized understandings of the Internet as a means for Kurdish empowerment. Recent studies include more nuanced analyses on the representation of Kurdish identity on Kurdish language websites (Sheyholislami 2011), digital exclusion (Polat 2012), Internet governance (Tawfeeq, Kheder and Qader 2014), the role of digital technologies in Kurdish-Turkish relations (Çelik 2013) and the role of social media in diaspora formation (Keles 2015; Khayati and Dahlstedt 2014; Toivanen and Kivisto 2014).

Literature
Studies on Kurdish literature stand somewhat apart from the previously discussed sections since they have developed, logically, within the fields of linguistics, literature and critical studies. The growth of Kurdish literature is closely related to print culture and political and intellectual life in different parts of Kurdistan and the Kurdish diaspora. The history of Kurdish book publishing has been documented by Hassanpour (1992; 1996: 61–71). Furthermore, there are extensive studies on orality and Kurdish literature (Allison 2001), the concept of identity representations in Kurdish novels (Ahmadzadeh 2007), the Kurdish literary field in Turkey (Scalbert-Yücel 2014) and imaginations of place and belonging (Galip 2015).

Cinema
Cinema
Kurdish cinema has become an important part of Kurdish cultural production and has gained international visibility in the early 2000s with the success of the Iranian Kurdish director Bahman Ghobadi's 'A Time for Drunken Horses' (2000). Although films by Kurdish directors and Kurdish language films were made in the 1980s and 1990s, these were considered part of the national cinema traditions of the directors, based on their citizenship. Ghobadi's oeuvre initiated a discussion on the existence and the importance of Kurdish cinema for national identity. Like other Kurdish media and cultural productions, Kurdish cinema has increased in volume, mainly due to the transnational networks of the diaspora. Several international Kurdish film festivals have been organized in London, Berlin, Paris, New York, Melbourne, Diyarbakir and Duhok. Academic studies have focused on the international Kurdish film festivals and their effects on the discourse of Kurdish cinema (Koçer 2014), transnationality and the identity of Kurdish cinema (Sengul 2013), and conceptual linkages between conflict and filmmaking (Smets 2015; Smets and Akkaya 2016).

Contemporary Studies on Kurdish Media and Cultural Production
While less than two decades ago Kurdish media culture made a remarkable, yet marginal, evolution within global communications, today a vivid Kurdish media landscape has developed in the Middle East. As a result, the field of research has been expanding in different directions. Recent studies may indicate the direction the field of Kurdish media and culture is heading in the near

future; attention has increasingly turned toward issues of digital surveillance, mediated digital activism and emerging production and consumption cultures among transnational Kurds. Moreover, as Kurdish media and cultural production expands and matures, it will no longer be studied as a 'remarkable' or 'peripheral' phenomenon, but rather as a basic part of regional and transnational media cultures (for instance, see Al-Rawi and Gunter 2013; Relly, Zanger and Fahmy 2015). It is only in this way that we will begin to understand how Kurdish culture can occupy a distinct place in the media landscape of the Middle East. Finally, now that the field of Kurdish media and culture is maturing, we can start to see how it can contribute to the various theoretical fields it has drawn on. As Allison (2013) notes, the complex Kurdish case lends itself to the re-evaluation and refinement of existing theories. Recent instances of such theoretical refinement based on the study of Kurdish media and culture include Allison's (2013) critique on the idea of 'imagined community', and Keles' (2015) conceptualization of the relations between diaspora, conflict and media.

The contributions in this special issue offer diverse perspectives to contemporary studies on Kurdish media and cultural productions. We seek to cover geographical, methodological, conceptual and thematic diversity. Özlem Belçim Galip, in her study of national identity in Kurdish novels, covers the widest range of communities (different parts of Kurdistan, the diaspora and Soviet Armenia) and sociopolitical contexts. Examining narratives of various Kurdish writers, she explores the notions of 'home' and 'homeland' and the ways in which Kurdish literature produces different maps—both real and imagined—of Kurdistan. While also dealing with representations, Francesco Marilungo's article on the image of Diyarbakir in the television series Sultan uncovers an entirely different set of imaginations of Kurdish identity. His study examines how selective representations of Kurdish culture in a mainstream Turkish television production relate to a number of noteworthy evolutions such as the 'de-politicization' of the city and a selective public memory process that puts Diyarbakir on the touristic map.

Mari Toivanen and Bahar Baser study another form of media representation that affects how Kurds are viewed by 'Others'. They investigate the gender dimensions of how Kurdish military troops, in particular the female combatants of Yekîneyên Parastina Jin (Women's Defense Unit), are framed in British and French newspapers. Their article uncovers an array of representations that become meaningful in the struggle against is and that contest traditional Orientalist gender and religious representations. Occasional representations of powerful unification notwithstanding, fragmentation is often signaled as a major challenge for Kurds. The same is true for the diaspora communities studied by Keles. In his paper, Keles explores the way virtual communities offer opportunities to enhance forms of social capital and overcome disadvantages of diaspora Kurds in the host societies.

diaspora Kurds in the host societies.
In a very timely study, Yazan Badran and Enrico De Angelis explore the new Kurdish mediascape that has emerged in Syria after the 2011 uprising. Syria

and Rojava (the northern Syrian regions historically inhabited by Kurds) in particular have seen the emergence of a whole new media landscape within which novel forms of Kurdish journalism have developed in a multi-sectarian society. Their study shows that a pan-Kurdish approach may not necessarily be the most beneficial way to promote sustainable Kurdish media institutions in the region.

Finally, Bahar Simsek focuses on cinema, a key medium for self-reflexivity and self-identification in the current Kurdish cultural landscape. Through an investigation of sound and voice in three different Kurdish films, she describes Kurdish cinema as a sphere of subjectification that transforms and transcends collective memory, conflict and trauma.

While these contributions offer a rich picture of Kurdish media and cultural production today, we cannot guarantee representativeness in all respects (for instance, Kurds in Iran are addressed only to a limited extent in Özlem Galip's article) in one special issue. Yet we do believe that these articles not only provide a starting point for scholars to consider Kurdish media and cultural production as indispensable topics in Kurdish studies, but also contribute to the greater understanding of relations between media, culture and society in the changing Middle East.

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