Decolonial and Intersectional Approach to Media Witnessing: Alevi Persecutions and Political Mobilisation Through Media

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ABSTRACT

Alevis are a persecuted ethno-religious community based in Turkey whose members have settled in various European countries since the 1960s. From the early years of the Turkish Republic, the broader Alevi community has witnessed through media the massacres that have befallen some of their members. The paper analyses Alevi media witnessing through two cases: Madımak (1993) and Sürgü (2012). While witnessing the Madımak massacre through mainstream Turkish media mobilised members of the community to form the Alevi movement, witnessing the attack on a family through Alevi media enabled them to prevent the massacre. Examining the cases of Madımak and Sürgü, the paper calls for a decolonial and intersectional approach to media witnessing. Critically engaging with the concept of media witnessing, the paper argues that the political potentials of media witnessing are mainly activated through drawing on collective memories of violence and atrocities. It also demonstrates the limitations of the political potentials of media witnessing without employing an intersectional lens towards different systems of power based on gender, ethnicity and so on.

Keywords: media witnessing, community media, Alevis, decoloniality, intersectionality

On 2 July 1993, television audience in Turkey watched the massacre of Alevis at Madımak Hotel in Sivas. I was among them as an Alevi child. This experience has undoubtedly shaped my Alevi identity ingraining complex mixture of feelings of fear, rage, curiosity, resilience and many others. Almost twenty years later, while completing my PhD research on media and conflict, I witnessed another attack on an Alevi family living in a small village called Sürgü in Turkey, this time broadcast on Alevi's community television, Yol TV. This moment did not only bring my early memories of witnessing the massacre of Alevis through media but also enabled me to reflect on what it means to witness atrocities, of one's own community in particular, through media and the significance of humble endeavours from local or community media in an increasingly complex media environment framed by the power of global and national monopolies. Studying Alevi media and its audience through ethnography more closely over ten years in a transnational context enabled me to develop a decolonial and intersectional lens into the practices in, engagements with and right claims through media. In this paper, I shall examine Alevi witnessing through media focusing on Madımak massacre and Sürgü attack drawing on this backdrop of personal experiences of media witnessing, my ethnographic research on Alevi media (Author, 2023) and my ongoing research on Alevi massacres.

First, I shall demonstrate why we need a decolonial lens in order to make sense of media witnessing of the Alevi community which can further be extended into other persecuted communities. This constitutes my exogenous critical approach, to the concept that rejects a uniform experience of media witnessing which prioritises the media text over the audience and overlooks who the audience is and the ways in which collective experiences of exclusion, marginalisation and persecution shape their engagement with media. Second, I shall call for an intersectional approach to Alevi witnessing through media, that is my endogenous criticism to the concept of Alevi witnessing, which undermines gendered and ethnic experiences of violence experienced by the members of the community.

In this paper, I argue that the ways in which Alevis mobilised through media witnessing following the Madımak massacre and the Sürgü attack can be understood through community's history of persecution and the collective memories of it which constitutes Alevi witnessing. I also demonstrate the limitations of Alevi witnessing in capturing other forms of violence targeting Alevis based on gender and ethnicity. Drawing on the body of research on Alevi history, media witnessing, decoloniality and intersectionality, the next section focuses on addressing the complexity of bearing witness through media for a persecuted community. The following section analyses Madımak massacre and Sürgü attack and demonstrates the relevance of decolonial and intersectional approach to media witnessing through these cases.

Decolonial and intersectional approach to media witnessing

Alevis are the second largest religious group in Turkey with a vibrant migrant community in Europe (Issa, 2017). Estimates of the size of the Alevi population varies from between fifteen to twenty per cent of the population in Turkey and 400,000 in Germany and 300,000 in the UK. Alevis are ethnically diverse including Arabs, Kurds and Turks. They can be defined as an ethno-religious group, are organised around hearths (ocak) that are led by religious leaders (pir) who claim to be descendants of Ali, the Prophet Mohammed's cousin and son-in-law. Alevis in Turkey have been persecuted on religious grounds either by the state, or more recently by civil or affiliated religio-fascist groups, as they have been regarded as heretics unwilling to compromise. The persecution of Alevis goes as far back as the Ottomans in the sixteenth century (Ateş 2011). Past atrocities include those in Koçgiri (1921), Dersim (1937-1938), Ortaca (1966), Sivas (1978), Maraş (1978), Çorum (1980), Madımak (1993) and Gazi (1995) (Jongerden, 2003; Keiser, 2003; Sinclair-Webb, 2003; Poyraz, 2013; Çakmak, 2020; Dinler, 2020). The collective memories of persecution have been formative in the creation of the modern Alevi identity (Poyraz, 2013; Ertan, 2017; Çavdar, 2020; Temel 2021) and are regarded as part of a continuum going back to the murder of Ali and his sons in the Kerbala massacre of 680 (Kehl-Bodrogi, 2008).

As Rentschler (2004) argues 'witnessing is a form of participation, through mass mediation, in others' suffering' and televising the Madımak massacre called Alevis into a collective position of witnessing. Frosch and Pinchevski (2009) distinguish between different forms of media witnessing in, by and through media: respectively, the appearance of witnesses in media reports; the possibility of media themselves bearing witness; and the positioning of media audiences as witnesses to depicted events. They emphasise the systematic nature of media witnessing as learning about experiences and realities of distant others on an everyday basis. Ellis (2000, 2009) is also interested in the more mundane forms of witnessing through television as an ordinary, everyday act that takes places within the domestic sphere. He says that mundane witnessing 'involves an awareness which does not require action' unlike eye-witnessing (2009), hence political action is not an expected end-result of witnessing through television. Zelizer (1998) emphasises that bearing witness creates a specific form of collective remembering that attributes to an event critical attention demanding retelling. In order to be an active witness which is performed through saying, first one needs to be a passive one through seeing (Peters, 2001). Bearing witness, a specific position which emerges through a different way of seeing, then spectatorship, becomes crucial for retelling the story.

Even though the history of racism and the colonialist past of the USA is very different from that of Turkey, Richardson's (2020) analysis provides a useful framework for understanding how minoritised groups gather evidence and engage in resistance through the collective practice of witnessing and, more importantly, how this collective practice is embedded within their history. The value of Richardson's work lies in the way she prioritises the history of the Black community in the USA rather than simply focusing on the affordances of (digital) media and communications. In this way, the recent mobilisation of the Black Lives Matter movement and the witnessing of police brutality towards Black individuals in the USA through videos recorded on mobile phones and circulated on social media can be better examined by looking at the history of Black resistance and uprising rather than solely focusing on the advancement of digital media and communications. Richardson distinguishes between the different periods in which Black witnessing took different forms through the uses of media and technologies. The history of almost two centuries of Black witnessing has been shaped through media and the ways in which they are used by the Black community to gather evidence against institutional, communal and individual forms of violence and injustice. She lists the evidence historically as: the Slave Narratives (1734-1939);

the Black Newspaper (1827-1960); the Black Magazine (1942-1970); Talk Radio (1938-1982); Television (1955-1968); the Early Web (1989-2008); and Smartphones and social media (2009 to the present) (Richardson 2020).

Kehl-Bodrogi (2008) mentions that for many Alevis, Kerbela, where 'Ali's son Hüseyin together with his family members and followers were slaughtered by the soldiers of the Caliph Yezid in an unequal battle fought for the Caliphate', became a myth of origin for many Alevis. This is of particular significance as the Alevi holy lineage (ocak) is believed to be descended from Ali's son, Hüseyin. According to Yalçınkaya (2011) the Alevi concept of time enables them to be on the side of Ali and his sons even before the massacre took place. That is to say, Alevis' positionality in aligning with the victim, the powerless and the innocent is predetermined by their cultural conception of time which transcends the actual events. The recent demand of Alevis to establish a museum on the site of the Madımak Hotel in order to commemorate the massacre can also be considered as part of a reviving concept of martyrdom among the community (377). It is important to note that collective remembering is contextual and dynamic (Zelizer, 1998) and is shaped by a sense of belonging and particular cultural conceptions of identity and political affiliation. For instance, Yalçınkaya (2011) argues that the strong engagement of Alevis with socialist politics from the 1970s onwards led them to interpret the massacres of Maraş (1978) and Çorum (1980) as revolutionary martyrdom. Alevi witnessing and martyrdom has also been shaped by the affiliation of the community to leftist politics intermingled with secular discourses. Therefore, witnessing and martyrdom are interwoven with the socio-political dynamics of the Alevi movement as well as being rooted within the religion itself.

While Richardson's historical categories are mainly based on particular media technologies such as newspapers, magazines and social media, it is relevant to periodise Alevi witnessing in relation to the massacres as they operate as key points of rupture for collective remembering. Therefore, I distinguish between three periods of Alevi witnessing. The first period mainly relies on oral histories and accounts of atrocities from the Kerbala to Dersim massacre (1937-38), the latter being the first Alevi massacre of the Republican era (Poyraz, 2013). The second period encompasses the time from the Dersim to the Madımak massacres (1937-1993) where bearing witness mainly relied on oral and photographic accounts which were mainly circulated in mainstream newspapers. The third period includes TV and video footage of the massacres and attacks from Madımak until now (1993 onwards). These periods should not be regarded as linear but co-existing since oral histories of the massacre are still prominent (albeit taking different forms in public talks, political speeches and commemorative events) and the visual accounts of the massacres are relatively limited. While each period deserves an in-depth scrutiny, for the purposes of this paper in the following sections I focus on the televisual witnessing of the Alevi massacres during the third period of Alevi witnessing.

Ellis (2009) says that witnessing through 'media is an everyday state', a mundane process and it 'involves some level of acquaintanceship that feels personal, yet it is not'. While this is a valid argument, it presumes that we witness what has happened to 'others' from a particular distance, the borders of which are defined by a sense of belonging and identity. Marginalised communities share a collective memory which entails experiences of violence, atrocity and trauma that can easily be triggered by first-hand individual experiences of discrimination and through different forms of witnessing of others' experiences, be they the members of the same community or not. According to Florini (2019) defending the memory of violence and exclusion through media practices is a strategy for defending the collective identity. Furthermore, 'the nature of such memory is not only a matter of contemporary urgency', but it affects the future viability of collective identity (157). This is pertinent to both cases covered here. Therefore, this paper suggests a decolonial approach to media witnessing, that is to situate experiencing and witnessing atrocities through media within the history of communities and their collective understanding of witnessing of atrocities. This would enable us to shift the focus from mediation and the assumption that encounter and engagement with media technologies follow the same universal pattern for different communities. Situating media witnessing within the history of Alevis and their collective memories of persecution is a way of resisting the epistemic violence (Mignolo, 2009) and an attempt 'to change the terms of the conversation' (4). Decolonial approach would also ensure a situated understanding of media witnessing which would acknowledge its greater potential to mobilise political action of the colonised, marginalised and oppressed communities. Therefore, in this paper I argue that it is not possible to make sense of why Alevis mobilised through their media witnessing of the Madımak massacre without taking the centuries long Alevi witnessing of atrocities into account.

While a decolonial approach to media witnessing is necessary, it would be incomplete without intersectionality as collective identities are produced by complex social structures of race, class, gender, sexuality, nationality, ethnicity, religion, ability, and age. Black feminist activism and scholarship have demonstrated that race, gender and other systems of power are interdependent and construct one another (Collins, 2000, 2019; Crenshaw, 1991). Collins (2000) identify race, gender and class as interlocking systems of power that oppress Black women in the USA most heavily. Experiencing and witnessing atrocities take place within a complex matrix of interlocking systems which require unpacking if we are to critically engage with representations of

violence and political mobilities and resistance against atrocities. For such critical engagement, we need intersectionality as an analytical approach which would help us to bring forward what is deemed invisible, unworthy and irrelevant in the context of media witnessing. Whose sufferings do we bear witness through media? Which systems of oppression are more visible in our engagement with representations of atrocities? Intersectionality allows us to address these different systems of power and differentiate between particular experiences of violence experienced based on gender, religion, ethnicity, sexuality and so on.

Christou (2024) emphasises the necessity of an intersectional lens in unpacking gendered experiences of war and atrocities in particular which then will be equipped with a potential of un/learning of traumas. Alevi witnessing enabled through (mainstream and community) media necessitates an intersectional approach as it assumes a uniform experience of victimhood for all genders, women, non-binary and so on. We can distinguish between several reasons that underpin gender-blind framing of Alevi witnessing. Firstly, despite that women have been involved in the Alevi cultural arena as musicians, producers, practitioners, artists and so on, Alevi media production is predominantly at the hands of cisgender men. Secondly, embodied experiences of sexual and maternal violence are a taboo for Alevis. This does not simply stem from the difficulties about talking about traumatic experiences but also because of further vulnerabilities engendered through shame embedded to the cultural notion of honour. Regardless of their gender, Alevi individuals are not keen to talk about sexual and other forms of gendered violence perpetuated by cisgender men. Thirdly, mixed gender religious practices which have been a key marker of 'Alevi difference' led Alevi women to be regarded as promiscuous and sexually available while the community has been seen as morally corrupt. Finally, in relation to mixed gendered rituals (and cosmology), Alevi sexuality and the accusation of so-called 'blowing the candle' that is starting an incestuous orgy after their gender-mixed religious ritual has long served for the circulation of hate discourses. Therefore, not only the community but particularly women carry the burden of shame, as an embodied experience, which 'is connected to oppressing marginal identities and communities, and playing a significant role in policing heteronormativity and the intersectional power relations that sustain traumatic inequalities' (Shefer & Munt, 2019). In other words, persecution of Alevis stand at the nexus of complex interplay between ethnicity, religion, gender and sexuality, therefore call for an intersectional feminist approach to Alevi witnessing.

Decolonial and intersectional approach to Alevi witnessing through media is also necessary for making sense of how media enables, facilitates, triggers and provokes certain emotions such as pain, hatred, anxiety, vulnerability both in Alevis and in those who are emotionally aligned with the persecutors. Arguably witnessing the massacres fill Alevis with a sense of urgency to act upon, to prevent, to protect themselves and other members of community along with many other feelings and emotions (Sozer, 2019). As Wahl-Jongersen (2019) argues, anger is the essential political emotion, perhaps not only for populists and far right but also for calls for justice that come from the oppressed and marginalised. While as a concept media witnessing has been deeply embedded in the studies on collective memory and traumatic events such as holocaust, the extent of which emotions are mobilised through media witnessing has not been examined in depth. Feminist scholarship on affect (Brennan, 2004; Hemmings, 2012; Sedgewick, 2003; Pedwell & Whitehead, 2012; Sedgewick, 2003), and the feminist critiques of 'affective turn' (Clough & Halley, 2007), enables us to approach media witnessing as a way of relating to others' suffering that is activated through emotions. Politics of emotions (Ahmed, 2014; Carlse, 2020) have two layers of relevance in making sense of media witnessing. The first layer pertains to the act of violence that targets the body of the other as dangerous, feared and hated. Persecutions are embodied violent political acts that are mobilised by and through emotions of hate, anger, disgust and often experienced by the victims through feelings of fear, shame and pain. As heretics, Alevis have been regarded as dirty, whose food should not be consumed, and morally corrupt, whose bodies are smudged through their gender-mixed religious rituals. The second layer pertains to the act of media witnessing of the violence that involves feelings of shock, shame, helplessness, urgency, anger and so on. Media witnessing focusing on the attack as 'media event' that is re-performed by media, in the form of 'mediatized conflict' (Cottle, 2006), controversially serves to conceal the first layer of collective emotional baggage mobilised in the form of violence. Decolonial and intersectional approach to media witnessing, allows us to acknowledge the significance of the politics of emotions in mobilising persecutors and those aligned with victims. As the remainder of the paper demonstrates Alevi witnessing has been facilitated through mediated emotions of anger and fear and led to political acts and calls for right to equal citizenship.

From witnessing to preventing the massacre through media

In the summer of 1993, Alevis had gathered for the Pir Sultan Abdal Festival in Sivas where various talks, concerts, plays and conferences were organised by the Pir Sultan Abdal Culture Association with the participation of various public intellectuals, writers and artists. Considering that the ban on the right to organise in Turkey, which was imposed following the military coup of 1980 had been lifted in 1989 (Bruinessen, 2016), the early 1990s saw a cultural and political awakening among various groups, including Alevis. The Pir Sultan

Abdal Festival held a particular significance in terms of marking the public visibility of Alevis in cities beyond Istanbul and Ankara. The Madımak, also known as the Sivas, massacre took place on 2 July when after Friday prayers at a local mosque thousands of Sunni residents in the city of Sivas marched to the Madımak hotel. The mob set the hotel on fire and thirty-seven people, mainly Alevi participants and intellectuals, were killed. Over the eight hours of the siege the police, military and fire services did little to intervene.

Even though knowledge about the massacre was gained through media by Alevis and the broader Turkish public, this fact has not been studied in detail. In this section, I examine what it means to know about the massacre through the video footage that appeared on Turkish media and how it rendered gendered forms of violence invisible. I argue that what disseminated the traumatic experience of the massacre to the broader Alevi community and others was the video images which circulated on the television news on the day of the massacre and thereafter. These images reinforced the matrix of domination (Collins, 2000) that is Turkish Sunni Muslim men's domination and sexual and gendered forms of hatred directed towards Alevis.

Televising the Madımak massacre enhanced what Ertan (2017) and Çavdar (2020) call the 'politicisation of the Alevi collective memory' and mobilised Alevi citizenship acts both in terms of scale and persistence. As Orhon (2020) argues, Alevis have been a community with one of the most 'stubborn' and resistant collective memory in Turkey insisting on remembering and reminding people of the acts of violence perpetrated towards them. Arguably, before the Madımak massacre the history of persecution had been an imaginary (rather than lived) part of the collective memory, whereas the televisual images of the massacre construed viewers as witnesses of persecution and called upon the Alevi political subject to be counted.

The reaction to the massacre is seen as a key event in stimulating the Alevi revival (Vorhoff, 1998) but it is often overlooked that the massacre was witnessed through media, mainly television. In other words, what led to the Alevi revival, that is the growing political organisation of the community across Europe and which served as a turning point for the transnational Alevi movement, was experienced as a mediated event for Alevis (except for those who attended the Pir Sultan Abdal Festival who witnessed it in person, some with fatal results). For the first time in their history of persecution of more than five hundred years, Alevis witnessed a massacre captured on TV cameras and broadcast for hours; and it was the emotions of fear and rage and collective memory of persecution galvanised by these televised images that then led to the so-called Alevi revival. Thus, the massacre at the Madımak Hotel had a profound effect on Alevis and was highly significant in fuelling the so-called Alevi revival (Vorhoff, 1998) in Turkey and Europe and the mass mobilisation of Alevis into a transnational Alevi movement. In this sense, the Madımak massacre is regarded as a turning point in the emergence of the now well-established and transnationally networked Alevi movement.

One must also note that at the time of the massacre there was a relatively small number of news channels in Turkey so, for anyone who wanted to watch the news on television, coverage of the massacre would be difficult to avoid as it was covered by all the channels. The images were so powerful and undeniable that they served a documenting function in a way similar to what Sontag (2003) describes as the expectation that photographic evidence documents the atrocities of war. However, such a documenting function is not always able to completely suppress alternative claims such as the one made by the Turkish authorities at the time that there had not been a massacre but a conflict between two parties. But, in the case of the Madımak massacre, it served to further the Alevi cause by taking the experience of ethno-religious persecution beyond the Alevi enclaves (Florini, 2019) and pushing it onto the public agenda. Rentschler (2004) says that '[w]itnessing needs to become part of a larger political and ethical mobilization towards the eradication of violence' and in this way, television as evidence (Richardson, 2020) of violence and persecution helped Alevis to re-construct Alevi rights as an issue for the Turkish public. Video images of the massacre identified the viewers, regardless of their identity, as media witnesses and '[t]o witness an event is to be responsible some way to it' (Peters, 2001). Witnessing the Madımak massacre through media, without doubt mobilised Alevis and re-defined them as political subjects even if such political mobilisation towards the eradication of violence has not been the case for the broader public in Turkey. This leaves a crucial question hanging in the air in terms of the media witnessing by non-Alevis: does their spectatorship of Alevi suffering in which Alevis are viewed as 'distant others' leave open for Turkish viewers avenues to expand the borders of Turkish citizenship to include Alevis or does it reinforce the asymmetry of power between Turkish citizens who watched the massacre from their homes and the victims they are observing (Chouliaraki, 2006)? Even if media witnessing and the re-politicisation of Alevi identity following the massacre have not transformed this initial power asymmetry, they have shaped the way Alevi recognition is discussed and have opened further channels for Alevi recognition to be part of public debates.

Zelizer (1998) says that '[m]uch of our ability to remember depends on images'. Interestingly, televisual images of the massacre also shaped how the families of the victims remember the event, many of whom also learned about the massacre through the television news. Çavdar (2020) argues that the victims' families do not relate to the actual building that was the Madımak Hotel during the yearly commemorations for the massacre that now take place but relate to an image of the hotel constructed through the visual images, photos and witness

accounts that depict their lost ones waiting to be rescued. In his research on Alevi collective memory, Çavdar (2020) mentions that his first recollections of the Madımak massacre were based on a blurry television footage of people gathered in front of a hotel which is encircled by yellow-red flames, followed by the attack on Aziz Nesin (the Turkish translator of Salman Rushdie's The Satanic Verses) while he is being pulled from the fire engine ladder as he attempts to escape the flames, similar to my vivid memory of watching the massacre on the television as a ten-years-old with my family. Çavdar also recalls seeing the names and photos of those killed on the front pages of the newspapers. The footage which was broadcast on public and private television channels at the time depict the hotel in flames. The Islamist mob is seen shouting out slogans and comparing the flames to the fires of hell while the police and others in authority stood by. Aziz Nesin, a prominent writer and keen defender of secularism, is seen being pushed aggressively by a fireman out of the building while one of the mobs try to pull him down to attack him. The television news reports that the attack around the hotel has started with stone throwing followed by putting the curtains on fire (HBB TV Sivas Katliamı Haberler 1993).

Since the footage showed how the security forces did nothing to intervene or try to rescue those in the hotel, it forcefully demonstrated publicly the state's attitude towards Alevis. It reinforced the idea that the state was not willing to protect Alevis against violence and deliberately choose a bystander role even if they themselves were not directly attacking. In this way, it can be argued that the television footage served as an intimidating function for some Alevis, visualising what is likely to happen to them when they claim their identity in a public event. One can also argue that it reinforced the feeling of helplessness and insecurity in the face of unpredictable violence which can occur at any time. Indeed, this attitude towards Alevis was reinforced when the authorities said the mob's anger was not directed against Alevis but against the presence of Aziz Nesin, signalling both the denial of violence against Alevis and that Alevis could not expect the state to protect them from such violence.

Butler (2004) says that '[t]he violence that we inflict on others is only — and always — selectively brought into public view'. This has been the case with previous Alevi massacres which, at best, received very limited coverage with only a few photographs in the newspapers. The massacres are also re-interpreted as with the discourse of the 1970s which framed the previous massacres as conflicts between leftists and rightist groups and individuals (Yalçınkaya, 2011; Çakmak, 2020). In a similar vein, the Dersim massacre (1937-1938) was remembered as either an uprising or a Kurdish massacre depending on the hegemonic discourses of the period (Dressler, 2021). In this way, the Alevi massacres of the previous decades were not made visible and discursively framed as 'Alevi massacres' in the public sphere until the attack at the Madımak Hotel. Following the massacre, Alevis gained more public visibility through a series of interviews, opinion pieces and talk shows appearing on Turkish media (Çamuroğlu, 2008; Ertan, 2017). This enabled them to politicise their mourning and penetrate broader public discourses on religion, secularism and Alevism. Arguably, the images of the massacre and the following public debates in the media also defined the Turkish 'collective imaginary of the "other"' (Chouliaraki, 2006).

The selective depiction of the violence inflicted on others highlighted by Butler (2004) is an issue of intersectionality. The violence experienced by Alevi women and girls such as forced adoption, sexual harassment, rape and intimidation has not been brought to public view at all until late 2000s. Even though half of the victims of the Madımak massacre are women, the Madımak and the ways in which Alevis witnessed the massacre through live coverage on television has not been regarded a gendered issue. It is no coincidence that the attackers have chosen the hotel, instead of festival venues where talks, concerts and other events took place. The hotel was a place where women and men attending the festival stayed together regardless of their family bonds. The attack started with stoning the hotel, reminding the so-called rajm, an Islamic punishment practiced in some communities to punish adultery where an organised group of men throw stones to the individual accused of adultery until they die. Arguably the hotel was perceived as a space that mobilised the deeply ingrained myths of hatred about Alevis such as incest and promiscuity. Pir Sultan Abdal Festival was the first festival in Sivas where women from other cities in Turkey have been able to travel, stay and make public appearance in various spaces in modern outfits. The women visitors embodied Alevis' mixed gender ways of living and praying challenging the dominant conservative and religious norms which excluded women from public spaces in Sivas. In a similar vein, the gaze of the televisual images of the massacre was that of the attackers. These images showed the hotel in flames through the camera situated within or so close to the mob, that was local men shouting slogans of hatred, surrounding the burning hotel.

In 2012, almost two decades after the Madımak massacre, Yol TV's daily broadcasting schedule was interrupted by a breaking news item which would not have made the news on mainstream media (Author, 2018). Yol TV, which has been on air since 2006, is owned and run by the European Alevi Unions Confederation. The item was about a family from a small village, Sürgü in Malatya in Eastern Turkey, who were being attacked by local residents and neighbours. Strikingly a similar pattern to Madımak emerged in Sürgü where the attackers stoned the house of the family and threatened to burn the house down. The time of year was the period of Ramadan (the Muslim month of fasting) which is a period of tension for Alevis in Turkey as they do not fast

during this time although feel under pressure to do so, particularly in small cities and towns. Problems usually arise when an individual drinks or eats in public such as in the lunch hall at work or some other public space. Ramadan drums, which wake up the faithful at dawn in time to eat before the daily fasting, are also a source of pressure. Drummers walk the streets before dawn and return during the day to collect money from the dwellers in return for this service. However, drumming or the collection of money can also be a means of harassing those who do not fast with drummers insisting on payment and locals expecting compliance. The situation in Sürgü exemplifies such harassment where the incessant drumming occurred in front of a house of a family who were known to be Alevi. When the members of the family told the drummer that they were not fasting and that he should move away, a crowd of locals gathered in front of the house in protest ready to attack.

Following some phone calls with the family, Yol TV started a live broadcast covering the situation, constantly checking with the family via the phone. The continuing live broadcast of the event turned into a campaign which lasted for days until eventually Yol TV managed to mobilise viewers to call the local authorities and armed forces and to bring to the attention of politicians and members of Parliament the family's vulnerable situation in the face of a possible attack. At the time, I witnessed the situation being broadcast on Yol TV from London and called the office of the local city police in Turkey using the phone numbers provided by Yol TV. I told the police officer at the end of the line that the life of the family in Sürgü was at risk, that I was keeping an eye on the situation and would expect action, and argued that the armed officers were obliged to protect the family. In response, the police officer, in a clearly frustrated tone of voice, told me that they would do whatever was necessary. Eventually Yol TV's campaign paid off and the family's life was saved although in the end the family could no longer live in the town and were forced to migrate to the UK.

The daughter of the family under attack, a young woman, has been the key contact person for Yol TV. Her testimony demonstrated that she had to confront the attackers in front of her house and had to confine in the house while they surrounded the house. She continuously reported on the attack and the wellbeing of the family and welcomed the politicians and members of the parliament at the family home. Alevi witnessing interrupted the family's victimhood thanks to her call upon the community media which urged Alevis watching Yol TV to act upon. While trying to save herself and her family, she mobilised Alevi memory through community media, call Alevis to bear witness and act against violence (Altınay et al., 2019). In this case, calling for media witnessing through community media is gendered labour which became available as a result of gendered violence. Later accounts of Sürgü attack demonstrate that while the men were trying to physically protect the family in front of the house from the attackers, women had to stay home 'to be protected' from Turkish Sunni men's violence and campaign for the attention of Alevis to pressurise the authorities and police enforcement (Sürgü'de Alevi Kürtlere ölüm; Allahu Ekber, İstiklal Marşıyla).

The videos shared on YouTube demonstrate that the family has also been targeted because of their Kurdish identity as the attackers chanted the national anthem in front of their houses and shouted at family members, "we don't want Alevis here, we don't want Kurds here.". The fact that the attack begun because of harassing the family with the drum during Ramadan, a common experience for many Alevis which serves a way of marking Alevi houses as spaces of heretics, was likely to highlight the attack as violence against Alevis, than Kurds. However, Alevi massacres such as Kocgiri (1921) and Dersim (1937-38) have been excluded from the discourse of the Alevi movement as Alevi massacres as they were claimed by the Kurdish movement as Kurdish uprising against the state until recently. Even though it would be unfair to argue that Yol TV perpetuated the exclusion of Kurdish Alevi massacres from the discourse on Alevi massacres, in the case of Sürgü coverage the Kurdishness of the family has been overlooked. In this regard, a decolonial and intersectional approach to media witnessing enable us to address the complex interplay between gender, ethnicity, race and religion in framing and representing violence.

The prevention of the attack in Sürgü was made possible through live broadcasting by Yol TV which invited Alevi viewers and the broader public to bear witness to the violence that might easily have turned into a lynching of the family and possibly other Alevis living nearby, or even the burning down of Alevi houses with echoes of the Madımak massacre. Drawing on the collective memories of persecution, the community media quickly re-framed the violence as a political attack on the members of the Alevi community which otherwise might have likely been framed by the local authorities as an everyday disagreement between neighbours. Such mediated forms of activism conducted by media organisations also shelter individuals who might be physically present at the event and could potentially witness the targeted violence through their smartphones from the risk of being attacked. Recording attacks, such as in Sürgü, and sharing them on social media, such as Black activists did in order to expose police violence, poses a great deal of risk for individuals, particularly when the attacks take place in small towns. Such witnessing often involves ordinary people or small organised groups who themselves are vulnerable to attack from other locals or the authorities. However, when such reporting is anonymised on television by reporters, it allows individuals to actively contribute towards media witnessing through phone calls and anonymous reporting without the personal fear of reprisals.

The Sürgü case epitomises why community media matters in conflict prevention and how it has real-life consequences for members of the community. Elsewhere, I (Author, 2024) argue that in the Sürgü case, media witnessing is a type of transversal citizenship act through media which cuts across local, national and transnational levels. A family who lives in a small town in Malatya are saved through a broadcast from Germany by mobilising members of the community living in different countries and by getting politicians in Turkey to act. Therefore, the spatiality of media witnessing matters in mobilising large scale collective action with serious implications for people living in small villages or towns as minorities. Noteworthy is the fact that Alevi television's power in mobilising their audience, politicians and members of parliament lies in its deep engagement with the community. In other words, Yol TV can be identified as community media in terms of its reach, scope and content, but more importantly it is the media organisation of the European Alevi Unions Confederation. Therefore, the station heavily relies on grassroot community politics at a transnational scale. But further, its ability to interfere in a possible lynching, and even to prevent it, also stems from the collective memories of persecution of the community which is interwoven into the media practices of Alevi media workers. Florini (2019) also reveals a similar pattern in Black activism on social media which draws on existing Black networks of cultural production and sociality.

CONCLUSION

The Alevi media witnessing of the Madımak massacre led to mobilisation only after the attack. The broadcasting technologies and limited power of community media at the time, such as Alevi radio stations, did not allow Alevis to organise against the massacre instantly and intervene in it. Alevis initially witnessed the massacre through mainstream media with no real capacity to intervene simultaneously. Satellite technologies and the capacity to have live broadcasting through community television has dramatically changed the community's ability to intervene in cases of violence such as Sürgü. Media witnessing, therefore, has taken an active and instantaneous form, in a similar way to bearing witness through social media.

The community's close engagement with Alevi television which builds upon existing transnational networks and grassroots politics also enables such instantaneity and proactive engagement. This realisation also indicates that we need to adopt a critical perspective towards technological determinist approaches to media which tend to attribute to digital media significant power in terms of political participation and mobility, whereas the capability of traditional media in facilitating political movement is deemed to be limited. Rather than being solely dependent upon the technological affordances of engagement and participation, media's power lies in its ability to engage its audience. Community media can be as influential as social media in setting a political agenda and mobilising their viewers around it depending on its level of engagement with grassroots politics and activism.

As the Alevi case demonstrates, community media is not only a means of communication but also a network of solidarity which is able to organise collective action at a transnational level. Media witnessing through the immediacy of live broadcasting has become a tool in the hands of community media activists for preventing a massacre. This is particularly striking in the age of digital media, where traditional forms of media and communications are regarded as becoming increasingly irrelevant and obsolete. While the dynamics of online resistance and activism are very promising in terms of their immediacy and connectivity, they also come with the risk of vanishing in the over-flow of topics, debates and agendas on social media for small and geographically dispersed communities. Community media and its grassroot networks enable community-oriented forms of activism to pinpoint and push forward the right means and tools at short notice. Media witnessing can be regarded as one of these tools. While it re-constructs the collective memory of the community in certain ways, media witnessing also prompts political action drawing on the collective memories of violence and persecution.

In the case of the Madımak massacre, media witnessing and the collective memories of persecution mobilised Alevis in the form of protests and demonstrations in the short term, but more significantly accelerated the Alevi revival in the long term. The case of Sürgü, on the other hand, demonstrates that community media can shift the power dynamics of watching an attack on mainstream media from being a bystander to active resistance and intervention. Therefore, community media became a tool for preventing the massacre through witnessing. This interesting shift indicates the significance of community media in preventing conflict and violence as it invites politicians, members of the community and the broader public to take immediate action through media witnessing.

As illustrated by Richardson (2020), communities, such as Alevis, deploy witnessing as a form of record-keeping, a way of building a collective memory and collecting evidence of violence and discrimination and acting against it. Media witnessing serves more than mere observation and judgement of a particular event for marginalised communities. It evokes collective memories of atrocities and calls upon solidarity and collective action against such actions as illustrated by the Alevi political mobilisation that followed the Madımak massacre. Decolonial approach to media witnessing is a call for taking the history of atrocities experienced by marginalised communities into account. While it enables us to unlearn

While Alevis were attacked because of their ethno-religious identity, they were attacked by cisgender men Alevis' mixed-gender rituals serve an excuse for attackers as they have been deemed as morally unfit, heretic and sexually pervert. Alevi women face with gendered forms of violence such as rape as survivor accounts of Dersim (1937-1938) and Maraş (1978) massacres evidence. However, Alevi witnessing through media to date assumed that Alevi members suffered the attacks same way. Indifference to experiences of Alevi women during the massacres despite their agency in Alevi mobilisation is deeply problematic. Not only because it disregards Alevi women's experiences of rape and other forms of gendered violence, but also because it serves to disguise the gender of perpetrators that is men, be them civilians such as in Madımak and Sürgü or armed forces in Dersim. Decolonial and intersectional approach to media witnessing enable us to consider those who call for bearing witness and those who bear witness as situated within colonial matrix of power. Therefore it reveals the potentials of media witnessing for political mobilisation in the face of injustices and inequalities.

Biographical sketch

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