Representation of the Azerbaijani Minority in Iran's Media and Significance of the Turkish Media

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Abstract

Absence or negative portrayal of ethnic minorities in media has always been one of the challenges facing ethnic minorities. Such exclusion or misrepresentation of ethnic minorities can cause serious problems among the dominant ethnic group and the minorities living within the same geographic borders. When the minorities do not see themselves appropriately mirrored or adequately represented in the media, they find themselves in a situation in which they lose their feeling of belonging to the country where they live. Therefore, such mis/under-representation of ethnic minorities could provoke serious divisions among the dominant and ethnic minorities. In Iran, 25-30 million Azerbaijanis who live in Iran are stereotypically represented in the Iranian media and negative, comical or exotic stereotypes are depicted while mirroring them. That is to the extent that the Azerbaijani minority prefers not to watch the Iranian media. In contrast, the Turkish media is unbelievably popular among Azerbaijanis who live in Iran. Almost all Azerbaijanis who live inside Iran watch Turkish channels through Turksat. The large number of channels provided by Turkish media is enjoyed by a large number of people ranging from children to adults. Hence, the influential role and popularity of the Turkish media among Azerbaijanis are indisputable. In this study, at first, the under-representation and misrepresentation of the Azerbaijani minority in the Iranian media are taken into close account and then the reasons behind the popularity of the Turkish media among the Azerbaijanis living in Iran will be discussed.

Keywords: Azerbaijani minority, under-representation, mis-representation

1. Introduction

Representation of minorities in their country media has always been controversial issue. In some media, minorities are totally absent or less attention is given to them. In some others, minorities are not absent in media but they are inadequately portrayed and improperly represented. When the minorities do not see themselves appropriately mirrored in the media, they encounter a situation in which they might lose their feeling of belonging to the country where they live in. Therefore, such mis/under-representation of ethnic minorities could provoke serious divisions among the dominant and ethnic minorities. Media depictions of majorities vary across national contexts. In some countries, like the UK, preponderance of majority groups over minorities could be seen in newspapers (e.g. Gardikiotis et al.'s, 2004). In different case, the priority of majority groups and under-representation of minorities are to be found in Canadian TV series (Cuff, 1990, cited in Mahtani, 2001). The portrait of the Azerbaijani minority in Iran's media, especially TV, has always been disputed. Despite all objections to the Iranian TV programs, negative depiction of the Azerbaijani minority in the TV series or different TV programs can be felt in majority of the national TV channels. Owning to the mis/under-presentation of Azerbaijanis in the Iranian media and because of similarity of Azerbaijani Turkish and the Turkish spoken in Turkey, Azerbaijanis living in Iran have preferred to watch the Turkish media, especially TV channels. As a result, the popularity of the Turkish media among Azerbaijanis living in Iran is rapidly growing. In this study, the mis/under-representation of the Azerbaijani minority in Iran's media was examined. An attempt was also made to investigate the importance of the Turkish media for the Azerbaijani minority living in Iran.

2. Azerbaijani Minority

Azerbaijani people have shared a common language, religion, and culture for thousands of years. Under the terms of The Treaty of Turkmenchay, which was signed on February 21, 1828, the oil-rich region that they inhabit was carved up between the Soviet Union and Iran. Azerbaijanis are now living in both of these countries and, in smaller numbers,

in Georgia. The largest group of Azerbaijanis lives in Iran. However, Iran's official census figures have not indicated the exact number of the Azerbaijani minority who inhabit in the country. However, it is estimated that there are about 25 to 30 million Azerbaijani people in Iran. They make up between third or half of the country's population and are mainly concentrated in the northwest of Iran, which is commonly named 'Southern Azerbaijan'. The important provinces of southern Azerbaijan include Western, Eastern Azerbaijan, Ardabil, Zanjan, and Hamadan. The main language spoken by the people is Azerbaijani Turkish which is a variant of the Turkish language, and is considered as a member of Altaic languages. Azerbaijani Turkish is common for the northern and southern part of Azerbaijani ethnic groups. Southern Azerbaijan has borders with three countries including The Republic of Azerbaijan, Turkey, and Armenia. As far as researchers are concerned, it seems there is certain gap in the information regarding the factors that contribute to the assessment of the negative image of the minorities in Iran, mostly concentrating on their perceptions by Iranians, rather than on perceptions among Azerbaijanis themselves.

3. Representation of Ethnic Minorities in Media

Representation of ethnic minorities in media is one of the challenges that ethnic minorities consider a threat to their ethnic identity. As Mahtani (2001) points put, there are two main ways in which ethnic minorities are mistakenly treated in the media. First is the *under-representation* or absence of ethnic minorities. The second refers to the *misrepresentation* or negative portrayal of ethnic minorities. Both of these representations could influence the ethnic minorities. She believes that minorities are unfairly being treated in the media and less attention is given to them. This is a problematic media treatment toward minorities globally. Similarly, Fleras (1995) points to the fact that the impact of minority marginality in the media only leads to further establish the invisibility of ethnic minorities in society. Fleras (1995) also declares that ethnic minorities are rarely represented as people who have something important to say. In some countries, ethnic minorities are not actually represented in the media and they are intentionally or unintentionally portrayed as low class members in the community. This is sometimes to the extent that negative, comical or exotic stereotypes are depicted while mirroring the ethnic minorities. In Canadian dramatic series, for example, as Fleras (1994, cited in Mahtani, 2001) cites, some negative and exotic stereotypes are attributed to minorities where the examples of ethnic minorities as "social problems" are mistakenly used: namely, high-school dropouts, homeless teens, or drug pushers. Cuff (1990, cited in Mahtani, 2001) describes how images of black Canadians on television are often limited to roles of villains or victims, or buffoons and folksy sitcom types. Gardikiotis et al.'s (2004) analyzed the content of British newspaper headlines to examine representations of majority and minority groups. According to the results, headlines containing the words majority or minority indicated an overwhelming predominance of majority over minority headlines.

4. Representation of the Azerbaijani Minority in Iran's Media

There are only a limited number of channels in Iran media and all of them belong to the state. The sole language in the Iranian media is Persian. Iran's media mainly represents Persian language and culture and no attention is being paid to minorities, particularly Azerbaijani minority. In fact, a low percentage of characters are from diverse ethnic or racial backgrounds. Persian speakers have occupied almost every position in the Iranian media. Under-representation or mis-representations are challenges with which all minorities who live in Iran deal with. Azerbaijani minority, the largest minority in Iran, is not excluded. Ethnic minorities are severely underrepresented in Iran media in general and TV in particular. In Iran, minorities remain either largely absent from TV, magazines and soap operas or misrepresented. In fact, not only Azerbaijani minority is excluded from representation, cultural mixing itself has been avoided by Iran's media.

The Iranian media is not accurately providing a mirror in which the Azerbaijani minority can see themselves reflected. Azerbaijani Turks, for example, are mainly represented as low class people in the Iranian media to which unimportant roles are given. They are presented as those who speak Persian with a strong accent. In the Iranian media, the Azerbaijani minority are often portrayed as stupid and silly individuals who speak Persian with heavy Turkish accents. In addition, some Turkish words might be used to spice up plot lines in movies and to make the audiences laugh. These negative stereotypes are causes for concern because they create a divide between the Azerbaijani minority and Persian speakers resulting in Azerbaijani minority to be seen as "others" who potentially have nothing to claim about in the nation. Such misrepresentation of Azerbaijani minority is likely to lead to a sense of inferiority, shame in one's heritage, and lower expectations of achievement. Such division and constant repetition

of negative images which are attributed to the minorities can harm individuals and are likely to lead to the dissatisfaction and uprisings. The uprising of the Azerbaijani minority on May 28, 2006 could be seen as an obvious example. It happened when the Azerbaijani minority was depicted as cockroaches in an official newspaper. Demonstrations and turbulence were spread to all regions that Azerbaijanis lived within Iran, and more than 30 Azerbaijani people were killed by riot police. The reason for such an uprising was merely the misrepresentation of Azerbaijani minority in Iran media.

Fleras and Kunz (2001) rightly state that such limited presentation of voices reinforces exclusion of ethnic minorities and ultimately undermines their sense of belonging to the country they live. 'Who am I?' and 'do I belong to this country where I am badly represented?' These are questions that overwhelm the minds of ethnic minorities when their sense of belonging to the country they live in begins to fade. In the case of Canada, for example, the very invisibility of minority issues and minority communities in the Canadian media contribute to a sense of "otherness" for minority Canadians. In the Canadian media, ethnic minorities are presented as threats, with overt division of "us" and "them" in which the former is an assumed mainstream audience, and the latter is the ethnic minority (Fleras and Kunz, 2001). Similarly, the absence of representations of the Azerbaijani minority in Iran's media also problematically encourages Persian ethnic group to be considered the norm in the media. This under-representation devalues Azerbaijani minority's role as citizens in their nation and this is likely to lead to feelings of rejection. The narrow range of images of the Azerbaijani minority, when they are under-represented, has effectively decreased the ability of this ethnic group to be seen as positive contributors to Iranian society.

According to Hebert (2001), whenever one is not sure of 'belonging', of how to place oneself among a variety of cultural styles and patterns, one thinks of identity. The role of the media in creating a feeling of belonging for the ethnic minorities is tremendously important. In Iran, where almost no place is given to the Azerbaijanis in the media, a sense of belonging starts to become a challenge because Azerbaijanis find it difficult to consider themselves Iranian. Therefore, they are likely to lose their sense of belonging in the country they live in.

5. Mass Media

As Appadurai (1990) declares, mediascapes (i.g. flows of information through media) is one of the important outcomes of globalization which has significantly influenced the people's life. Flows of information through satellite television channels are the main and widespread mean of getting information in the globe. It has enormously provided the opportunities for the people of this planet to know more about each other, and also to shape and reshape each other's thoughts and actions. Thanks to the media, people have contact with different ideas, values, and ways of life. Global electronic media should be regarded as one of the engines that control cultural globalization. By breaking down the borders, globalization paves the way for people to get informed of those people with whom share the same ethnicity.

The media of mass communication, then, are an integral part of our lives, occurring in a wide variety of settings. According to Turow (2009), mass media refers to the technological vehicles through which mass communication takes place. It encourages huge numbers of people who are in different parts of the world and unrelated to share the same materials. In addition, mass media create people's common lived experiences, a sense of the common culture and the varieties of subcultures acceptable to it. Mass media materials speak to the most personal parts of our lives. They also connect us to the world beyond our private circumstances. As a result, mass media industries are a major force in society.

6. Turkish Media

The Turkish media provides a huge number of channels in which the main language is the Turkish spoken in Turkey. These two languages belong to Altaic group of languages and are lexically and grammatically the closest languages among the Altaic language family. Such closeness could be due to the fact that Turkey and Azerbaijani are adjacent countries. Both countries share the same ethnicity and there is a common saying about their ethnic relation; 'Turkey and Azerbaijan are two countries but one nation'. As far as the Azerbaijani minority is concerned, Turkish channels are unbelievably popular among the Azerbaijani minority who live in Iran. Nearly all Azerbaijani Turkish speakers who live in Iran watch Turkish channels through satellite receivers. Various channels provided by the Turkish media are enjoyed by a large number of people ranging from children to adults. Such popularity of the Turkish media among the Azerbaijani minority could be attributed to the realistic representation of Turkish ethnicity and particularly

Azerbaijani ethnic group in Turkish channels. In contrast to the Iranian media, where the most attention is given to the Persian language and culture, where Persian speakers are represented as ideal, educated, attractive, and perfect individuals, and where Azerbaijani Turks are portrayed and represented as people who are worthless and have ridiculous behavior, Turkish media represents Turkish ethnicities as ideal and respectable ones who have had a rich history and civilization. Hence, Azerbaijani minority do not find themselves trivialized or stigmatized while watching Turkish media. Vast number of programs offered by Turkish media provides an environment for the Azerbaijani minority to feel safer because their ethnic identity is not threatened when they watch TV. A study conducted by Shokri and Solhi (2011) to investigate the popularity of the Turkish Media and its effect on Azerbaijanis living in Iran. According to the results of the study, Nearly seventy eight percent of Azerbaijani people preferred watching the Turkish TV channels to the Persian TV channels.

7. Method of the Study

Inspired by the studies on the representations of ethnic minorities in the media, we decided to carry out a study on mis/under-representations of Azerbaijani minority in Iran's media and the role of the Turkish media in their identity formation. In so doing, a questionnaire was devised to first investigate perceptions that Azerbaijanis have about their mis-representation or under-representation in Iran's media. Then, the role of the Turkish media in formation ethnic identity of the Azerbaijani minority living within Iran was examined. This questionnaire was both sent through email and distributed to nearly 643 Azerbaijanis throughout Iran. Exactly 538 were returned. However, only 523 of them were taken to final evaluation since some of them lacked the information required. Each participant was representing his/her family. Data was analyzed using SPSS package program (Version 11.5). Descriptive statistics was used to analyze the demographic information of the participants. The responses given for the last two questions were classified under various subheadings and were given as frequencies and percentages.

8. Findings and Discussion

In the first three questions, we tried to get some demographic information about the participants. The questions inquired about their gender, age, and educational background. Seventy three percent of the participants were female while twenty seven percent were male. Demographic information gathered via the questionnaire revealed that nearly 86 % of the respondents (N = 450) were aged 21-35. The mean of scores obtained for the age of the participants was 2.05 and the standard deviation was 1.01 with the variance of 1.02   As it is evident in Table 2, the educational background of the participants ranged from illiterate (N = 32) to Ph.D. (N = 5). The participants with Bachelor's degree constitute more than 72 % of the respondents. The mean of scores obtained for the educational background of the participants is 2.80 and the standard deviation is 0.67 with the variance of 0.45. The information about their age and educational background is given in Table 1 and Table 2.

Table 1: **Demographic information about the age of the participants**

Age	N	Percent
21-25	182	34.78
26-30	205	39.17
31-35	63	12.04
Over 36	73	13.95
Total	523	100

Table 2: **Demographic information about the educational background of the participants**

Degree of Education	N	Percent
Illiterate	32	6.11
A high school diploma	77	14.72
Bachelor's Degree	379	72.46
Master's Degree	30	5.73
PhD	5	.95
Total	523	100

Among the five questions asked the last two are of particular relevance here. In the last two questions, an attempt was made to gain insight into how the Azerbaijani minority evaluate their mis-representation or under-representation in the Iranian media and how their ethnic identity is formed through Turkish media. They were analyzed in detail. The fourth question aimed at obtaining some information about whether Azerbaijani minority are satisfied with their representations in the Iranian media. It was to get some information on their self-perception and their attitudes toward their mis-representation or under-representation in Iran's media. It was a multiple choice question but the respondents were asked to briefly explain the reason for their choice. It enabled them to explain the rationale behind the reasons. Only just over 168 (32 %) went for the first option (i.e. yes), while 355 (68 %) argue that they were not satisfied with their representation in Iran's media. The answers given to this question were analyzed descriptively and given as frequencies and percentages. The reasons for their dissatisfaction with their representation in the Iranian media were categorized under three headings (Table 3).

Table 3: Reasons of the participants for their dissatisfactions with Iran media

	Items	f	%
1.	We are represented as uneducated people.	230	64.78
2.	No attention is given to Azerbaijani culture and music.	110	30.98
3.	We don't have any particular channels in Azerbaijani Turkish.	15	4.22
	TOTAL	355	100

The purpose of the fifth question was to get some information on whether the participants prefer to watch the Iranian media or Turkish media. It was also an open-ended question. More than 277 of the participants (78 %) indicated that they preferred watching Turkish media, and only 22 % said their preference is the Iranian media. The reasons for their preference to watch more Turkish media than the Iranian media were classified under four headings (Table 4).

Table 4: Reasons of the participants for watching Turkish media

	Items	f	%
1.	Because my mother language is Turkish and I can understand while watching Turkish channels.	152	42.81
2.	Turkish media represent us as we are.	134	37.74
3.	I enjoy watching Turkish channels.	44	12.39
4.	No threat is imposed to my ethnic identity and I don't feel stressed out while watching Turkish media.	25	7.04
	TOTAL	355	100

9. Conclusions

According to Herbert (2001), the development of an ethnic/racial identity appears to follow four stages. Occurring before the age of six or before schooling, young children are often unaware of their ethnic origin, considered ethnic/racial unawareness. In childhood and early adolescence, ethnic/racial ambivalence occurs in which adolescents attempt to distance themselves from their group of origin, often adopting the norms of the dominant culture by using fashion trends, peer groups of different ethnicity, and multi-media to conform. In a later stage, ethnic/racial emergence which occurs in late adolescence and early adulthood, individuals come to realize that they cannot completely join the mainstream culture and look toward their own group for acceptance, looking for connections via family, religion, and peer groups of similar origin. A fourth stage may occur in the adult years wherein the individual joins the ethnic group and resolves any ethnic identity conflicts, termed ethnic/racial group incorporation.

Here the role of the media could be increasingly critical because adolescents of minority backgrounds must also deal with unpleasant media images and stereotypes which are often incorrect portrayals of cultures, ethnicities and races. In this way, minority groups are represented as people who are different from the dominant society. In Iran's media, for example, the image of a Persian is represented as an educated, polite, rich, energetic, and attractive, surrounded by a poor, illiterate, and unintelligent Turks. Due to the fact that Azerbaijanis find themselves downgraded and unrealistically portrayed as uneducated and silly people in Iranian media and that unable to find any channels or programs in their mother language, they unconsciously incline toward the ethnic/radical groups with which they mutually share a mother tongue and ethnicity. The Turkish media, with its vast array of channels in Azerbaijani Turkish and Turkish languages, is a place where the Azerbaijani minority could find their lost identity. Turkish media reflects who they are and empower their sense of belonging to their ethnicity.

In this study, first, an attempt was made to investigate the under-representation and misrepresentation of the Azerbaijani minority in Iran media and then the role of Turkish media in formation of ethnic identity of the Azerbaijani minority living in Iran was taken into close account. According to the results of the study, members of the Azerbaijani minority speak openly about their concerns about ethnic misrepresentation in the Iranian media. Iran's media representations of Azerbaijani minority tend to come to fairly pessimistic conclusions.78 % of the individuals participating in this study expressed their dissatisfaction with the misrepresentation of Azerbaijani minority in the country.

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