

A slice of Turkey

by [Andrew Dickens](#)

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The strength of Turkey's local production scene is now a well-documented trend. But what advice is there for distributors looking to sell into the country? Andrew Dickens reports. You'd be lucky to get a finished series into Turkish primetime these days. That's the general consensus among international distributors, who are increasingly being forced to re-think ways of selling into a country fully self-sufficient in programming.

Now the second-largest producer of TV drama in the world behind the US, Turkey is consistently churning out high-end, big-budget series such as Ay Yapim's *Ezel* (ATV) and *Magnificent Century* (Star TV) – far more relevant to its audience than anything coming out of Hollywood.

The Turkish production scene has been buoyant for some time, but how has the boom affected the demand for imported programming, and what slots remain open for distributors?

"There are first-run opportunities in Turkey for distributors of drama from the UK, the US or other places, but on pay television and digital channels," says Jamie Lynn, exec VP of sales and distribution for EMEA at FremantleMedia.

"It's very unlikely they will be on the big free-to-air [FTA] channels, though. There are more than 10 FTA channels in Turkey, but for the most part they are commissioning local content. There are exceptions but the big FTAs are making their own stuff."

Lynn believes some FTA broadcasters' secondary channels, including those operated by state-run TRT, can provide a way in for distributors selling finished content.

But he maintains that pay platforms such as Digiturk and D-Smart provide superior opportunities for finished Western programmes, such as FremantleMedia's fantasy drama *Merlin*, which aired on CNBC-e in Turkey.

It's a view echoed by Chris Bartlett, VP of sales at UK-based distributor Digital Rights Group, which recently sold ITV comedy drama *Doc Martin* to Digiturk, while also offering the option for a remake to the broadcaster. "Digiturk is the main one for us; they are buying nearly all the movies and dramas we have," Bartlett says.

"We do talk to the likes of TRT and ATV, and in the past they have taken programming from us, but it's now really about Digiturk and digital channels for us.

“But because what’s working for Turkish FTA broadcasters are series like [period drama] *Magnificent Century*, we are being asked what we have like that. And, essentially, we haven’t got a lot like that.”

Nevertheless, Bartlett believes there are gaps for finished programmes on networks such as Fox International Channels’ 24Kitchen.

There’s also a small amount of space for documentaries on FTA channels, he claims, highlighting DRG’s recent sale of factual series *The First World War* (10×60’) to Kanal D as a triumph.

Ayse Poffet, head of finance at Swiss-based factual distributor First Hand Films, believes factual titles are “always a challenge in Turkey,” but senses changes are on the horizon due to a growing number of younger viewers watching a greater range of programming.

“Of course, it’s easier for reality slots,” says Poffet, whose company has sold such titles as *Bridge Over the Wadi* and Oscar-nominated documentary *Burma VJ* into Turkey in the past. “But I believe there is a slight change because a greater number of young people are opening up and are interested in international titles, so I am very positive this will bring even more interest to our kinds of programmes.”

This interest, claims Patrick Jucaud-Zuchowicki, general manager of Discop Istanbul organiser Basic Lead, means major opportunities still exist for foreign distributors in Turkey. “There isn’t an example of a developed marketplace that has strong local production activity like Turkey but is no longer an interesting market for foreign content,” he says.

“Turkey is a huge market, just by the size of its population – close to 80 million people. You have a highly educated audience in the country that will not be satisfied watching only content made in that territory.”

For the moment, though, getting finished programming on to a mainstream Turkish channel remains an uphill task.

Broadcasters have definitively shifted their focus from acquiring finished programmes to taking the remake rights to popular Western shows like US network Fox’s *The OC* and The CW’s *Gossip Girl*.

Star TV, for instance, began airing an adaptation of *The OC* to enormous success last September, after commissioning 13 episodes from Warner Bros International Television Production, with Istanbul-based Ay Yapim producing.

“One of things we know about scripted formats is that buyers in Turkey are pretty good at knowing what they want,” said Andrew Zein, Warner Bros International’s senior VP of creative, format and development at C21’s Content London conference last November. “With drama formats, they tend to say they will target this audience that has a bias towards a particular demographic.”

“With *The OC*, the broadcaster did want to play it in primetime. The show completely hit the ground running as the number one show on Friday nights. The production values out of Turkey are quite phenomenal.”

Meanwhile, Nelly Weber-Feld, sales director at Israel's Keshet International, believes Turkey's own versions of dramas and non-scripted shows are improving in quality and are preferred by local audiences.

Her comments were backed up in January when Turkish prodco Acun Medya became the latest international player to license Keshet International's hit format Rising Star, following the company's successful adaptation of The Voice and Survivor.

"In the past, when speaking about the television industry in Turkey, the focus has been mainly on Istanbul and other areas," Weber-Feld says.

"But recently, we have started to analyse the viewing habits of the whole country and the results indicate that the entire population of 75 million people also prefer local programmes to translated US series.

"I am noticing a trend for a sort of 'nostalgic viewing,' audiences wanting to hold on to their own cultural nuances. Therefore local adaptation – as opposed to finished shows – are very popular.

"The need to reduce programming costs for channels and platforms due to increased competition is also a factor in how we sell, but less so than providing proven formats that can be re-versioned with local sensitivity."

But Fredrik af Malmborg, MD of Scandinavian distributor Eccho Rights, which recently opened a sales hub in Istanbul to focus on the Turkish drama market, believes the price of a Western script can be over-valued by Turkish producers.

"There are a number of producers in Istanbul that really understand the value of a good script, of course, but to some extent the value of the script shouldn't be as high because they have longer series in Turkey, and a lot of rewriting has to be done," he adds.

"Many Turkish producers just buy into the brand and then realise they need to rewrite it a lot anyway because their circumstances are so different from others.

"A 45-minute script from the US is more like 90 minutes in Turkey because their pace of storytelling is a bit slower. It goes the other way too. Sometimes in the West we cut Turkish series down."

Competition for scripts has meant some distributors, particularly those dealing with drama formats, have seen a surge in licence fees.

FremantleMedia's Lynn has witnessed a "positive upwards trend" in fees due to the competitive nature of the Turkish market. On the other side, though, First Hand Films' Poffet believes fees for her company's factual programmes are "not as high as one could wish for."

She adds: "I'm very sure that this will develop in Turkey because of the awareness that's growing from producers and broadcasters."

But in this vast and competitive market, what opportunities do emerging digital platforms, particularly subscription VoD services, provide distributors?

Neil Bailey, commercial director at All3Media International, believes SVoD has the potential to provide lucrative slots for distributors, but admits it's not his company's current priority. "There are opportunities if you have the right product – SVoD platforms are certainly not hoovering up everything," Bailey adds. "SVoD is something we are keeping an eye on but at the moment I would say that it's not top of our agenda."

For DRG's Bartlett, SVoD is also "not a growing business" right now. "To be honest, at the moment we don't really know how digital is going to pan out," he says. "I find channels like Digiturk, Kanal D and Fox's 24Kitchen are the ones I'd more likely have a chance of selling into."

But digital players such as Dogan TV Holding's VoD platform NetD will have their day in Turkey, according to Basic Lead's Jucaud-Zuchowicki.

Almost 1,100 delegates from 76 countries attended Discop Istanbul in February and Jucaud-Zuchowicki believes OTT is the "direction the market is heading."

"What's happening in Turkey is no different to what's happening in an established marketplace like Poland – things have grown fast," he adds.

So with digital players likely to offer more opportunities for distributors in future, it may not be long before the line between Turkish digital and FTA channels becomes blurred.

International distributors will surely be keeping watch, but for the time being Turkey's primetime slots will continue to air big-budget locally produced content. And why not?

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