

TURKISH JOURNALISTS: SURROGATE PUBLIC OR A DEMOCRATIC QUANDARY

(Part I)

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Özet

Kamusal Alan, iktidarın alanı olarak Devlet ile özel ekonomik çıkarlar alanı olan Pazar arasında ancak her ikisinden de özerk olarak kavramlaştırılır. Sosyal sorumluluk kuramına göre gazeteciliğin profesyonel bir yapıya kavuşması kamusal alanın bu özerkliğinin sürdürülmesi açısından son derece önemlidir. Günümüzde medyanın özerkliğinin kurumsal özerklikten daha çok gazetecilerin mesleğin profesyonelleri olarak bireysel özerkliklerinin demokratik kamusal alanın işlerliği konusunda önemine vurgu yapılmaktadır. Gazeteciliğin kronikleşmiş sorunlarından olan ifade özgürlüğünün etkin olarak kullanılması, yani, toplumdaki farklı enformasyon kanallarına erişimleri noktasında karşılaşılan sorunlar bu alanda oluşturulacak etik kodlarla

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aşılabilir. Bu nedenle gazetecileri koruyan çeşitli ulusal ve uluslararası düzenleyici kodlar ve ilkeler oluşturulmuştur. Buna karşılık profesyonelleşmenin gazetecilerin otorite kaybına neden olarak sonucunda bu kaybı telafi etmek isteyen gazetecilerin devlet görevlileri veya özel/ticari televizyonlar sözkonusu olduğunda pazar aktörleri ile daha yakın ilişkiler kurmaya itebilir. Yapısal engeller olarak adlandırılan bu kısıtlamalar kitle iletişimcilerin toplumsal organizasyonunda ve ayrıca organizasyonun mesleki başarımın gerçekleştirilmesinde oynadığı rolde açıkça görülebilir.

Bu makalede kişisel düzeyde ortaya çıkan ve gazetecileri ifade özgürlüğünün etkin gerçekleştirilmesinde kişisel özdenetim mekanizması olarak işleyen ve 'ifade engellenmesi' olarak adlandırılan durumun Türkiye'de özel/ticari televizyon kanallarında çalışan haberciler açısından bir incelemesi yapılacaktır.

Anahtar sözcükler: Kamusal alan, ifade özgürlüğü, gazetecinin özerkliği, ifadenin engellenmesi.

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The public sphere as it is conceptualised in this study stands between the state as a realm of power, on the one hand, and the market as the space of private economic interest on the other, thus it needs to be kept autonomous of both. Social Responsibility theory provides a theoretical framework for this conceptualisation by predicting the

professionalisation of journalism as a guarantee against the domination of public sphere by both the state and the economy. In a sense, as Hallin has pointed out, it anticipated for setting up journalists as a 'surrogate public sphere' with autonomy from the power and economic interest and gives journalists an important role in relation to a democratic public sphere. (Hallin,1994:4)

A recently modified forms of 'social responsibility' theory even increases the role of journalist. What is called the 'professional responsibility' model offers a shift from the organisation to that of individual as professional.(Stepp, 1990:196) That is, it displaces the media's power onto journalists as an individual and professional. It is argued that, by the creation of a new professional ethics, the chronic problems of exercise of freedom of-expression, that is, access to and diversity of information sources may be overcome the organisational and personal dimensions to freedom of-expression. It is upon this importance that, various conventions, national as well as international often protects the journalists. The operational codes and principles often seen in that direction that is reaffirmed by the recent CoE Declaration stating that, 'the maintenance and development of genuine democracy requires the existence and strengthening free, independent, pluralistic and responsible journalism.'(CoE, 1994:11) As the declaration has accurately pinpointed the freedom of journalists or in other words the freedom of impart information has two sides. On the one hand journalists must enjoy as

much freedom and independence as possible, but on the other hand, s/he must use its power with solemn responsibility.

Nevertheless, the role of journalists as professionals is rather complex which demands further elaboration on their role in public communication. According to Hallin, professionalisation of journalism could be problematic depending on the level of differentiation from other subsystems namely power and economy in a practical level. The discrepancy here is that, professionalization result the loss of authority of journalist and then forces them to compensate it by establishing ever more intimate relations with the state officials.(Hallin,1994: 4-7) On the other, differentiation form economic interest, especially in the case of private television is not always easy to sustain. Indeed as Gallagher has pointed out, various 'structural constraints are implicit in the social organisation of mass communicators and the ways the organisation helps or precludes the achievement of occupational goals.'(Gallagher,1990:162)

One of these constraints occurs at personal level. What is called 'express inhibition' may cause individuals to adopt a self-restricted manner towards free _expression.(Mazıcı,1989) These extra- legal forces may arise from internal as well as external factors. The fear of intimidation by governmental forces or pressure groups may inhibit a person from expressing his or her ideas. Internally, one may legitimise certain kind of restrictions by adopting a particular set of ideologies and beliefs. Express inhibition may work in different level for journalists.

Elliott for example identifies dilemmas of role conflict. (Elliot, 1997:148-151) These dilemmas are complex and ranges from dichotomy between autonomy and creativity, professional standard and commercial judgements as well as self-regulation and bureaucratic control, self-motivation and financial inducements, self-monitoring and serving an audience. Some of these contradictory forces impel journalists to adopt self-restrictive measures. For example, media professionals may use their talents entirely for the commercial achievement of organisation and neglect their responsibilities towards public at large. The findings of recent research shows that role conflicts that Elliott mentions are also exist among the media professionals in Turkey. (Alpay 1991; Öke 1994) The initial parts of the news production, or the routine newsgathering, journalists decide according to their own value judgements. In the final stage, which is to assess how the news is actually presented, -the length, the importance, which aspects of it will be emphasised- the news values of journalists seem to become less relevant. Their views are either restricted or totally ignored if their news values contradict with that of the organisation. One of the Turkish columnists has pointed out that, when there are differences between the journalists and editors in any particular news outlet, the editor:

‘Would not want to use (this particular) news item; (s/he) either distorts it or is put of with an excuse. It is for this reason, in the eyes of editorial board that, all the journalists have their own boundary lines. If

these lines are exceeded the alarm bells start ringing and this particular reporter is sent back to his or her line. That is why journalists must be aware of their limits and play the game within these predetermined spaces.' (Çölaşan 1994)

At this stage I would like to focus on the discrepancy on the Turkish political system and its impact on the determination of journalists' role in a functioning democratic public sphere. Differentiation and professionalism stands for journalist to play the role of neutral observer in public communication. As it were, the minimal normative dimension, that is maximum objectivity, is prerequisite for journalistic professionalism as well as scaling the level of differentiation. Taken from that perspective, Turkish journalists' attitude in regards to full membership to the EC, well illustrates the lack of professionalism, low level of differentiation as well as personal dilemma. According to Alpay, although journalists admire the Western values i.e. democracy, and individual rights and freedoms, there exist a certain degree of skepticism and apprehension.(Alpay 1991) The reasons to support Turkey's full membership of the EC often justified by a secured democratic system, pluralism, human rights, individuality, rationality, and freedom of-expression. Nevertheless, the reasons to be skeptical are also not short of variations. Economic insufficiency, religious and cultural differences, dogmatism, communitarianism are the reasons being put forward. Various motives to accept the full membership to European Community and opposition to it disclose a kind of self-

centrism. Conservatives would want to join hoping that it would extend the religious freedom. While mainstream/secularist may favor the membership but worried about the rise of religious feelings. This ambiguity of the media elite is the reflection of a lack of commitment to democratic ideals, which leads Alpay to conclude that, in the final analysis, democratic liberal values are only accepted as face value. He quotes from a leading Turkish social-democrat columnist, Hasan Cemal, which clearly reflects the quasi-democratic attitudes of the media elite:

‘Typical Turkish journalist would begin by saying that the values which have made the West are democratic values including human rights and freedom of the press . typical of the journalist would thus try to legitimise a limited democracy including restrains on the freedom of the press. People in general regard democracy as freedom of _ expression for themselves but not necessarily for the others.’

The superficial and self-centered understanding of democratic values make for example, a cultural conservatives to object free speech when he believed that they may undermine the religious beliefs and norms. While for the secular member of the media, freedom of-expression may be jeopardising in the phase of rising religiosity. What this suggests is, generally speaking, Turkish journalists are inclined to adopt certain normative values. This may result journalist to deny objectivity and take a particular normative stand, which could be a popular sentiment or lean, on to the state. The later position seems more significant yet not rare

occurrence. There are the times when the mainstream secular media elite would not even hesitate to justify military intervention. Nezih Demirkent, the President of the Turkish Journalist's Association made it clear that the military interventions took place as a response to coded calls from press. The place of the media in Turkish society and its role for the democratic politics most interestingly and explicitly defined by the former owner of one of the largest media groups in Turkey. In his polemic with the Prime minister of the day, Erol Simavi said that:

'It is said that the press is one of the five major powers [in Turkey]... that it is the fourth power. This statement is not valid for Turkey ... Sovereignty of course, belongs solely to the people... That is something else... But which is the first power in Turkey? The army? No... It is the press... the army is the second power... It is the press that urges the army to stage the coups.'

Although the validity or even desirability of such over-confident confession in a democratic politics can always be questioned, it should nevertheless not to be underestimated. The media as powerful as it is argued here, yet suffering from the lack of professionalism may be a handicap well functioning public sphere.

Attitude of Journalist Towards Expressive Rights

Although the freedom of-expression is a relatively recent phenomenon in Turkish political culture, freedom of press is not. In fact,

the latter constitutes one of the buzzwords of the professional discourse of Turkish journalists. In this discourse freedom of-expression is perceived as part of 'westernization'. For the mainstream media elite, which is the part of the stratum of the secular elite, westernization socially refers to 'civilization' and 'modernity'; and politically it connotes 'democracy' and 'press freedom'. The individual members of the media as well as press associations express the lack of guarantee of the freedom of journalists in every occasion. The media elite has often renewed their calls for governments to provide a democratic means of mass information. (see for example; Gemalmaz and Doğru 1990).

This criticism may not be totally unjustified. The freedom of-expression in Turkey, whether as in the traditional form of 'press freedom' or in its broader concept as 'the right to impart and receive information', has always been restrictive rather than liberal in nature. Apart from the legal restrictions the other source of limitations on the freedom of-expression is self-censorship. It is a personal dimension of free _expression as well as government regulations which may create some 'no go' areas. What is called 'express inhibition' may cause individuals to adopt a self-restricted manner towards free _expression. (Wyatt 1991: 3) These extra-legal forces may arise from internal as well as external factors. The fear of intimidation by governmental forces or pressure groups may inhibit a person from expressing his or her ideas. Internally, one may legitimize certain kind of restrictions by adopting a

particular set of ideologies and beliefs. There are many aspects of which expressions are subject to legal limitations as well as inhibited voluntarily by the individual conscience, or by ideological preferences. The issues of secularism, the cult of Atatürk, sexuality, religion, and the Kurdish question are some of these taboos. These self-imposed limitations may be shifted from being a private towards public regulation of speech. For example a secular member of media elite than may consider restrictions on anti-secular speech justifiable to a greater degree by a religious conservative. On the other hand certain aspects of religion or sexuality are more sensitive issues for a Muslim conservative than a secular journalist.

The survey was inspired by other researches into the freedom of-expression. Two were worth to mentioning here. The first carried out by Wyatt was *Free Expression and the American Public*, which focused on media rights and individual right of freedom of-expression. The survey is based on a set of data gathered through a questionnaire that prepared according to certain rights are at stake. The other is *Willingness of Journalists to Support the Freedom of-expression* by Andsager and Miller. (Andsager and Miller, 1994: 102-114) Their main objective was to find out the differences between newspaper journalists and the public in the support of media rights and personal rights of free speech. My own analysis initially intended to measure journalists' attitude towards expressive rights. It is also aimed to find out if the above mentioned professional culture is applicable to TV journalism in private channels. It

centered on questions of express inhibition, namely, how much journalists are committed to expressive rights, what kinds of issues are represented or restricted, and on questions of extra-legal motivations be it ideological, organizational, and personal based on answers to a specific category of questions. The chosen items reflect a cultural and symbolic significance. Some of them are considered having a strong symbolic value in a society at large i.e. the State, or the army whereas others are more specific to one particular group than others i.e. secularism or family values. This categorization reflects orientations towards particular life-styles, which constitutes the major dividing line in contemporary Turkish society. The diffuse categorization of Secular (also Western, liberal or main-stream) vs. Islamic (also traditional, conservative or alternative) seems broadly applicable to that of private television in Turkey.

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