TURKISH JOURNALISTS: SURROGATE PUBLIC OR
A DEMOCRATIC QUANDARY
(Part II)

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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 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 söz konusu olduğunda pazar aktörleri ile daha yakın ilişkiler kurmaya itebilir. Yapısal engeller olarak adlandırılan bu kısıtlamalar kitle iletişimcilerin toplumsal organizasyonunda ve ayrıca organizasyonun mesleki başarının 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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Results

In the time of the survey is conducted there were nine channels broadcasting or planning to broadcast nationally (see Table 1). Six of nine television stations are in category A (secular/ main-stream) and remaining three are in category B (Islamic/ alternative).

Among the sixty respondents forty-four (73 %) of them fell in category A, while the remaining sixteen (27 %) are in category B.

Although this broad categorization did not provide a balance representation, I believe

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the outcome would be more representative. Similar argument also valid for gender representation as those journalists who occupy the place in decision making process in private channels are mostly male (83 %) and the women representation is significantly low (17 %) particularly in Islamic channels which only one out of ten female respondents.

It was assumed that if a respondent agrees not to restrict a certain item she or he is unlikely demand a restriction of any items that is relatively less important than this particular item. One of the aims is to find out a possible orthodoxy of TV journalists who constitute the editorial structure of Turkish commercial TV.

One out of three came from other professions and has no earlier journalistic background. Although this inclination is visible in the mainstream television, it is more significant for the Islamic channels, which are unwilling to recruit their editorial

staff either from TRT or, from the mainstream newspapers. More than half the editorial boards have no previous journalistic experience. Journalists in commercial/mainstream television were significantly more likely than journalist in Islamic/alternative television to support the rights of free expression. Juxtaposing the mainstream and Cultural conservatives restriction scale journalists in mainstream media less favor on legal restriction on most of the items than journalist in Islamic channels.

In regards to general restriction index, the scale follows almost the same pattern but with a difference on the level of restriction shows journalists working for alternative channels seemed more favorable to restriction. The three most favorable subjects for restrictions are 'reporting the name of the rape victim'; 'advertising harmful product 'and' programs damaging the reputation of others. Here the general tendency is towards the restriction at all times.
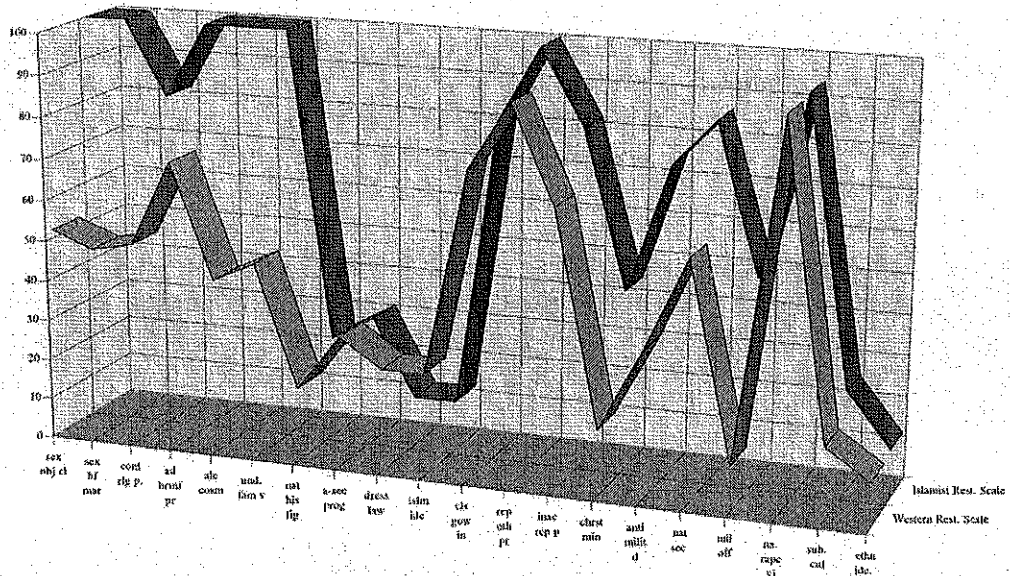
Tablo 1

One significant difference appears as the graphic took almost a U shape in the first part of the diagram. (Tablo 1.)These are questions related to the issue of sex, family values, and harmful products, which constitutes the Cultural conservatives' own restriction index. Cultural conservatives confirm the research hypothesis by favoring high degree of restriction to their own index while adopting a fairly moderate approach to Western restriction indicants.

In regards to western restriction index, the research findings contradict with the initial assumption. Journalists who work for the mainstream TV channels seems less concerned and the ideological taboos became less significant among the media elite. (Langer, 1992: 128) Restrictions on secularism, the cult of Atatürk, expressing religious, cultural and ethnic identities, and unquestioning state institutions found undesirable. They seemed willing to work with a broader legal framework. More significantly they prefer limiting the freedom of expression in terms of Islamic restriction index as much twice as they favor their own.

Discussion

The general conclusion of this survey would be that journalists working for mainstream private channels are generally in favor of greater freedom of expression. This result became even more substantial considering that a desire for greater freedom includes the items, which has initially been considered as would-be sensitive issues. In one sense this should not be surprising giving that Turkish journalists are painfully aware of the vital role of the freedom to impart information in doing their jobs well. What is interesting however is that it challenges the general assumptions about the uncertainty of the

journalists attitudes towards the freedom of expression.

Furthermore two factors, which are confirmed by the research findings, could have lead contrary expectations. Given the majority of the respondents have journalistic background from the print media on the one hand, and the horizontally integrated ownership patterns on the other, the transfer of assertive professional culture would be expected. It seems this is not the case and the journalists prefer to use their individual talents freely and establish their own professional standards. This can be interpreted in a way that professionalism in the case of broadcasting journalism has been improved. The professionalism as is defined by the criteria of 'neutral observer' that is journalists having no normative stand is indeed confirmed by the survey. When it comes to reporting journalists have no specific identification with or commitment to widely accepted social norms and values. Neither they have distinguish between a politician nor the high ranked military officer which in Turkish political culture the image of the former is corrupt, self-interested and opportunist while the image of the latter is repeated, powerful, and trustworthy state official. The early practices of commercial TV may also support this assumption.

However, above mentioned positive indication of self monitoring, seems not working in practical terms that second reading, which is rather pessimistic and based on actual journalistic practices rather than verbal statements is also possible. The discrepancy between journalistic utterances and the actual practices can be revealed in two items. Journalists responded to the questions of 'the name of the rape victim'

and the 'protecting the reputation of other persons' with high degree of a desire for restriction (together with restricted under certain circumstances and restricting all the time). These two items were particularly designed to measure to protect the individuals against unwanted breach of their privacy. However, despite journalists' well-stated respect for individual right to privacy in various cases the individuals became the victims of media assault. They occurred in the forms of false accusations, revealing the name or the pictures of convicted suspects, or the victims of assault and so forth. Some of these individuals are public personal be it politicians, state officials or celebrities but most of were ordinary people. It soon became a public issue. When Mumtaz Soysal, a respected academician, parliamentarian and columnist, made a plea to stop the 'media terror' it was expressing the general feelings. (Soysal, 1995:-) It has got positive responds from the various civil society organizations. The influential Bar of Istanbul joins the call asking for an action to protect the democratic system against media terror.

One way of explaining this contradiction would be the role conflict, which in this case the dilemma of professional standard and commercial judgments are seen at work. In a highly competitive environment the possibility of commercial failure impels journalists to scarify their overall responsibility and respect towards individual rights. Caught in a dichotomy between self-regulation and serving the audience, journalists put the commercial success before public service requirements despite their repeated respect.

The same role conflict seemed at work at another level this time pressure from the ownership. Post-1980 period saw the gradual industrialization and vertical as well as horizontal concentration of the media ownership. The ownership intervention in media generally and broadcasting in particular is now a common practice more than ever. It is often said that the owners are very keen to use their organization for their own wasted interest to gain access to public funds or discredit their business rivals. As one journalist told during the interview that 'one of the new orthodoxy in commercial TV is that, the interest of the owner comes first'[i] During the *de facto* privatization, the interventionist attitude of the owners went so far that, the news managers welcomed the new broadcasting law, which they often criticized as being highly restrictive. He stated:

'From time to time owners do intervene the day-to-day operations. Then you would not have many options but to observe them. Now things have become better. Although the new broadcasting law brought some restrictions, it protects us from the ownership. Now when the ownership demands anything, which we do not wish to broadcast for professional reasons we took refuge in the law.'[ii]

Insofar as the Islamic channels are concerned, the role conflict seems less significant. For the journalists in those channels normative considerations clearly determine the cultural conservatives' attitude towards television generally and the expressive rights in particular.

Although cultural conservatives use the publication without any hesitation they were uneasy with broadcasting especially

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[i] interview with Turan Yavuz, The News Director on Kanal 6
[ii] Interwiew with Osman Balcıgil, The News Director on Interstar TV

television.[iii] Questions like what is the 'Muslim television' stand for? Whether television can ever be any 'Islamic' was discussed. The responses were varying. Moderates focused on the current organizational structure of broadcasting. For them, radio, television and video may not be bad in itself but since they are in bad hands they harmful to the society. (Güneş-Ayata, 1991:-) The similar line has taken by the Office of Directorate of Religious Affairs. In a book titled *Islam and Radio & Television*, it is emphasized that, the function of Islamic televisions should be, to fulfill the dissemination of the divine message; 'ordering good and forbidding evil'. (Baydar, 1994:VIII) The moderates are skeptical about television simply because they had no control on television. Once in the safe hands television could be a very useful medium.

Others took more critical stance. Being a social scientist in communication field, Avci criticized television's capacity to produce and disseminate knowledge. He argued that:

'Television neither provides nor communicates information... but produce a particular set of mind or habit of mind. [By television] the idea that the knowledge requires an intention, endeavor and patience is set aside; it is failed to create an alternative discourse of learning which would enable to explain the effects of new communication and information devices. For that reason today one can talk about the discourses of

not-to-learn, and still remain ignorant when you learn. (Avcı,1990: 114)

In this manner television is bound up with mass culture due to the causal structure of thinking. Hence it comes with its own culture that what can be done is already limited by the peculiarity of the medium itself. The content whether information or entertainment is bound to be superficial and ambiguous. The knowledge that is produced and distributed by television may be universal but perishable.

From the point of view of the traditional Muslim, the particular condition of mind created by television will have a negative impact on their manner and behavior. According to Arslan, assuming this 'negative' impact will be removed by the creation of 'Islamic' television is not convincing. (Arslan, 1996: 52) During the process, these normative rules become deterministic. Television is not exemption. It opens private sphere to the public sphere for, which is contradictory to understanding of 'privacy' in Islam. Therefore, since the medium is the message 'Islamic' television or the 'Islamisation' of television is problematic and may be undesirable. For this reasons that during the early days of television, watching was discouraged in traditional Islamic circus. (Acar, 1991: 284)

At the end the 'Muslim television' in Turkey emerged without finding any theoretical answer to any of these questions. In one sense Islamic television is the product of and reaction to uniforming tendencies of global modernization (read as western consumerism), which ideologically represented by the state television and commercially by mainstream broadcasting in Turkey. On the balance, having television of

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[iii] In 1993, Media Culture and Society examined the relationship between Islam and communication in a special issue which focuses were largely given to traditional view which put emphasis on contradictory and confrontational aspects between the Islamic and modern (read as Western) modes of communications. Yet this traditional view represented as totality of Islam as a trought system and the way of life. See, Media Culture and Society, London: Sage Pub. (January, 1993) Vol. 15, No.1.

their own, so the Cultural conservatives felt would be more functional to counter these undesired impacts. In the last analysis television appeared to be the aspect of cultural strategies of Islamic revivalism for the self-definition and self-maintenance. Through television they manifest themselves and their identities in public sphere.

In the broadcasting sphere, although Islamic television carries some of the characteristics of a community model of broadcasting i.e. mobilizing various financial sources, they are largely based on territory or region, which may be motivated by the politico-commercial motives of a particular locality. This is truer for Samanyolu TV than TGRT that latter focused their attention in commercial activities.

Community in the sense of Islamic television rather refers to community as *Gemeinschaft*. The members of the *Gemeinschaft* accept the common moral convention which is more or less unquestioned, and their experience of social relations involves many occasions on which individual is able to identify with social 'others'. These features of *Gemeinschaft* may be observed in Islamic channels. As our survey findings reveal the Islamic channels recruit their editorial staff neither from the TRT nor from the mainstream print media. It is significant that the half of the editorial board have no previous journalistic experiences. (See Table 2) It is suffice to believe that, their staff shares the same norms and values. The staff may be considered semi-professional and semi-volunteered. The work force of Ihlas News Agency which is the only news agency produces local news for broadcasting, begun their career as volunteered reporters of

Turkiye newspaper.[iv] The implication of this may be that the Islamic channels may form their own professional standards and news values. One negative impact is, on the other hand, these channels must provide their services through relatively less experienced journalists.

Islamic televisions define their broadcasting activities as service to people, which implicitly or explicitly come to mean Muslims. Television broadcasting, according to Deputy Co-ordinator-General of Saman-yolu TV, television should consider:

'(T)he benefit of people. It should educate and inform them. It must help to transfer public consciousness to the new generations and help individuals to be respectful and contemporary citizens. This has to be done according to the traditions and values of people.'[v]

This statement sounds more like a traditional definition of public service broadcasting than that of the tradition of the TRT. Yet there is no contradiction between their normative grounds and the attitudes towards expressive rights. Upon this explicit desire to restrict the public sphere according to their normative stands -sex, family values, or the consumption of alcohol- these stations would strongly resist for example, to broadcast advertisement on alcoholic drinks.

One significant finding in terms of the Islamic channels is that, although they are in favor of expressive rights regarding with the traditional taboos of secular state it should by no means understood as a firm distance

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[iv] Interview with Zihni Sakarya, The Co-ordinator for Public Relations of The TGRT
[v] Interview with deputy Coordinator-General of Sa-manyolu TV Abdülkadir Gök

from the state as such. Parallel to that statement, those items, which refer to state and its identical institutions, are quite moderate. Two items (program against the military service and security of state received reasonably high degree of negative response (in favor of restriction). It can be interpreted that although the cultural conservatives are critical on certain aspects regarding with the state they are rather careful on the state and its core institutions. The comparison on items regarding with politicians and high ranked military officer further support this argument. In questions respondents were asked disclosing material about 'illegal finical link of a high ranked military officer' and 'illegal interest relations of a leading politician based on actually inaccurate information but is believed to be true'. Although the nature of these questions are generally the same we deliberately put the condition of 'inaccurate information but it is believed to be true.' Despite insufficient evidence in the case of politician, journalists are favor of disclosing the material compare to high ranked military officer.

Commercial imperatives seem challenging and this times the normative considerations

of Islamic television. So far this is more visible in TGRT partly because culturally their group can be identified as conservative than Islamic and partly it is the most commercially oriented channel among the Muslim televisions. As a result of this loose normative ground, the Islamic identity of the channel had to be sacrificed sooner than latter for the sake of attracting more audience.

'Our target audience is those who define themselves as "Muslim." It is true that we are sometimes criticized by some of our audience. Some of them ask for example why we commissioned a popular woman singer to make a music-magazine program. However, most people like them, want them to be shown on television. If we do not let them other stations will.'

This shift from an imaginary populism (designing program policy according to one's own definition of target group) to a real populism (designing the program policy following popular demand in the market) is a response to competition in the market

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