

Who Guards the Turkish Press? A Perspective on Press Corruption in Turkey

ANDREW FINKEL

"The press becomes corrupt when it tolerates what it knows to be false and becomes an apologist for what it itself has condemned as wrong."

Q*uis custodiet custodians* or "who guards the guardians" is a conundrum which open societies claim to have resolved. Although the press may be an imperfect, excitable and at times incompetent watchdog, its commitment to editorial independence and to the integrity of the public realm remains in theory one of the safeguards of liberal democracies. In theory again, it is market forces which help guard the press from abusing its own powers. It is the competition between the variety of published and broadcast media that serves as protection against the abuses of any individual press organ. To surrender credibility undermines commercial viability. Thus, a newspaper jealously guards its good name not simply for altruistic motives, but to survive in a crowded marketplace.

The substance of that good name—journalistic standards—varies from country to country. Ethics and their violation are concepts tinged with the problems of relativism: one society's backhander is another's cargo cult. Yet, as a journalist, my own prejudice is that the issue of corruption in the media contains the key to its own complexity. Newspapers and television stations can be judged by the standards that they use to judge others. A common axiom for journalists is that to engage in half-truths, even in pursuit of the common good or national interest, is to risk peril.

The starting point for my discussion about the press in Turkey is that the public realm, like public land or public contracts, is a

common resource. That resource can be put to good use if market forces are allowed to compete openly and fairly under reliable and transparent public supervision; it can be abused if those same forces can engage in under-the-table collusion with officialdom.

There is also a larger issue pertaining not just to Turkey, but to the entire world concerning the reliance on the market as the ultimate regulatory authority and the increasing commercialization of the media. There is a tendency for news to slip down-market or simply reflect the concerns of the most prosperous communities. Most correspondents brush up against the problem of cognitive dissonance. Whatever the declared premium on "scoops" and sensational revelation, it is hard to report in way that surprises the reader, let alone in a way that offends the prejudices of one's editors. In the case of Turkey, reporting on Kurdish issues has been circumscribed as much by conservative public opinion—which simply does not want to confront certain issues—as by official pressure.

However, my concern in this article is much simpler and has less to do with the market than the dictates of a distorted market that operates *sub rosa*. Contrary to what was stated above, market forces do not always keep the press in line. An alliance between proprietors—who pursue their own non-press interests—and the state—which controls the flow of information—is an unholy one. The resulting distortions create a vicious circle that mitigates against organizations competing solely on the quality of the news. The profusion of newspapers and recent proliferation of private television channels is often cited as proof of the underlying vigor of Turkish democracy. This would be less questionable if these organizations were profitable in their own right, rather than because of the economic clout press ownership bestows.

The quality of the public realm, as patrolled by the nation's media, is an issue at the very heart of the criticism proffered by Turkey's Western allies—that a neglect of individual liberties and rights of expression acts as a drag on the growth of civil institutions and on Ankara's ambitions to exercise regional leadership. Within Turkey, there is a sense that the country must now engage with a set of structural reforms that will improve the responsiveness of its democratic institutions and deal with serious problems. Not least of these problems is removing the accumulated residue of patronage politics from the state's own finances—practices which have led to an average annual inflation rate of 72 percent over

the last decade.

There is an awareness as well that Turkey now has an impetus for change. Acceptance as a candidate for the European Union at the Helsinki summit in December 1999, coupled with the IMF's endorsement of a disinflationary package, has provided politicians with both the yardstick and the incentive for reform. For Turkey not to respond to this challenge would be to lose its way at home and set itself adrift internationally—a message which the press and broadcast media itself declaims. Like the politicians they criticize, these press institutions are slow to acknowledge that their own standards of integrity and commitment to independence must change if reform is to become a reality.

I make no secret of my belief that the press in Turkey often fails the tests it sets for others and that this failure is heavily subsidized by the society it purports to serve. My observations are unashamedly those of a participant-observer—both as a foreign correspondent in Turkey for over a decade and as someone who has worked inside the newsroom of a large Turkish-language daily. Later, for over two years, I had a bi-weekly column in one of the country's largest papers—an experience which involved undergoing a rite of passage still all too common among my Turkish colleagues. As a result of my article, I found myself on trial for defaming an institution of the state (in this case the military)—an offense that carried a potential sentence of six years. My career in the Turkish media came to an abrupt halt after another article, this time about Abdullah Öcalan's November 1998 flight to Rome. In this case, I stood back from the unmitigated outrage that was expected from commentators at the time.¹ This, along with my coverage in international media about the Öcalan affair, prompted a series of attacks against myself in a rival newspaper, including defamatory accusations against my wife.²

¹ See Andrew Finkel, "Bariş Kazanmak," *Sabah*, 16 November 1998. In it, I interpreted Öcalan's flight to Europe as a sign of the PKK's weakness rather than—as was the popular reaction at the time—evidence that he enjoyed Western support. With the PKK a far less tangible military threat, I wrote, the challenge for Turkey was to repair the damage to democratic institutions which had resulted from the long years of fighting. I was dismissed the same day. Within a week, *Sabah's* principal rival, *Hürriyet*, was attacking my coverage on CNN of the Öcalan affair.

² My wife, an Ottoman historian, was accused of having been caught stealing documents from state archives. See Fatih Altaylı, "Bir de Bayan Finkel Var," *Hürriyet*, 28 November 1998 or Andrew Finkel, "Caught in the Muck of Turkey's Media Reform," *Washington Post*, 12 March 2000.

These experiences led me to take a somewhat different view from NGOs concerned with freedom of press issues and other human rights bodies, many of whom rallied to my defense. Organizations like the Committee to Protect Journalists and *Journalistes sans Frontières* illuminate the very real difficulties Turkish journalists have in doing their job. My court case appeared in these organizations' annual country reports, alongside other far more grievous instances of intimidation against media organizations and their journalists. The overall impression left by those reports is that other self-appointed guardians impede the press in its role as guardian of the public realm. The assumption is that if the press does not speak out more openly, it is because it is confronted by an antediluvian statute book and the deep-seated illiberality of the Turkish establishment.

At the end of my ordeal, I came to the conclusion that newspapers were failing to protect their own professional standards and, as a result, were exposing journalists to unacceptable risks. I was less disenchanted with the legal system, which tried me fairly under a bad law, than with my own newspaper, which did not cover the case at all.³ A civil court awarded my wife damages for the sort of libel that would have made the rounds of a Stalinist broadsheet. Her good name was cleared. Yet, I am not confident that the decision in her case will in any way instill a greater sense of professional responsibility.

Faith in the Turkish courts is not universal and the legal system is much criticized—even by its most senior jurists.⁴ In a series of

³ My case was dropped under the terms of a Postponement Law (Law no. 3354), one of the early measures passed by the Ecevit coalition formed in June 1999. It resulted in numerous cases being suspended indefinitely and 21 people (according to figures supplied by Turkey's Directorate of Press and Information) being released from prison—including one of Turkey's most "hardened" prisoners of conscience—the oft-imprisoned sociologist İsmail Beşikçi.

⁴ Appeals Court Chief Justice Sami Selçuk delivered an impassioned speech marking the start of the 1999 judicial year, in which he criticized the jailing of journalists and other restrictions on freedom of expression. "I must issue a stark warning," Selçuk said, "Turkey cannot enter a new century with a constitution whose legitimacy is almost zero, and it must not." See *Attacks on the Press in 1999: Annual Report of the Committee to Protect Journalists* (CPJ) at http://www.cpj.org/attacks99/framezet_att99/framezet_att99.html (March 1999). In April of the same year Judge Ahmet Necdet Sezer, president of the Constitutional Court and Turkey's most senior judge, was equally outspoken in urging that the legal code be made to conform to universal standards. This remark alone was enough to sky-rocket him into prominence and then into the post of Turkish president—an office elected by the Turkish Grand National Assembly.

publicized trials involving torture, organized crime and gross corruption,⁵ justice was often perceived as not being done. Public prosecutors appeared to act from a sense of divine right to protect the ideological purity of the state. It is highly questionable whether such institutions have the ability to carry out the sort of Italian "clean hands" operation necessary to raise the ethical standards of public life.

But, my concern here is with the court of public opinion. For this to function badly—and confuse its priorities—is every bit as demoralizing as a breakdown of the legal system. The common colloquialism "this is Turkey" ("burası Türkiye") used to explain the failure of basic standards is the cry of a society in which priorities are too complex to unravel and private interests too deeply entrenched.

PARADOXES IN THE TURKISH MEDIA

The media in Turkey embody a number of paradoxes. It is both the victim of rights abuse, the clarion of reform and, yet, an industry that understands well the methods of a lax business environment. Historically, Turkish newspapers looked for their profits not just from ad revenues or the cover price, but to the covert resale of heavily subsidized newsprint from the state paper factory—a practice in which governments until the late 1980s colluded.⁶ As the years progressed, press owners became experts at acquiring cheap state land, indemnities on imported machinery and inexpensive credit from state banks. As guardians of the public realm, the press has acquired a "crooked cop" instinct of when to

⁵ The US State Department's 1999 Human Rights Country Report for Turkey lists the following high profile cases which either lingered without resolution or resulted in punishment that seemed short of fitting the crime, including the case and appeal of police officers charged with the clubbing to death in 1996 of journalist Metin Göktepe, the trial of 10 police officers from Manisa charged with torturing 16 teenagers in 1995 and action against police and security personnel charged with beating to death 10 prisoners during a prison disturbance in Diyarbakir in 1996 at http://www.state.gov/www/global/human_rights/1999_hrp_report/turkey.html. There has also been a dearth of convictions in the Susurluk Scandal (see below)—a conspiracy implicating politicians, police and organized crime. Another on-going case is that of Cavit Çağlar, a businessman and political crony of President Süleyman Demirel, who is suspected of embezzling US\$ 2 billion from his own bank.

⁶ It was explained to me in my first month working on a Turkish paper in 1989 that the reason the other papers in the group had declared open war on Turgut Özal was not simply because they did not like his policies, but because his government had removed the state subsidy on newsprint.

behave and when to bend the rules.

Of course, the notion of a perfect public realm in which claims to truth resound with equal clarity is just a notion. Like anthropologists, journalists understand the practical limits of moral indignation. Societies tolerate—even thrive on—moral ambiguities. The gap between formal legitimation and actual practice—public ethics and private rationale—is an accepted starting point not just for investigative reporting but for much social scientific enquiry.

I accept the social scientific distinction between patronage politics and interest politics, between the political machine and political associations. In the first, corruption is a regrettable fact of life, even a means of shortcutting a leaden bureaucracy.⁷ In the latter, corruption is a demoralizing waste of public resources, a tax on efficiency. The political machine has to deliver services if it is to deliver votes but it is better at distributing scarce resources selectively than generating better administration. There is a certain point when the machine is simply an obstacle and even a political liability. When an EU delegation or World Bank pundit urges Turkey to become more transparent, to cut the public sector or to put its faith in the institutions of civil society, it is urging Turkey to make the switch from vertical to horizontal politics.

The *Gestalt* between vertical and horizontal politics is a complex one. That ambiguity is reflected in the press. For example, one of the first directly elected mayors of Istanbul appeared, sledgehammer in hand, on the cover of various newspapers soon after taking office in 1973. He was leading a brigade of municipal officers to tear down a nightclub constructed illegally by figures associated with organized crime. His expectation was, of course, that this crusade would win him popularity. The more cynical observers might argue that such a display of integrity would strike fear into the hearts of what was then a growing majority of the city's residents who were themselves living in accommodations that had been constructed without attention to planning regulations. Whatever the implications of this incident, the mayor was not chosen as his party's candidate in the next elections. That

⁷ A favorite anecdote relates to a neighbour who tried to better himself by going back to get his middle school diploma. His efforts were frustrated by his inability to pass the compulsory religious studies course—a fairly spiritless course that involves a great deal of memorization. He protested with moral indignation that the teacher refused to accept a bribe to award a passing grade.

honor went to a politician who understood the political machine better. Twenty-five years later, these events took on a very different complexion when it became clear that the high toll in the August 1999 earthquake around the industrialized Marmara Basin occurred precisely because of political complicity in the mass defiance of building regulation.

There is always a gap between political reality and what the state is prepared to admit in public. It is a function of the press to see that this gap is minimal. It is disillusioning for claims of truth to have little resonance, for calls for accountability to go unanswered and for the mechanisms of legitimation simply to rust.⁸ The press supports the paradox of both advertising its own disillusionment with the standards of public life,⁹ while at the same time contributing to that very disenchantment. It exposes corruption in one breath and in the next, under the guise of exposing corruption, will commit grotesque distortions of the truth. For example, the libel against my wife was presented in the indignant style of a journalistic exposé. The same writer in the same column on the same day accused another prominent journalist of having fabricated an interview with Armenian terrorists—even going to the lengths of staging a photograph of some ordinary people wearing hoods. Curiously enough, the accusation—although dated—may well have contained an element of truth. In the end, the Turkish press helps create, even if inadvertently, what commentators in other contexts refer to as a “climate of impunity”—where anything goes and where human rights violations still occur and the plunder of public resources goes unpunished.¹⁰

That impunity, which has led to a general disillusionment with the political process in Turkey, is evinced by the last two general election results in 1995 and 1999, in which any number of political parties strained to get over 20 percent of the popular vote. Those

⁸ I tried to develop this point in the introductory paper in Andrew Finkel and Nüket Sirman, eds., *Turkish State, Turkish Society* (Routledge, London, 1990) p. 4.

⁹ A perfect example is the relaunch in March 1999 of *Milliyet*. The billboards showed what the advertising companies conceive of as a model banner headline—the paper uncovering (a hypothetical) public scandal involving bribery.

¹⁰ The expression appears in the US State Department's 1999 Human Rights Country Report for Turkey at http://www.state.gov/www/global/human_rights/1999_hrp_report/turkey.html. They write: “The rarity of convictions and the light sentences imposed on police and other security officials for killings and torture continued to foster a climate of impunity that remained the single largest obstacle to reducing torture and prisoner abuse.”

parties which presented themselves as "modern," or actively pro-European, were seen as insincere in their commitment to the new horizontal, non-clientelistic politics. I agree with the general perception that gradual collapse of the political center, the search for alternatives—whether in ultra-nationalism or Islamic movements—reflects popular frustration with the standards of public life. This is intimately related to a deterioration in the credibility of the mainstream national press.

A persuasive example of this is the 1995 general election, when the two largest media groups—and their flagships, *Hürriyet* and *Sabah*—fought a circulation battle through the proxy of the two main conservative parties, the Motherland Party and the True Path Party respectively. The popular assumption was that each group would benefit should the political horse they backed win. The election resulted in a decline in the newspapers' prestige and the parties' political fortunes. The Motherland Party came second, the True Path Party third with a similar share of the vote (just over 19 per cent) and the pro-Islamic Welfare Party ranked first (21.3 percent)—results that helped usher in a four year period of parliamentary instability.

The dangers of being too closely associated with specific political outcomes was one which newspaper executives privately acknowledged at the time. Yet my subsequent experiences led me to question whether the press really grasped that the ultimate source of its authority was in reflecting the truth (with all the imperfections of the profession) rather than using its power to create a "reality" of which it approved. This point was driven home during the 1999 general election when a television channel (for which I was working as a consultant) deliberately refused to broadcast for many hours on election night what proved to be the correct forecast of the final result. Even though the democratic ballot had been cast, the proprietor of the station refused to accept an outcome different from the one which he desired—until about two in the morning when further denial became ludicrous. The mood on the newsroom floor, among people reporting a result which they knew to be inaccurate, was one of despondency.

This is not to say that the Turkish public is denied information about a variety of serious issues. In an age of the internet and satellite dishes, it is impossible to exclude information or opinions even on sensitive subjects. There are clearly many good journalists, incisive commentators and brave cameramen in

Turkey. Many would not recognize what they do for a living from my description here. Perhaps the great status awarded newspaper columnists as opposed to reporters in the Turkish press is that the former have to defend a name and reputation. They are rarely subjected to editing whereas reporters are. Many columnists defend their independence and others, more regrettably, the reputation of their principal sources. The result is that opinion acquires a disproportionately higher status than reporting. Any Turkish journalist who has not, after a certain age, become a columnist has failed.

I acknowledge that my argument over the failures of the media in Turkey takes for granted its many accomplishments.¹¹ Private television coverage of public demonstrations, for example, has been successful in putting pressure (not always heeded) on the police to abandon violent methods of crowd control. Despite the critical tone of my remarks, I am still emboldened by the complaints of my Turkish colleagues about the environment in which they operate. There is what I would call a mismatch between press coverage, political performance and popular expectations of reform. The press is powerful in shaping people's image of society, yet weak in promoting its view that Turkey is a society that must change. It is otherwise difficult to explain an obstinacy in Turkey to persist in, for example, human rights violations which serve little purpose other than to embarrass the country abroad.¹²

MEDIA MONOLITHS: CORRUPTION AND FINANCIAL INFLUENCE

Without question the greatest danger facing the Turkish media is pressure based on the financial interests of its proprietors. While no newspaper can afford to be totally discredited, some run

¹¹ See CPJ Report (see footnote 4): "For years, Turkey has had one of the liveliest yet most restricted presses in the region. This paradox was again on display in 1999. Print and broadcast media continued to cover sensitive social and political topics and were often unbridled in their criticism of the government—notably during the authorities' sloppy rescue efforts following the devastating August earthquake in northwestern Turkey."

¹² Western diplomatic observers divide the problem in two: first, that of police acting illegally in the detention and interrogation of suspects and, secondly, repressive legislation. Blatant illegality has come under public pressure to be resolved and in some cases is no different from the conduct of the New York or Los Angeles police force. The reluctance to change laws is supported by a perception that the country inhabits a dangerous neighborhood rather than a post-Cold War universe where ideology is irrelevant. The threats come from radical Islam and Kurdish nationalism. This leads to pressure to maintain a formal and visibly constructed barrier around the public realm.

unacceptable risks by bartering political support for financial advantage. Industrialists and financiers are attracted to newspaper and television ownership not just as businesses in their own right, but as "loss leaders" for their other commercial activities. Dedicated media owners see the advantage of moving into non-media fields. They are prepared to peddle influence in return for credits, incentives and other advantages. Partnerships combining industrial groups with media organizations have been prominent in tenders during Turkey's long-running attempt to privatize state assets. The implication, certainly in the mid-1990s, was that these partnerships succeeded not by what they put on the table but by promising to back the party in power. Senior media executives confess, albeit in private, that they have sacrificed their independence.

Turkey now has many aspiring press barons, motivated by the commercial and political muscle which media ownership affords. The most graphic example of this is the scandal which helped topple the Yılmaz government in 1998. A large construction magnate, Korkmaz Yiğit, who won the state tender in the nationalization of the state-owned Turkish Trade Bank, bought his way into two national newspapers and two television stations. He was subsequently arrested on charges of having links to organized crime, or at least of having paid protection to crime syndicates, to enable him to compete successfully for the Turkish Trade Bank tender. His defense was that his ambitions had been encouraged by government ministers, themselves anxious to have a new media owner on their side. The perception is not that he was the worst offender, but was "grassed on" by rival media patrons.

Financial rewards go to the bold. The termination of the state's monopoly on private television was not the result of new legislation but legal defiance. The key figure, however, happened to be the prime minister's son, Ahmet Özal. Star Television, which was eventually wrested away from the Özal family in a series of boardroom maneuvers, became a model of how the media could be used to gain advantage in non-media sectors.¹³ The conduct of

¹³ A good example was the concerted attacks by the station during 1995 on the head of the Capital Market's Board (CMB) who was trying to protect minority share holders in Cukorava Elektrik, the electrical generating and distribution company in the Mediterranean city of Adana. The CMB had taken issue with the holding company that owned both Star and the power company, accusing it of stripping the assets of the company by depositing revenues in İmar Bank—also owned by the group—at no interest. This cash allowed the group to bid for more privatization tenders—a cycle which would keep it sympathetic to the government.

that station and of some of its rivals quickly disabused anyone of the idea that private television could be self-regulated through an industry-based authority. The result was that when private television was legalized, it became answerable to the High Council for Radio and Television (RTÜK), which was given wide powers to monitor content and privacy concerns. A current generation of media owners test the limits of the RTÜK law, which prevents them from owning more than 20 percent of a television station if they own newspapers as well. The courts have not been entirely passive. The Administrative High Court overturned the awarding of a public tender for energy concession to a media groups, against the provisions of RTÜK.¹⁴

Some press owners cultivate restrictive practices in their own sector as well. Even the sales distribution network—organized as a near monopoly—is restrictive. An Istanbul brokerage house, in an advisory, urged investors to accumulate shares in *Hürriyet* and its parent Doğan Yayın Holding for the following reason:

The high cost of establishing an effective distribution network avails limited opportunities for new entrants without the prior consent of the two media giants. The news daily *Akşam*'s failure to penetrate the market is a good example.¹⁵

The result is that the two main media groups control about 70 percent of the market which the same report describes as saturated. These same print groups are linked to television and radio stations and stand as monoliths in the media sector.

The press's wavering integrity in the presence of financial inducement is illustrated by the following example. In a well-documented case, an editor-in-chief was revealed to have made contacts with a state minister to help secure industrial incentives for a packaging factory for the parent company that owned his

¹⁴ The one newspaper to protest against attempts to repeal restrictions on media-related companies participating in tenders for state concessions, the English language *Turkish Daily News*, sold a 50 percent share in its ownership to the Doğan Media Group, the subject of its criticism.

¹⁵ Doğan Yayın Holding—a report prepared by the research department of Demir Yatırım, Istanbul (29 June 1999) p.8. According to the report, there are two major distribution networks in the print media section. The Doğan Group owns Yay-Sat (which controls 60 percent of the market) and Medya Group whose BBD controls 30 percent. The two groups jointly own a third distribution company called JV which has the remaining share. These three companies control almost the entire distribution business with over 20,000 selling points throughout Turkey.

newspaper. He first claimed that the evidence against him was the result of an illegal wire tap, despite the fact that his own newspaper had itself recently tried to expose misdeeds through phone taps. The issue of how far a newspaper can invade privacy or circumvent the law is a much-debated issue in many countries. In most cases, it is newspapers which argue that the public's right to know takes precedence over the interests of privacy.

The editor's second argument was even more outrageous and is worth quoting at length:

I admit the conversations were mine. I said nothing to give offence or to cause me to feel ashamed. As well as being the editor-in-chief of *Hürriyet*, I am a president of the executive board. At the same time I am one of two of the most senior executive directors of the Doğan Publications Holding Company. Therefore as a director I have an obligation to pursue the business affairs of the group. We are planning to invest in a US\$130 million packaging factory... At a time when Turkey is going through an unemployment crisis, we will be creating nearly 1,000 jobs.¹⁶

The notion that an editor-in-chief can pursue both editorial independence and the financial interests of his employers is, to say the least, inconsistent with the basic ethical requirements of the profession. It recalls, in its audacity, the famous admission by Süleyman Demirel during his last term as prime minister who, when confronted with the accusation that his government indulged in an act of political favoritism with state land, responded "verdimse ben verdim" (I did it, so what).¹⁷

The admission of guilt did not end Demirel's career. Indeed, he went on to become president and his statement continues to have an extraordinary resonance. It was a deliberate removal of the mask to reveal, behind the superficial world of democratic procedure, a world of clientism, pay-backs and power politics. It was a confirmation of the popular assumption that political expediency rivals the rule of law.

Similarly, the editor-in-chief's admission that financial interests take precedence over safeguarding editorial integrity did not lead

¹⁶ Ertuğrul Özkök, "Editor-in-Chief's Column," *Hürriyet*, 18 December 1998.

¹⁷ The other great charter for corruption was Turgut Özal's remark as prime minister, "My civil servants know how to look after themselves," i.e. that they were perfectly capable of supplementing an inadequate wage under the table. Cited in Nicole and Hugh Pope, *Turkey Unveiled, Atatürk and After* (London: John Murray, 1997) pp 172-73.

to his resignation. More remarkable is that his paper's rivals did not focus on the moral bankruptcy of their competitor. Certainly for the mainstream press to start accusing each other of ethical misconduct would be to open a large can of worms. The story did not even appear in much of the fringe independent press the next day. To the best of my knowledge it was only covered in detail by *Akit*, one of the most radical of the Islamic press.¹⁸

CORRUPTION AND POLITICAL INFLUENCE

In a curious way, the notion that newspapers barter their political influence for financial gain has a dog-bites-man lack of newsworthiness in Turkey. This is despite the fact that like newspapers everywhere, Turkish newspapers formally abide by "press principles"—a moral contract between publisher and reader. The Doğan Media Group, publishers of *Hürriyet*, whose editor-in-chief was the offender in the case described above, has an internal Publications Council, set up specifically to enforce 20 principles of ethical journalism.¹⁹ The committee was created when the group embarked upon a partnership with CNN to broadcast a Turkish language version of the "global network." It appears that the Council serves as an answer to the criticism that it might "debrand" CNN by the quality of its output.

The gravitas of that Council is treated with some mirth by Turkey's own journalistic community.²⁰ Press owners set standards

¹⁸ *Akit*, 18 December 1998, p. 10. In the transcript, the editor-in-chief of *Hürriyet* jocularly chides the minister of state for the economy, Güneş Taner, for sitting on a proposal to match US\$130 million worth of investment with a US\$50 million incentive-like subsidy. "It was at least \$50 million," the editor says. The minister responds immediately by phoning on a second line to the responsible civil servant. Perhaps the most telling aspect of the whole eavesdropped conversation is that the civil servant knows immediately about the factory but confuses the owner with another press baron. "No," the minister corrects him, "it's not Korkmaz Yiğit—it's Aydın Doğan." The same issue of the paper gives the transcript of another tapped conversation, this time between a judge of the Supreme Court (Yargıtay) and a senior executive officer of the Doğan Media Group. The judge is extremely deferential, apologizing profusely for the off-hand way a secretary treated the executive's previous call. "Don't think I've forgotten to chase up your business to do with the energy [tenders]... We have an appointment with the private secretary Monday morning if that's convenient." Yet another records a conversation with a government official asking a newspaper executive to have its newspapers drop their coverage of environmental protests over a proposed coal-fired power plant in the minister of energy's constituency [my translations].

¹⁹ Reported with solemn ceremony in the group's publications. See *Radikal*, 1 December 1999, p. 1.

²⁰ A straw poll on a Turkish journalists website at <http://www.dorduncukuvvetmedya.com> revealed that only four percent of those sampled took the body seriously.

that their employees know they have no intention of meeting. I set out to test this hypothesis after winning a libel action against *Hürriyet* newspaper. In the spirit of a demarche to the Council, my wife issued a press statement pointing out that one of the Group's newspapers had violated at least four of its 20 golden rules. How could it, she asked, expect its readers to take seriously a potential accusation that a politician was deliberately lying when it, too, harbored the authors of malicious untruths? *Hürriyet's* reply was curt and mildly offensive.²¹

It was not a surprise. Like all readers of Turkish newspapers I did not believe the Doğan Media Group Publications Council would abide by its ethical commitments. I too have acquired the skill of reading a Turkish paper—reading between the lines, understanding the bias and discounting the arrogance that power brings. This applies across the entire spectrum of the media. The market has little sanction against a dishonest press, not only because there is no alternative, but because there is no expectation of an alternative.

The press's guilty conscience makes it particularly vulnerable to outside pressure. Most international concern about the Turkish press is focused on post-factum censorship—the prosecution of mainly radical Kurdish or Islamic journalists and the temporary closure orders issued by the broadcasting authority, RTÜK.²² While these publications have no financial incentive to speak falsely, the mainstream press understands the boundaries in which it operates and censors itself. The perimeters beyond which publications and broadcast media dare not stray are often loosely defined and contract or expand. During my public musings on Abdullah Öcalan, my mistake was one of timing. Similar opinions appeared in the Turkish press at less sensitive times.

While I believe—but cannot prove—that I was fired by someone outside the newspaper, the Turkish press, in general, responds not to explicit instructions from authority, but to a game of “Whispering Down the Lane.” That is, a few words in Ankara

²¹ A detailed account of this exchange appears in an article for the Turkish journalists association newspaper. See Andrew Finkel, “Istanbul Sendromu,” *Bizim Gazete*, Istanbul, 29 February 2000.

²² The CPJ calculates that RTÜK has forced stations to suspend broadcasting for a total of 5,642 days since its founding in 1994 “for such alleged offenses as violating morals, depicting violence, invading privacy, “separatist propaganda” or “reactionism” (i.e., pro-Islamist political discourse).”

become the order of the day by the time they reach the sub-editor's desk in Istanbul. And though the Turkish military is often accused of influencing the press directly, I suspect the number of occasions on which they have to do so is limited, given the number of editors prepared to imagine what the military might be thinking. It is worth recollecting that the Ottoman Turkish word “jurnalci” doesn't mean journalist, but was used to refer to police informers in the late-19th century reign of Sultan Abdulhamid II. That half-truths and disinformation can be enlisted in the interest of the state is a notion that dies hard.

Yet, the press has demonstrated that it can, if it wishes, hold its own on issues of press freedom. When a government minister requested RTÜK to close a channel critical of the government's handling of the August 1999 earthquake relief, the case languished after the media howled. For all its potential might, however, the press is generally reticent in defending its own freedoms—let alone the freedoms of those in fringe ideological camps.²³ It was even slow to defend Oral Çalişlar, a much respected writer for *Cumhuriyet* newspaper, who was sentenced to 13 months in jail for publishing contrasting interviews with Abdullah Öcalan and Kemal Burkay, head of the non-violent Kurdistan Socialist Party, in 1993. It was not a big story in the Turkish press.²⁴

The press fails to push forward the boundaries of freedom of expression. Clearly to do so more unequivocally would be to expose itself to direct pressure. Yet, one suspects the press has come to a comfortable *modus vivendi* with that pressure. I recall an evening spent with the former editor-in-chief of a newspaper, speculating which of his colleagues worked for the intelligence

²³ The Turkish Press Council, for example, accepts the government distinction between journalists and those imprisoned for other offenses who say they are journalists—including those on the radical left and Kurdish nationalists. The CPJ says there were 13 journalists in jail at the end of 1999. The Press Council says there was one.

²⁴ A look at ten national newspapers the day after the conviction reveals that three, including Çalişlar's own *Cumhuriyet*, did mention the trial on their front page. *Sabah*, one of the largest-selling papers, did not mention it at all. *Hürriyet*, the other giant, mentioned the verdict in a page deep inside. Other papers had a paragraph here or there. Two pro-Islamic papers did not mention it, despite their passionate defense of their own liberties. A third did so in a sarcastic vein, sniping that the rabidly secular *Cumhuriyet* was convicted for “Kurdish separatism.” In the following days, the news gathered some momentum as columnists weighed in to defend a friend—a point I make in Andrew Finkel, “Turkey's Press Freedom Record: There's Plenty of Blame to Go Around” on the CPJ website at <http://www.cpj.org> (June 1999). The case was happily dropped under the same amnesty from which I benefitted (see footnote 3 above).

service.²⁵ After my dismissal I learned from Turkish friends writing for other papers that they were indeed being forced, during the Öcalan crisis of late 1998 and early 1999, to be far more circumspect than usual. As the result of a state directive, the PKK leader was no longer to be referred to as "Apo," his press sobriquet of many years, but rather, at the request of the military, by the somewhat comical-sounding incantation, "the separatist chief" or "chief terrorist." Meanwhile the "Kurdish question" became "the so-called Kurdish question." Sub-editors were requested to go over copy more than once in order to weed out anything that might be construed as sympathetic to the PKK. According to one of my informants who had volunteered to correct a few grammatical errors, some papers urged their readers to fax protests—the text of which was dictated by the minister of foreign affairs—to the Italian government.

It is difficult to underestimate the damage wrought by the Kurdish issue on Turkey's democratic sensibilities—and at a crucial historical moment after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The authorities, fighting for what they saw as the integrity of the nation, accused Turkey's allies of hypocrisy and bad faith. They, in turn, through human rights reports and parliamentary commissions, accused Turkey of neglecting those very values on which the alliance was based. It is hard to imagine a newspaper systematically questioning the way the military conducts its affairs or even the size of the defense budget. Broadcasting in Kurdish is *de facto* illegal. Publications which espouse, however cryptically, a Kurdish nationalist line, come under enormous pressure. In 1994, the offices of a pro-Kurdish paper were blown up, mysteriously and the offices of its successor were subject to a police raid in November 1998.

That the war in southeast Turkey, estimated to cost US\$10 billion per year, was corrupting in the most literal sense, became explicit after what became known as the Susurluk Affair. A freakish car accident in November 1996 established a link between the passengers, figures inside the government, the police and organized

²⁵ At the time that this article went to press, a former agent of national intelligence publicized via a foreign registered web site at <http://www.sim.org> accusations that there were 20 prominent journalists working for intelligence—one of them being Fatih Altaylı, the man whose libel against my wife she pursued in the courts. These accusations were denied by the head of intelligence, but not to the best of my knowledge by those accused. They are, of course, part of a web of information and disinformation and are not easily proven.

crime. It was widely reported in the press that squads set up to pursue a "dirty war" against the PKK had subsequently become involved in drug running, loan-sharking, debt collection and various other forms of extortion.²⁶

The incident led to popular protest—a call for an Italian-style "clean hands" campaign—in which ordinary people blinked their house lights for a minute at 9:00 PM. The protest had no specific target. Susurluk became synonymous with all-purpose political corruption and not simply as a criticism of the counter insurgency against the PKK. This was also true of revelations in 1999 of a homegrown Turkish Hizbullah, which graduated from being a force encouraged to fight the godless PKK to a religious-based and extremely brutal extortion racket. It was tarred in the mainstream press as the logical consequence of religious extremism rather than resorting to the worst sort of expediency to contain the PKK.

Curiously enough, Susurluk coincided with the establishment of the Islamist Welfare Party-led government, a party totally untouched by the scandal. Necmettin Erbakan, the Welfare Party prime minister, was extremely dismissive of the popular protest movement, which he could have turned to his own political advantage. By the end of February 1997, his government was confronting difficulties of a different sort. The entire press agenda of the country was transformed by the opposition of the military to the Welfare Party coalition. The military proved itself adept at using the press to put pressure on the coalition which eventually was forced to resign. Newspapers were given a list of columnists whose loyalties were considered questionable to assist in the project of removing Welfare from power.

The media's credibility was inevitably tarnished by the polarization within Turkish society as reflected in highly polemic headlines. A story appearing in the so-called Islamic press carried little credibility in the secular press. In turn, the Islamic press regards what it refers to as the "monopolistic media" as having no credibility on a number of issues. In short, the checks and balances one would expect across the media spectrum do not come into play. To contradict one's own side is to risk being placed in

²⁶ The recently launched *Radikal* newspaper—which attempted to appeal to a younger, better educated audience—made the story its own.

the enemy's camp.²⁷

The Islamic press was the only one to report the details of my own legal battles or the libel case against my wife. The important exception to this was an op-ed page in *Milliyet* called "Intellectual Point of View" which on two occasions carried interviews with my wife, whose work on historical seismicity had become an important reference book in the aftermath of the tragic Izmit 1999 earthquake. We were certainly aware that the page editors were sticking their necks out in their persistence on reporting her views.

Even so, readers of the mainstream press question the defense of civil liberties in the Islamic press as a temporary expedient of those in search of power. They may even prefer the predictable venality of their own daily paper to the blinkered ideological commitment of another, more independent paper. Credibility does not operate like a see-saw: if one side goes down, the other does not necessarily go up. Indeed all sides may be devalued by the polemic.

CORRUPTING JOURNALISTIC STANDARDS

Another danger confronting the press in Turkey is the constant violation of professional standards. There is an apparent lack of sanctions against reporters and columnists who indulge in sloppy practices or outright libel. The columnist who was proven in court to have lied deliberately about my wife is still writing for the paper as if nothing happened. The rent-a-pen tradition of the 18th century London coffeehouse is a tradition very much alive. That is, much reporting is simply bad or sensational.

One of my first jobs in the Turkish press was on the newspaper *Güneş*, then owned by Turkish Cypriot businessman Asil Nadir. That paper still enjoys a reputation in the Turkish journalistic fraternity as a brief-lived Camelot where news stories were well-structured—with leads, beginnings and ends—and were made to conform to high standards of verification. It represented an attempt to break the tradition that considered only political news as serious news. For the first time, a Turkish paper

²⁷ The most extreme example of this is Kurdish broadcasting. Illegal in Turkey, it is a project only open to those prepared to oppose the Turkish state. (The British) Independent Broadcasting Authority ordered the closure of MED-TV, a Kurdish station beamed to Turkey by satellite, for its overtly partisan character and incitement to violence. As one station closes, however, another opens.

dedicated desks to environmental stories and human rights. Nevertheless, there were still flaws. Nadir unquestionably acquired his press empire with the encouragement of Turgut Özal to counter the influence of a hostile press. One columnist was fired because he had poked fun at Özal. The greatest flaw of all was that the paper was almost certainly subsidized by money siphoned from a publicly listed British company, of which Mr. Nadir was chairman.

The rest of the press felt threatened by *Güneş* and the other Nadir titles. Nadir's greatest feat was to keep the cover price of his newspapers low and to lure well-known journalists with high salaries. As a result, he was accused of every manner of misdeed, including, somewhat improbably, that he smuggled drugs into Britain concealed inside cabbages.²⁸ In the end it was not the Turkish press that managed to pull down Nadir but the British Serious Fraud Squad, which accused him of theft on a massive scale. Bankrupt, and with his press interests in ruins, Nadir no longer posed a danger to his fellow proprietors. Rather than pursue his downfall, they rushed to his defense, declaring that his arrest was a British and Greek Cypriot plot to create economic uncertainty in the Turkish north of the island and thus force an unacceptable political settlement on the island.

CONCLUSION

Even a politically neutral subject such as the seismicity of the Marmara Sea Basin, within which Istanbul is situated, is subject to distortion. There is scientific consensus only that this region has a seismic potential and that its inhabitants should plan accordingly. This gives the media ample scope for contriving sensational scenarios. Newspapers have reported that city officials would "redraw" a known fault line on a city plan rather than sacrifice lucrative construction projects. The problem is that newspapers are themselves constantly redrawing and redefining the earthquake threat in the interest of selling papers. In a case I have followed closely, a news magazine falsely attributed to one of Turkey's most prominent geologists the view that millions of Istanbul's inhabitants should move away from the city's coastal strip. The danger to public morale and to that scientist's

²⁸ For a description of his press interests, see David Barchard, *Asil Nadir and the Rise and Fall of Polly Peck* (London: Victor Gollanz, 1992) pp. 171-75.

reputation is obvious. This is a typical example of news editors failing to exercise either skill or responsibility.

Part of this failure is attributable to the steeply hierarchical employment structure of the Turkish press. Exaggerated financial rewards go to those at the top, who often stay there by engaging in assiduous self-promotion. A newspaper that declares its radical position on social issues will at the same time indulge in mass dismissals before employees have clocked enough days to qualify for statutory benefits. Working practices lag behind many other white collar industries in Turkey, if only because the criteria of profitability is so skewed, deriving not from the balance sheet of the newspaper but the power and prestige that press-ownership bestows. There is only modest incentive for proprietors to invest in the human resources that will increase credibility.

My criticisms are not absolute. Things do change. The Doğan Group publication, *Milliyet*, has allocated a weekly section to a readers' ombudsman who analyses his own paper's bias and attacks sloppy reporting. It is a reminder that a newspaper's ability to take liberties is very different from freedom of expression. "Ask me if the press is free in Turkey and I would have to say no," a senior writer of a prominent national daily once said to me in conversation. "But," he added, "if you said the press was not free, I would have to deny that as well." That the media is itself implicated in the very corruption and injustices it tries to expose is a sweeping statement subject to many exceptions. My own experiences do not deter me from believing that in many respects Turkey's media does operate with the courage and sensibility of a free press. It is up to the Turkish media itself to come to terms with its "half-freedom" if it is to contribute to reform rather than confirm popular cynicism that change is only a distant possibility. ♣