Turkish and International Journalists Comparing the Media Systems, Journalistic Practices and News Production Processes

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SUMMARY

The article will be mainly based on the comparison of media systems and journalists' professional values and practices. By relying principally on the findings of the in-depth interviews conducted with the Turkish journalists and journalists from different countries working in Turkey, I will analyze journalists' approach to their profession and ask what kind of a professional approach is dominant both in theory and in practice among the journalists and what are the potentials and obstacles for more democratic forms of journalism. The findings show that Western values are the key points for comparison, not only for the journalists from Anglo-Saxon countries but also for Turkish journalists (as can be seen in the discourse of "we are more democratic than Middle Eastern countries, but less democratic compared to Europe"). Turkish journalists and the others differed mostly in the rights and opportunities they have and the different political culture. They share more common points when it comes to professional codes, but they have differences in practice.

Key words: comparative media systems, journalism, Turkish media, Turkish journalism, news production

Introduction

This article will focus on the media system, journalism and news production process in Turkey through an analysis of in-depth interviews conducted with Turkish journalists and journalists from different countries working in Turkey.

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The aim of the article is to analyze journalists' approach to their profession and to ask what kind of professional approach is dominant both in theory and in practice among the journalists and what the potentials and obstacles are for more democratic forms of journalism.

Attempts at professionalization of institutions and ethical codes in Turkey started earlier than many Southern/Mediterrenean countries. For example, *journalism education* started in 1965 in Ankara University with the help of UNESCO. The Press Council, which can be considered as the *formal accountability system,* was established in 1986. However, it is debatable to what extent it works in that regard.

The basis of *ethical standarts and self-regulation* have been laid down in writing, by both the Turkish Journalist's Association and media groups. However these are not internalized nor put into practice, mainly because of the political, economic structuring of the sector (fierce competition, ratings, etc.) rather than their violation by individual "irresponsible" journalists.

The concentration and conglomeration of the media and ratings war not only affected the content, with a tendency to greater sensationalization, but also, since the 1990s, increased the trend against trade unionism. Journalistic *autonomy* is limited in Turkey. Due to the lack of unionization of journalism and harsh working conditions, they are powerless and alone. The newspaper bosses employing journalists who were union members threatened them with dismissal; in consequence, to keep their jobs, the journalists had to leave the union and there is no job safety and protection. Different from the historical tradition of political journalism and editorial autonomy, there is now an increased identification between managerial staff at the top levels and the owners. As a result of "unwritten rules", self-censorship is an issue for journalists (Gencel Bek, 2004).

Is journalism universal or national?

The growing literature on journalism approaches the profession from different aspects, such as profession, genre, industry, institution, ideology, skills or culture. Schudson (2000) divides these studies into three groups, roughly, as political economy of news, social organization of the news, and cultural approaches, and, by underlining the weakness of each approach, warns us not to underestimate the analysis of historical dimensions. This study follows this path and tries to understand journalism specifically, and the media system in a broader sense, by considering the meanings attributed by journalists from different countries and focusing on the journalistic culture in Zelizer's (2005) terms. That being the case, this study does

not underestimate the effect of political and economic dynamics. In fact, as will be seen in the words of journalists below, they are critical in many respects but the conditions in which to practice them are quite insufficient. As Hanno Hardt (2000: 210) warns, we should take into account the fall of traditional journalism and the rise of corporate power and control and commercialization almost everywhere in the world.

According to Deuze (2002: 135), comparative journalism research has been developed in the 1990s with several projects. As far as I can see, there are two different answers in the literature to the question in the title above. While the first one argues that journalism has similar codes in different countries, the other stresses the differences. Some research from different countries underline the similarities. The journal *Journalism Studies* devotes space for these kinds of comparative research in many issues in the last decade, such as Herscovitz's (2004) study on Brazil and Hanitzsch's (2005) research on Indonesia.

By relying on the research conducted with 1800 students in 22 countries in *Journalists for the 21st Century* (1994: 181), Splichal and Sparks support the view that there is no strong relation between the attitudes and national identities of journalism students. Therefore, it is argued, dominant political systems and ideology do not seem to cause differences. Instead of national boundaries, what is in question here is the universal ethical and professional standards (p. 181).

David Weaver's (1996) article "Journalists in Comparative Perspective: Backgrounds and Professionalism" evaluates Splichal and Sparks' work from a critical point of view. According to Weaver, the conclusion that has been reached (about journalism having some universal ethical and professional standards) is related to the design of the research in which some questions were not asked. According to Weaver, there are differences in the UK, Germany and the USA in terms of journalistic roles. According to research he conducted with 2000 journalists, there is a consensus on the view that news should be delivered quickly and should express the views of the public. However, there are also different opinions among journalists on some issues such as news containing analysis and being the watchdog of the government. One of the issues dividing journalists is about news that contains entertainment versus purely objective journalism. The reason for the differences between countries on this, according to the author, is the similarities or differences of political systems, as Jian Hua Tzu and others suggested in 1996 in their analysis on the journalists from China, Taiwan and the USA. In fact, as Weaver acknowledges, this is more important than cultural differences (or similarities), organizational constraints and individual characteristics (Weaver, 1996: 85–87), or journalism education and professional norms (Weaver, 1998: 478).

One thing which should not be underestimated in this discussion is that Splichal and Spark's work relies on journalism *students* rather than working journalists. Our study below also reveals that there are many common and similar points among journalists regarding the perception of the profession, but that their journalistic practices differ. Similarly, Deuze (2005) relies on Shoemaker and Reese's study in 1996 in his discussion over the universal and differing applications in different countries and argues that it is possible to talk about a universal professional journalistic ideology, but he also adds that this ideology is used and applied differently by journalists who interpret it differently (Deuze, 2005: 445).

Donsbach (2010: 40–41) lists the three traditions of professionalism: the subjective tradition (pursuing political goals, i.e. opinion-oriented journalism); the public service tradition (supplying objective information, i.e. professional); and commercial tradition (doing whatever is profitable). Donsbach also summarizes research which reveals such differences as between the European and American ways of conducting journalism despite the converging tendencies due to globalization (Donsbach, 2010: 41).

Methodology and research findings

We conducted in-depth interviews with 26 journalists in the summer and autumn of 2010 in Turkey.[1] Journalists were chosen from the diplomacy/foreign affairs section of different media groups on the basis of their expertise and travelling opportunities, making comparison with other countries easier. All of the interviewees are university graduates. The interviews, in general, lasted from 20 to 30 minutes. 16 are women. 17 of them work in Turkish media organizations. Since neither the respondents working for TRT (Turkish Radio TV) nor the foreign/international respondents let us use their names (some did not even wish the name of the organization to be revealed), they remain anonymous. Most Turkish journalists interviewed are aged between 20 and 30 years, whereas international respondents are mostly in their 40s. The oldest participants (one is 51 and the other is 64) are again international participants. This age difference was discussed in interviews, along with length of professional experience – on average 10 to 20 years among international respondents while mainly 3 to 5 years among Turkish respondents.

In the interviews, besides the questions,[2] demographical information was collected such as previous institutions, graduation details, age, and years of experience in the profession.

Comparison Point: "Backward from the West, forward from the East!"

When we posed the question, "How would you compare the media system in Turkey with the other countries?", some asked which countries we meant. In fact, the aim of this question was to learn which countries *they* choose to focus on in their comparison and not to influence them in their selection. Turkish journalists mostly addressed a country and focused on the West as a universal ideal. Interestingly, that was the common point of journalists who work for different newspapers of completely different politics, such as *Cumhuriyet*, which is a Kemalist, nationalist, left-oriented newspaper against the AKP government, and *Zaman* which is an Islam-oriented newspaper supporting the AKP government.

> There are different approaches in the world, but the comparison base should be the western world (M2, *Zaman*).

> The Turkish media system has corrupted with the AKP (implying the Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan) government based on a single man mentality. The only opposition is our newspaper, *Cumhuriyet*. The comparison base is Western Europe whose media can criticize governments and are independent (M6).

The finding that Turkish journalists referred to the USA as well as Europe is interesting because of Turkey's ideal of EU membership. The fact that Turkish journalists mentioned the USA in their reference to the West might be related to the influence of the USA in the universalization of professional codes (Hallin and Mancini, 2004).

The respondents also referred to the East, Middle East, Arabic World, Iraq, Syria, Iran, India and Pakistan as "non-democratic countries" that are different from "developed countries" and are below "international standards". Moreover, the position of Turkey was discussed as backward compared to the Western world, but better and more progressive compared to the countries mentioned above.

The same pattern can be observed among the international journalists. While the first group of journalists mostly from the west raised a more critical voice about the system in Turkey (M14, M20, M15), the second group of journalists from El-Arabiyya and Azerbaijan TV (M17, M19) mentioned more positive aspects, such as NGOs and society being open to the media, the media being independent economically and affecting democracy positively. Even though the first group of journalists was also aware of the similar processes in their countries (such as the relationship between media and government, concentration), they still underlined Turkish TV being full of sensationalism and the *paparazzi* chasing celebrities in addition to the attempts to censor the Internet.

Professional Security and Rights

It is very striking that some Turkish journalists immediately mentioned their economic rights, working conditions and security, when asked the question of "How would you compare the media system in Turkey with the other countries?" Even though we had questions on this matter later in the list, this subject turned out to be an important dimension of comparison from the outset. Later, when we asked about the differences between being a journalist in Turkey and elsewhere, economic and social rights, lack of insurance, lack of security, low salaries, etc. were listed. Since Turkish media professionals are not members of trade unions except in a few organizations, it is not surprising to hear these problems being mentioned as the difference between Turkish journalism and that in other countries. In fact, this situation also partly explains why Turkish journalists are younger than their colleagues from different countries as both foreign and Turkish journalists said that this situation causes younger and less experienced journalists to work as journalists in Turkey while their seniors aim to work either as columnists or in managerial positions.

The fact that the Turkish political agenda is always heavily active was evaluated as something positive by the respondents from different countries. They said that they never had a problem of finding a topic for news in Turkey. This situation meant more workload for Turkish journalists, though: while their foreign colleagues write two to three pieces a day, they write ten items. This, of course, is not just because of the heavy agenda but is more related to the organization of newsrooms and employment of fewer staff.

Differences in News Production

The situation regarding working conditions and employment affects the news production process. Diplomacy/foreign affairs correspondents in Turkey stated that the Turkish media industry does not support expertise and journalists can rush to work to cover other news.

> In Turkey there are not many opportunities to increase expertise. For example, in France, there are special correspondents who focus only on Iran. Here, even if you are a diplomatic reporter, you can travel everywhere in the daily routine (M9, NTV).

As some Turkish journalists stated, this situation causes journalists to conduct less research and make fewer analyses, and it prevents them from mentioning the source of the news in detail (just the expression "diplomatic source" is considered to be

sufficient). The Turkish journalists argued that the outcome of this is that an event cannot be covered in all its dimensions.

It is very rare that they ask what the background information regarding this event is. I have never seen an editor asking why I did not include an Armenian thesis. However, in other countries, when they need the views of experts they consult at least three experts holding different views, whereas it is thought to be enough to talk with two experts here (M4, *Akşam*).

Yet, at this point it should be mentioned that the issue in question here is more comprehensive than working conditions and news production process. Instead, what we see here is the media prioritizing national identity and "national interest". Some Turkish journalists in fact had a wider perspective and they link the situation to the political system. Here, interestingly again, journalists from two completely different newspapers, *Zaman* and *Cumhuriyet,* complained about the same thing, even though the latter limited the issue to the AKP government:

European journalists can freely criticize their governments. In Turkey, if you criticize, you are not allowed to ask a question in press meetings. You cannot get the view of bureaucrats. In the Western world, news sources are diverse and accessible (M6, *Cumhuriyet*).

The journalist from *Zaman* argued that Western journalism is more institutionalized, whereas Turkish journalism is more sensational and tabloid:

Diplomacy in the Western world is more institutional. For example, when I call the American Embassy in Ankara, that person certainly gets back to me in a short time and replies in the name of the American state. In Turkey, for example, if you hear that the Foreign Minister is going to the USA, it is hard to confirm that information. You call the Ministry; they say "it is not certain, yet". You call someone else and he does not explain. In our case, the more secret, the better; it is better if the press does not know things (M2, *Zaman*).

These two interrelated matters, namely the use of sources and difficulties in obtaining the views of institutions were also shared by some international journalists:

The Public relations sector and transparency culture are so weak that it is really hard to find a person who can reply to your questions. In that case, personal connections at the top become more important (M14).

An unknown source is used in Turkey without checking whether it is correct or not. This news is easily disseminated by the other media channels as well (M15).

In the West, public authorities are responsible for replying to you. Besides, a PM can never tell a newspaper management to sack a columnist (M20).

Thus, the differences in working conditions and political culture seem to have an effect on the implementation of professional principles. One journalist replied to our question regarding the application of professional codes as follows:

> It is difficult to apply professional codes when you feel under pressure because of time constraint. Unlike the west, the Turkish press asks things to be done immediately, today and now (M1).

Professional Codes and Practice

Even though almost all Turkish journalists interviewed agree that professional values are universal and Turkish news writing is based on the Western system, they also agree on the fact that these principles are not fully put into practice. One of the journalists gave an example of the violation of ethical principles as follows:

> We were discussing with foreign colleagues in Switzerland around a table on how to cover a rape event. They said they would never mention the age, ethnic identity...etc. of the rapist...However, we write "a rape by the professor" in the headline...We said there, then, how to write the news...Ethical values and universal journalistic codes are similar but they of course change from one country to another (M7, *HaberTürk*).

These words of the journalists remind us of the cultural environment shared by citizens and the professional cultural environment (Schudson, 2000). It should be added that these principles change with the hegemonic struggle, though. In fact, many issues regarding the representation of women, LGBTT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, travesty, transvestite) people, children, ethnic identities do not remain the same but change through the efforts of the NGOs, alternative media, public intellectuals, researchers, etc.

The reply to the question: "Why is that so?" is of course not only the cultural environment as it has been emphasized throughout the article. Some journalists interviewed answered this question by referring to more technical and minor factors such as time pressure. Some journalists underlined that there are other reasons beyond the power of journalists, such as commercial concerns, the ideology and values of the media outlet.

The State was not prominently mentioned in the replies (except in the answers from journalists of *Cumhuriyet* and the Anadolu news agency). Even in their conversation, the issue was self-censorship more than censorship. As the journalist from the semi-official Anadolu News Agency stated:

> But of course, like every institution, AA has some limits...At the end of the day, we cannot publish the news against the interests of the State. We cannot

have a different discourse. We have to look out for the interests of the State in the news. In such a situation, some professional codes and your practices can conflict. But you know and accept it from the beginning and write the news accordingly anyway.

Some international journalists also were aware of that. For example:

I think there is very little respect for professional values in Turkey. But, rather, media work along the lines of capital groups and political groups. Here I know lots of honest journalists trying to do something but unfortunately being obstructed by their bosses (M18).

When the journalists were asked whether their work was subject to intervention because of political reasons and any economic connection of the media company, some talked about the existence of these by giving examples. However, they also added that most of the time there is no need for intervention because of self-control. The journalists know what to publish, and how. Sometimes, even if they insist on making their news, they end up not publishing it at all or publishing it with some modifications.

Critical Views of the Profession?

Even though some journalists stated that they believed the media to be the fourth power (M1, Sabah; M9, NTV; M10, SkyTürk; M21, Hürriyet), they mostly had critical views of this argument of the fourth estate. According to those who oppose the view of the media as the fourt estate, the media is the first power rather than the fourth (M7, Haber Türk; M5, Taraf) because it creates public opinion (M5, Taraf); "…it is not independent of advertisement and capitalism" (M20); "…it works in parallel with some interests" (M25, TRT).

News containing facts rather than comment was presented as an ideal which should be kept but is not put into practice by some journalists. A journalist working in an English media institution (but does not want to give the name of it) (M14) stated:

In every country newspapers have a political angle but it is experienced in a more extreme way in Turkey. It is even debatable whether Turkish media make any division between news and comment.

According to the same journalist, the fact that readers give more credit to comment and commentary rather than news, and that more space is devoted to commentary, decreases the quality of journalism.

The other group of journalists, on the other hand, did not support this liberal principle which separates comment/opinion and the news. They tended to regard the

comments as a positive thing, a complementary part of journalism which is used to provide a background context. A journalist from *Hürriyet* said:

> Even while writing the news, a journalist puts his/ her comment in it. The first sentence is important. Even what you put there reflects your comment, your institution. Even deciding what the news is, is a comment. It is just a myth to say that there is no comment in the news. The selection of words, questions being asked, all are comments (M 21).

> I am against all these, objectivity without comments, etc. When there are people, there is no objectivity anywhere (M6, *Cumhuriyet*).

These ideas were shared by foreign journalists as well:

> Comment means context; saying why this is so is important. Well-written news should contain both (information and comment) (M15).

> I do not want the news to be without comments, because I do not want the news to be that dry (M17).

The principle of objectivity was also questioned by both Turkish and international interviewees:

> …there is not really such a thing as objectivity. We are part of the system; we are produced by the system. News production process is a part of the system. It is not independent of the system. That is why objectivity is impossible. However, if you talk about the minimum ethical requirements, yes, that is important, that is good, and something makes us develop ourselves (M4, Akşam).

International interviewees, similarly, said:

> It is impossible to apply 100 % objectivity and impartiality, but it may be 80 % or 90 % (M18).

> It is hard to be objective and impartial. Even the selection of words is a declaration of a view, leaving aside the unwritten stories. On the other hand, we have to target those principles. Quotations and statistics should be correct. Evidence should be there. The use of language should not be emotional. Ideas and comments should not be presented as facts (M20).

> At a philosophical level, guaranteeing objectivity and impartiality completely is hard. On the other hand, trying to reach those can make journalism better (M14).

These words remind us of Lichtenberg's (2000) famous reply to criticism of objectivity that we cannot understand the world without the possibilities and values of

objectivity. That is not to claim that the press is objective, but it means not to give up the possibility of objectivity.

The critical views on objectivity among journalists were seen mostly in those who work on newspapers with more visible policies and ideologies:

> Objectivity is the biggest lie. But we can be principled and just (M2, *Zaman*).

> Instead of objectivity and impartiality, a journalist should be prone to universal values such as being anti-militarist or anti-sexist (M5, *Taraf*).

> There is a common opinion that Al Jazeera is an enemy of the USA and Israel. There is no hostility in our literature. Yet, we see the bullshit the USA creates wherever we go. We cannot hide them. We revealed the massacres in Iraq war. We were being criticized because of that. How would people know if we did not show these? By watching CNN? (M18)

These discussions remind us of Liesbet Van Zoonen's formulating subjectivity as a necessary element of organizational identity for a better journalism (2008: 84). Stuart Allan (1998) similarly attempts to criticize the descriptions of truth in journalism; instead he suggests a critical work which represents the voice of the resisting ones.

Discussion and conclusion

The Turkish media system resembles in certain aspects (low circulation, high TV-watching, public broadcasting and regulation) the South and Latin American media system, if we follow the indicators that Hallin and Papathanassopoulos list (2002: 176–77). In Europe, what is said about public broadcasting in Greece and Spain and control by the ruling party is also valid for Turkey. In Turkey, as in Greece, unlike in the past when media owners were originally journalists, now we see big media conglomerates that use the media in their power struggle, and are also strong in other sectors. Doğan Tılıç's research on Turkish and Greek journalists revealed that both groups of journalists make a division between "journalism as an ideal" and "journalism in practice" (1998: 93–139). While the first approach refers to the journalists' understanding of their profession as telling the truth independently, the second one defends the interests of a boss or a party. As a difference, it is possible to say that attempts at professionalization through the establishment of the Press Council, ethical codes, etc. in Turkey were made earlier than in Southern European countries. However, it is hard to say that these implementations are efficient enough to reduce the limitations and obstacles caused by the state and neo-liberal market.

Almost every journalist interviewed compared the media system and journalism in Turkey with the West and East in a way which shows the common acceptance of the western codes in Turkey and other countries. Even though there are no big differences between Turkish and international journalists in terms of universal journalistic knowledge, bigger differences were observed in autonomy of practice, ethical codes and news production processes. This study reveals that there are many common and similar points among the journalists regarding the perception of the profession, but their journalistic practices differ.

Difficult working conditions and lack of security in Turkey were mentioned as the first point of comparison by both Turkish and international journalists. It was argued that this situation influences the whole production process and prevents specialization. In addition to all these, the pressures of commercialization, ideology of the organization and political culture prevents the implementation of professional codes.

More critical views and questionings regarding professional codes, such as objectivity and impartiality, were seen especially among the journalists who work in newspapers whose ideological positions and policies are more visible and which are different from mainstream, popular newspapers.

If we use Donsbach's (2010) categories of differing professional traditions summarized above, Turkish journalists being interviewed seem to reject the commercial tradition (even though it is common in the industry) while positioning themselves between public service and subjective traditions.

According to Örnebring, the literature on professionalization includes three categories: knowledge (cognitive oriented, skills, specialization); organization (membership of professional organization); and autonomy (professional standards being determined not externally but within the profession itself; limited external intervention) (Örnebring, 2010: 569). This study showed that, even though there are no great differences between Turkish and other journalists from different countries in relation with the first two aspects, there are big differences in relation with the third, i.e. autonomy, especially compared to the western journalists. Ethical codes are already seen as an indicator of professionalization if we follow Örnebring (2010). In other words, ethical codes are considered as one of the concepts of journalistic ideology, if we use Deuze's (2005) terms. It is very striking that Turkish journalists put themselves in the position of defending ethical values as a resistance to the interventions to increase their autonomy, as it was seen in an earlier research on journalists (Gencel Bek, 2004).

It is important to make the comparison with other journalists with different expertise. Further research also could enlarge the comparison with more journalists from

different countries. However, it is essential to have a conversation with journalists rather than reducing them to some numbers.

NOTES

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   This technique was chosen because talk inhabits more potential to reveal the ideas of people compared to questionnaire asking them to choose one of the determined questions.

2 The questions are as follows:

   1. How would you compare the media system in Turkey with the other countries? What are the reasons of differences or similarities?

   2. What is the division of work in your institution (as chef, manager, editor…etc?). How are these divisions clarified?

   3. Is the media the fourth estate?

   4. Do you believe the importance of professional values? Are they being applied properly?

   5. To what extent do you believe that you are autonomous?

   6. Have you ever experienced a situation of your news being intervened in for political reasons?

   7. Have you ever experienced a situation of your news being intervened in because of the economic links of the media owner?

   8. Could you evalauate your professional financial rights? Do you feel secure?

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