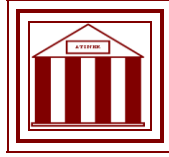


ATINER CONFERENCE PAPER SERIES No: MED2013-0659

Athens Institute for Education and Research

ATINER



ATINER's Conference Paper Series

MED2013-0659

**Moral Politics of Journalism in Turkey:
Making of Scandals and Journalistic
Responsibility in the Age of Media(ted)
Politics**

Oğuzhan Taş

Associate Professor

Ankara University, Faculty of Communication

Turkey

Athens Institute for Education and Research
8 Valaoritou Street, Kolonaki, 10671 Athens, Greece
Tel: + 30 210 3634210 Fax: + 30 210 3634209
Email: info@atiner.gr URL: www.atiner.gr
URL Conference Papers Series: www.atiner.gr/papers.htm

Printed in Athens, Greece by the Athens Institute for Education and Research.
All rights reserved. Reproduction is allowed for non-commercial purposes if the
source is fully acknowledged.

ISSN 2241-2891

31/10/2013

An Introduction to ATINER's Conference Paper Series

ATINER started to publish this conference papers series in 2012. It includes only the papers submitted for publication after they were presented at one of the conferences organized by our Institute every year. The papers published in the series have not been refereed and are published as they were submitted by the author. The series serves two purposes. First, we want to disseminate the information as fast as possible. Second, by doing so, the authors can receive comments useful to revise their papers before they are considered for publication in one of ATINER's books, following our standard procedures of a blind review.

Dr. Gregory T. Papanikos
President
Athens Institute for Education and Research

This paper should be cited as follows:

Taş, O. (2013) "Moral Politics of Journalism in Turkey: Making of Scandals and Journalistic Responsibility in the Age of Media(ted) Politics"
Athens: ATINER'S Conference Paper Series, No: MED2013-0659.

**Moral Politics of Journalism in Turkey:
Making of Scandals and Journalistic Responsibility in the Age
of Media(ted) Politics**

Oğuzhan Taş
Associate Professor
Ankara University
Faculty of Communication
Turkey

Abstract

The prevalence of “sexual-political scandals” in Turkish political life have increasingly become widespread in recent years. In this research, I specifically focus on the media coverage of two distinct examples of this phenomenon which had dramatic effect on the general election in 2011. The study aims at questioning the role of both traditional and new media outlets in making of scandals and also attempts to understand how media professionals justify their concern on politicians’ intimate relations in terms of journalistic responsibility and practical norms. Although the content of all news stories, editorials and commentaries selected from nine leading national newspapers as well as news sites and blogs involved in the making of scandals examined in the research, I portray here only some main findings and remarks. The paper concludes by underlying the argument that journalism ethics should no longer be considered in Turkey as an isolated, intrinsic phenomenon solely concerned with the professional codes and conventions and it has to consider its vital role in sustaining the culture of democracy in an age of media(ted) politics.

Keywords: political scandal, Turkish press, journalistic responsibility, mediatization, new media

Corresponding Author: e-mail: [oguztas@media.ankara.edu.tr], tel: +903123197714, address: Ankara Üniversitesi İletişim Fakültesi

The structural transformation of Turkish media in 1990s which is characterised by commercialisation enabled the public visibility of politicians more fluid and multi-faceted. In an increasingly competitive news environment in which competition meant seeking for more audience, interest in sexual-political scandals became prominent since this type of content offered a personalised and highly moralistic character. The prevalence of “sexual-political scandals” in Turkish political life, along with the several cases of secretly filmed videos and audio recordings, have increasingly become widespread in recent years. In this respect, the political destruction in Turkey triggered by two extraordinary sexual-political scandals in 2010 and 2011 implies ‘a moment of crystallisation’ (Özkazanç, 2011) rather than beginning of new era.

In May 2010, a secretly filmed video showing Deniz Baykal, the leader of the main opposition party CHP (Republican People’s Party), and the MP Mrs. Nesrin Baytok half-naked in a hotel room was uploaded to *metacafe.com* and to an Islamist news site *habervaktim.com*. The video immediately appeared on YouTube and numerous copies and captures were later distributed to various other file sharing platforms, news sites and blogs. The next day, this news-story was everywhere in the media. This was the end of Mr Baykal’s political career.

In April 2011, this time, secretly filmed images and audio recordings revealing extramarital affairs of the two vice-presidents of the second party in opposition, Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), were posted online at *farkliulkuculuk.wordpress.com*, a blog run by an undisclosed group identifying itself as the ‘Different Nationalists’ who urged the party leadership step down. The story was very similar: Images penetrated everywhere in online and traditional news media outlets and the MPs eventually resigned. In May 2011, the obscure group’s new postings appeared on the same blog and they pressured six more senior MPs to resign. At the end of the story, the scandal has thrown the party into disarray and damaged its political credibility in the eye of the public.

In his seminal book on the phenomenon of ‘political scandal’, John B. Thompson (2000) suggests that the political field is increasingly constituted as a mediated field in which the relations between political actors and public are shaped by mediated forms of communication. In this light, scholars such as Manuel Castells (2009) propose the term ‘media politics’ to describe politics that is conducted in and by the flow of communication networks. One of the main conditions to acquire power in the political field is being visible in the media. In contrast, ‘as the networks of communication become more ramified and complex, mediated visibility acquires a more unpredictable, uncontrollable character’ (Thompson, 2000: 108).

Scandal politics is inseparable from media politics (Tumber and Waisbord, 2004a; 2004b). As Thompson (2000: 31) argues, ‘mediated scandals are not simply scandals that are reported by the media and exist independently’: they are constituted by the mediated forms of communication. James Lull and Stephen Hinerman (2005: 3) take a further step and introduce the term ‘media

scandal' to emphasize that 'a scandal is only made public and visible when the media narrativize it.'

As political phenomena, two recent cases chosen for the analysis are distinctive in character; not only with their devastative impact on political area but also with their wide coverage in the new media such as news sites, personal blogs, file sharing and video streaming platforms. In this way, the legal interventions which were employed to prevent the dissemination of images have failed and they became accessible for any potential internet user.¹

The spreading of these so-called 'sex tapes' via Islamist or nationalist news sites and blogs had a dramatic impact on turning them into media(ted) scandals in the pre-election period. In both cases, two crucial research questions that need further investigation are: (1) in which ways journalistic practices operate in the making of political scandals by rendering politicians' private acts visible and questionable, (2) how media professionals justify their practices on scandals by referring to their journalistic responsibilities and moral duties? This study aims at answering these questions by focusing on the mentioned cases.

This paper is designed as a research note in order to display some main findings and to highlight some crucial questions surfaced through the analysis. The time span of the news media coverage selected for the analysis includes the period between 6-16 May 2010 for the case of Republican People's Party and 27 April-26 May 2011 for the case of Nationalist Movement Party. The content of all news stories, editorials and commentaries selected from nine leading national newspapers representing different political leanings namely pro-Islamist, liberal-leftist and Kemalist as well as news sites and blogs involved in the making of scandals are examined in this research.²

Victim but Guilty, A Conspiracy but It's the Truth

On 6th May 2010, two weeks before the 33rd General Assembly of CHP, the hidden camera videos of the leader of main opposition party Deniz Baykal and the MP Nesrin Baytok published on a Islamist newspaper's (*Akit*) web site (*habervaktim.com*) at first and they were also uploaded to the video sharing platform, *metacafe.com* by the same news sources who were related to *Akit*. The title was knowingly sensational: "Deniz Baykal's One Night Stand". *Habervaktim* removed the video after a while, but it had still remained enough to be copied and spreaded into the video sharing platforms, news sites and blogs.

¹The data derived from Turkish Statistical Institute shows that 47,2 per cent of households had access to the Internet in 2012. Accordingly, the potential audience for the videos can be described by some 'millions'.

²The chosen dailies are *Milliyet*, *Cumhuriyet*, *Hürriyet*, *Taraf*, *Yeni Şafak*, *Sabah*, *Zaman*, *Radikal* and *Taraf*.

The next day, editors and commentators of *Habervaktim* defended their practices as follow: ‘This is a chance for a journalist which could be come across once in a lifetime’, ‘this is such a news story that would be jumped at anywhere in the world’, ‘these politicians are paid with our taxes and there would be any better thing rather than revealing their immoral attitudes.’ Thus, they have excellently performed their roles in turning the events into a scandal. According to them news journalism was “an occupation of deciphering rather than of concealing.” Because of that “the immorality of a married party leader who has also grandchildren shall be deciphered.” As you see in the quotes, they attempted to justify their practices in a strange way by mixing professional responsibilities with conservative moralism and opportunism. In this way, they employed a discursive intervention in order to solve moral contradiction in publishing some materials which were stigmatised as ‘immoral’ at the same time.

Delving into the related material in other Islamist dailies (*Yeni Şafak* and *Zaman*) shows that they made call for some ethical sensitivity in the news but they pointed out to the Islamic imperatives and prohibitions for the conceptual base of such an ethics rather than the professional principles. The main concern of these dailies were the common morality that must have protected against obscenity. It was also significant that while making a call for journalistic ethics, they deliberately avoided from questioning *Akit*’s news performance against the case. The most obvious explanation for this state of neglect has to do with their political concerns since these three dailies are on the same political leaning characterised by religious conservatism and by unconditional support for party in power, Justice and Development Party (AKP).

On the other hand, the mainstream newspapers took their constitutive roles in making of scandal yet they did not publish any secretly filmed images. Their involvement were constitutive in a way that they represented their editorial positions as being ‘bounded hand and foot’ as to publish the story since it has an ‘explicit news value’. In other words, images should not be published, but the potential of news value emerging from the ‘reality’ can not be ignored. The right to publish and to comment of news media conceived as an ‘absolute’ right even this could cause a political effect as much as to publish the images. For instance, a commentator from one of the most prominent dailies (*Hürriyet*) suggested that ‘the influence of the scandals on political field had to be accepted “sooner or later”, had to be recognized “unfortunately” at last’. Then in the same paragraph, he recommended to Mr. Baykal to resign from the same conformist and ultra-realistic point of view. He was not alone at calling for resignation. Another commentator from the same daily judged the revelators but he also assumed at the first place that Mr. Baykal’s political life came to an end. According to him, “images should not be published in newspapers, but they have definitely news value.” Both of the commentators share the same contradictory line of argumentation: Mr. Baykal and MP Mrs. Baytok were the victims but they were also guilty; it was a political conspiracy but it was also the truth. However the commentators from different dailies were on the same line at cursing to use hidden camera by calling this ‘dirty trick’, ‘disgrace’,

‘cruelty’, they did not regret to speculate on the moral dimensions of the story. For a commentator from *Sabah* to bring the issue into the public arena was ‘a natural reality’; ‘scratching it’ was the responsibility of the press.

In this vein, Baykal’s decision to resign welcomed with great respect and appreciation. Headlines and comments echoed sounds of ovations towards Mr. Baykal. Thus, the Turkish press reassured that the inevitable political result of such a ‘scandal’ has to be a resignation even it is conceived as a conspiracy. One of the common themes in the news and comments was to consider the story as an act of ‘invasion of privacy’. But paradoxically, after Baykal’s resignation, newspapers turned their eyes to the daily life of Baykal family and reported on some daily activities of family members.¹

Another emerging point in the analysis was about the language of news that is laden with some moralistic functions even without mentioning any private details related to the story. Using the phrase of “sex tape” stood for referring the images lead to generate a pornographic image about Baykal and Baytok even though it is not possible to talk about any concrete material as a video tape or any sexual activity recorded.

A last word about this case must be on the the way of coverage of MP Mrs. Baytok. She was objectified in the news discourse by being degraded to a passive victim or in contrary by being turned into a *femme fatale* character who drags the ‘undefended and innocent men into catastrophe’. According to the some comments on her, some moralistic and sexist arguments emerged as well: ‘Women were the vices of men, their blind side and weakness and the men were always the victims of seductive and dangerous women.’

Private but Shameful, A Blackmail but It’s The News

On 27th May 2011, about a month before the general elections, secretly filmed images of two senior MPs from MHP were posted online first at a blog (*farkliulkuculuk.wordpress.com*) running by a opponent group targeting at party administrators. This was the beginning of a multi-levelled collapse resulted with the dissolution of central organisation of MHP.²

At the time of pre-election period, if MHP could surpass the national barrage of 10% in order to be represented at the the parliament was a controversial issue since it would significantly alter the allocation of chairs in parliament for the benefit of rival parties. Therefore, the political leanings of

¹For instance, *Milliyet* (May 12, 2010) reported that Mrs. Baykal ‘was captured’ while shopping, returning to her home and then hanging out the laundry. Thus, by attributing a news value to some ordinary daily life activities, newspapers disproved “the invasion argument” by their own practices.

²The legal interventions could not managed to remove online videos and images completely. Blog has reappeared over and over again under different names, web addresses or on different service providers. Finally the group moved their activities onto *Twitter*. Anyway, videos have already been disseminated through file sharing platforms.

newspapers became one of the main determinants in which way the story would be covered.

The leading mainstream dailies widely covered the images and secretly recorded dialogues between politicians and their partners by the motives of political interest or competition. On the other hand, a couple of dailies (particulary *Cumhuriyet* which is opponent to AKP and supporter of CHP) decided to give support to MHP with concern of a potential coalition between CHP and MHP after general election. *Cumhuriyet* raised a claim that it was a conspiracy of party in power aiming at excluding National Movement Party from the parliament.

Islamist dailies were explicitly disgraced MHP and took constitutive roles in making of scandal with their sensational and provocative headlines such as “Four Video Tapes Four Chumps”, “Jerk 1, Jerk 2”, “Insult to Islam and Veil for Picking Up a Woman”, “The Real Faces of MPs”. They reflected their same hypocritical attitude towards MHP as we have seen on the first case. This was a private issue but also a shame, was a blackmail but also had a news value. According to Islamist dailies, “the duties of journalists” were to reveal obscenity, dishonour and immorality. This was a discursive strategy employed in order to justify to publish some obscene visual and verbal material in their newspapers. These dailies pursued and reported Different Nationalists’ threats towards MHP on *Twitter* day by day. Thus, Different Nationalist’ online activities limited to social media could have a chance to reach out to a wider newspaper audience. Although the editors of Islamist dailies attempted to justify their news policy on the base of “public’s right to know”, it was in fact a political strategy designed to derive a political advantage for the sake of AKP by damaging MHP’s political credibility. Some commentators from *Yeni Şafak*, the leading supporter of AKP, speculated on voting results prospectively and argued that MHP would not manage to exceed national barrage after the revelations. Their another concern was to protest against who blamed AKP for the revelations.

Concluding Remarks

The analysis of the commentaries concerning with the journalistic practices during both cases revealed that there was a strong attempt to legitimize the journalistic interest on politicians’ private lives by appealing to the notion of “fourth power”. It was argued that investigating and revealing any truth about politicians was one of the most prominent duties of journalism. In this light, the notion of fourth power turned into a strategical tool in order to rationalize to reveal politicians’ intimate relations. In doing so, any secretly collected personal life material could be easily brought into the newsroom for the sake of “public interest.” But in fact, no one cordially asked which private details should be certainly come into the public eye. As Thompson puts (2000: 111) “once it was accepted that the curtains which shrouded the upper regions of power could be drawn back, it would be very difficult to maintain a sharp

distinction between secrets bearing on the exercise of power and secrets concerning the conduct of private life.”

In this vein, it must be emphasized that after 1990s in Turkish media scene, investigative journalism had entwined with tabloidisation and commercialisation and it has produced a *sui generis* ethics which provides it with a stand of point to use every private detail of politicians allegedly for the sake of public’s right to know. Then, this line of argumentation has spreaded into all news media outlets, not so rapid but in a consistent and contagious manner. Competition between news media outlets is a key component of this process. Scandals have been considered as an opportunity in order to create sensational and catchy news stories. Many scandals can readily be moulded into the form of a modern morality tale (Thompson, 2000: 76). Particularly, sexual-political scandals, “with their personalized and highly moralistic character, provide ready-made stories” for those segments of the media “which are orientated towards maximum sales and popular taste” (Thompson, 2000: 239).

As a conclusion, I suggest that moral responsibility of journalism in sexual-political scandals can not solely be reduced to decide to publish/ not to publish obscene images or to mention/not to mention private dialogues. In fact, the dominant ideology of journalism with its obsession with scandalous material already takes its role in making of scandals in which the way it covers the stories. Newspaper editors, journalists and commentators instrumentalise the journalistic norms, ideals and responsibilities such as “public right to know”, “seeking truth” and “supervision of politics” in order to use private life materials for their political or commercial interests. In this light, journalism ethics should no longer be considered in Turkey as an isolated, intrinsic phenomenon solely concerned with the professional codes and conventions in an age of media(ted) politics. The moral arguments underlying editorial decisions, claims and counter-claims embodying abstract notion of “social responsibility” are all crucial for democratic politics in Turkey.

References

- Castells, Manuel (2009). *Communication Power*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Lull, James ve Stephen Hinerman (1997/2005). “The Search for Scandal.” in *Media Scandals: Morality and Desire in the Popular Marketplace*. J. Lull ve S. Hinerman (eds.). Cambridge: Polity. 1–33.
- Özkazanç, Alev (2011). “Seks, Yalanlar ve Kasetler.” *Birikim* 267: 24-33.
- Thompson, John B. (2000). *Political Scandal: Power and Visibility in the Media Age*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Tumber, Howard ve Silvio R. Waisbord (2004a). “Introduction: Political Scandals and Media Across Democracies, Vol. 1.” *American Behavioral Scientist* 47(8): 1031–1039.
- Tumber, Howard ve Silvio R. Waisbord (2004b). “Introduction: Political Scandals and Media Across Democracies, Vol. 2.” *American Behavioral Scientist* 47(9): 1143–1152.