

The Myth of Objectivity in the News and Internet Journalism in Turkey

*Hüseyin ÇELİK**

Abstract

Objectivity in news discussions continue over many years. Many and various rules were formed as a result of studies that were conducted so that the news on papers would reflect to reality and the journalists would be objective. The commercial aspect of journalism and the pressure groups and formations that affect the process of news production lead to the limited opportunities in the terms of achieving objectivity in news. This concept which is on the agenda again with the advent of the Internet has been controversial. This article focuses on the concept of objectivity in news and journalism in the internet as an example of objective structures is investigated. It uses qualitative research design. In Turkey, the most clicked on 14 news sites the sample are taken. The first five of these sites are the extensions of sites of newspapers. These sites continue the objectivity of newspapers. It is seen that there are news from these different internet sources when the news sites are examined. Because these news are spread instantly and very fast to the sites, there is no way of verification. For this reason, the objectivity of the internet news sites is more controversial than the newspapers.

Introduction

In Turkey, the view of the principle of objectivity in news as problematic is not found to be particularly meaningful, as both the dominant nature of news sources and the tendency to produce these discourses direct reporting. All conditions and contexts of the media, the structural

* İstanbul Arel University; huseyincelik@arel.edu.tr

properties of news texts, and their foundational contexts along with their contradictions are debated over examples of texts. Yet, the liberal media principle of objectivity that argues that it is possible to view the news without being under any kind of influence and without deviating into subjective comments is still prevalent albeit under suspect. The principle, even for the most convinced, persists as a faded ideal of both the trustworthiness of the news reporters and their effort to be uninvolved in others' formation of opinion. The main objective is to help the readers be aware of events in the most correct way possible and form their thoughts as independently as possible.

The effort of internalization of objectivity (by the journalist and her institution) for the purpose of objectivity in news is not merely an insufficient effort; it is also an unrealistic policy. The arena where the news practices are formed does not develop independently of the political, social and economic conditions. The role of news production processes in building the text makes the quest for objectivity inextricable. Over the years, the perspective about the way in which the news practices are produced and consumed has, in the main, remained the same, and various objectivity measures are developed in newspapers, visual and audial tools. Because of the characteristics of new arenas for news due to the emergence of new communication technologies, these measures have become even more problematic. Following the news activity in new media; the processes of compiling, publishing and consuming news in these newly emergent channels are opened to debate again in terms of the objectivity of news. In this article, the way in which the structure of traditional journalism that depended from time to time on the allusions of objectivity in news has been transformed with the advent of internet reporting. In this context, pieces of news from internet news sites constitute the sample. For this purpose, a qualitative method is used, and with a critical perspective, the current place of internet reporting in terms of objectivity in news is evaluated.

The concept of objectivity in news

While today with technological advances writing news has become a much cheaper, easier and hassle-free occupation, the principles of

reporting have been, one by one, undermined. Financial and political concerns have replaced, in importance, the ethics of reporting and approaches that take into account the common good and human rights. Indeed, since the advent of journalism, within the passage of time and formation of conditions, a distinctive structure has developed. The professionals strove to be organized in order to solve the bureaucratic structure that had developed over time, and to institutionalize the profession of journalism while avoiding taking it up the internal contradictions in depth. Yet, it is still acknowledged that it is not possible to reflect the societal events as objectively as statistical data or experimental results. This measure rather alludes to the necessity of minimizing the commentary that could be visibly noticed in the text and of refraining from mixing the reporter's personal values with the content of the news¹.

The development of the media as a fourth force has attracted the attention of some classes and groups. The laborers of the media that did not have much value earlier have attained an indispensable place in political life, and politicians, pressure groups and patrons have begun to shape and organize news. In fact, journalism in the beginning was formed as a business occupation². In this way, the news has been viewed as a professional product and, in a sense, has begun to serve capitalism. The commodification of cultural products and their evaluation as such have led to the commercialization of the function of reporting. Thus, the newspaper has been integrated into the business life. The news reporters have been accepted as the laborers of business life like wage laborers. The legal arrangements in journalism are merely codifications to confine it to specific frames. The reason is that the news produced in this context reflects a structure of information within such rules. Free reporting is possible only within these parameters.

Journalism carries unique properties incomparable to any other profession³. Journalists should not be compared to for instance doctors and lawyers who do have formal limitations. The profession of journalism cannot be formulized with a structure of profession developing in a master-apprentice relationship or as a profession that could be defined with rules. The primary target is the reporter's formation of her unique style and free news making. Here, it is important to develop in news life

some measures and practice some methods. When looked at its past, it is seen that the mode of organization in journalism has been realized through professional journalism rules.

Capitalism has spread faster with the advent of Protestant Christianity in Western countries. The Protestant ethics focused on not thriftiness but greed. Because of this, the ethics have gone along with the painful laws of capitalism. For the six days of the week, a good Protestant played all kinds of commercial games that capitalism imposed, and on the seventh, wanted to live like a good Christian. Journalism too has emerged in this process. While the brutal rules of capitalism were ongoing, the need to be a good and virtuous human being was still felt. Until today, in order to situate the act of journalism on an objective plane, the Protestant ethics was taken as a guide and continued its development along with the ruthless rules of capitalism. These rules dictated that the news had to be objective and balanced. Balanced news brought with it the sense of justice⁴. Yet, delivery of this justice was quite difficult. It was unclear how the journalists would remain independent of the material reality (and 'just') in this capitalist production process whereby money attained such functions that would provide all kinds of hegemony. Thus, for the sake of respectability of those in the profession, organizations were formed. The tendency to evaluate the conditions of performing the profession and the processes of news making in a secretly critical way have therefore become dominant. At the same time, the essentials of written press reporting have been offered as the principle of objectivity clichéd in a simplistic manner, the emphasis on the necessity of balance and neutrality, and the commonly accepted persuasion about neutrality. For this reason, the rules of journalism have formed the metaphor of 'journalism purified from value judgments'. However, these rules of journalism formed in such ways have developed - for the sake of saving the written press from political subjectivity- as dependent on the discourses of persons and institutions that provided the sources⁵.

At the beginning of 1900s, the neutrality principle has become indispensable to serious and trustworthy reporting. The respect for this principle derived from its credibility, which was closely related to standardization⁶. The reporter had to prove his reliability. Only in this way,

it was possible for the readers to understand that the news or statement was neutral.

However, the efforts to make journalism dependent upon specific rules lead the journalists to personal accountability about mistakes or prejudices, and undermine the systematic bias in the organization of reporting. Thus, the ethics of reporting which was shaped around the notion of neutrality at the beginning of the last century has emerged within the context of professional organizations and principled documents shaped around a professional ethics dependent upon more specific principles and norms⁷. The recognition of objectivity as a main principle has been possible via various declarations. The declarations published in 1923 and 1926 stated that the neutral news was the main principle of all bases of the profession. Added to this principle later is the notion of truthfulness⁸.

Indeed, reporting has been affected by the social hierarchy from the beginning. This impact is a result of the complex, specific, social reality of the country. In the capitalist world, the style of news making is an activity of reporting that takes into consideration the class differences. Hence, the social and cultural reality affects the news life and consequently the neutrality in the news. The factors affecting the process of publication or withdrawal from publication of the news should be investigated. The news first goes through the filters of the sources and the writer⁹. The second action of control is done by the institution. The workers in the institution and the capitalist structures that the institution operates in influence to an important extent the neutrality of the news. Besides, the capitalist business life and the cultural, social structure make it difficult to ripen the news in a neutral manner.

According to Theodore L. Glasser, what is emphasized in many different approaches to the development of the notion of objectivity in journalism is the fact that the objective presentation is a necessary consequence of mercantile publishing and that it has not developed as a standard of the concept of responsible journalism¹⁰. For this reason, while the press is part of the market as a commercial formation, it has also utilized scientific methods as a guide for itself to grasp and reflect reality. In this manner, the journalists should rid themselves of political subjectivity in accordance with the practices of reaching

the knowledge of reality which was made observable, having been purified from value judgments as required by the notion of positivist science. What is important here is how the journalists read into the social events that they confront. When the social events are taken as a text, these events can be carried out as the interpretation of the written text. Yet, this act of evaluation is possible only by way of choosing amongst the different interpretations.

Objectivity is that, according to Richard Rorty, “which carries the characteristics of a view accepted as a result of a debate undeterred by thoughts unrelated to it” and “which reflects things as they are”¹¹. The news should bear the events that happened in reality without any subjective interpretation. When we evaluate the formation of the news in terms of its publishing, the journalist who receives the news may be held responsible for the correctness or incorrectness of any or all of the “facts” which he has structured and interpreted¹². These facts are read by both “general” and “relevant” news consumers. Meanwhile, news organizations also wish to dispose some dangers. For this reason, if the news reporters collect and structure “facts” in a neutral, non-subjective way, they assume that some mistakes can be compensated for and cases of slander can be avoided¹³.

The news reporters think in this way: The news reporter should investigate the fact going to its source, but some of the facts should simply be accepted as “correct”. Viewing everything to be questioned may not make sense. The reporter may balance nonsense and slander by way of equating objectivity to the “facts” that she or others observe or may prove. To this end there must be good investigation. If this is not possible, then other new strategies should be followed¹⁴.

The division, in the profession of journalism, between reporter and commentator increased the dependency of the journalists on news sources. This problem is closely related to how “comment” is defined. In fact, it is not possible to have a language purified of comment; the reporters can add their comments to the news at any rate. In this way, the journalist forms the message through his language and the multi-dimensionality of different codes while he has to be balanced and to be a reproducer of the discourses of the news sources with a concern for factuality. The discourse of the news can only be

understood when the news is related to the context of its formation¹⁵. For this reason, the journalist should engage with the reflection of that context and evaluate the news in that way.

The fact that the journalists shape the news taking into consideration the society, her newspaper and herself leads to many problems. Hence, a form of publishing purified from all value judgments remains a difficult ideal¹⁶. The journalist may develop new perspectives on reporting by way of accumulating experiences and constantly transforming himself by reaching sufficient levels of knowledge and skills in his profession.

Regardless of the journalist's efforts of objectivity, he cannot make news stripping himself off his ideology and the newspaper's ideology and style. The targeted audience takes as reference the newspaper, news channel and their news that are appropriate to its own discursive and ideological stand. Another factor that influences the objectivity of the journalists is the organic tie between the journalists and the news sources¹⁷. Over time, it is observed that the news source and the journalist begin to acquire the same language as they are in interaction with each other. Thus, the journalist engages with publishing without regarding the news odd, questioning, and verifying them.

The principles of "objectivity", "neutrality", and "balance" on which the concept of liberal journalism and the professional ideologies of the journalists depend are norms that have developed with the commercialization of the press, and depend, largely, on the positivist knowledge theory. The critical news making that internalize critical philology and critical discourse analysis emphasize the questioning of positivist stand and adopt the view of the person as the "subject" that is shaped and transformed on discourses instead of the view that bestows upon the person the capability to analyze social events stripping off personal value judgments. According to this approach, the journalist is not the transmitter of news sources from a neutral stand but is the reproducer of the discourses of these sources. The language of the news transforms the discourses of the news sources—in other words of the political, military, economic, and symbolic elites—into the language of the people and has an important role in

the formation of the consensus with the societal structure and the status quo. This approach views the journalists to be among the symbolic elite, and while questioning the mission that liberal journalism bestows the journalists with, it argues that today's mass communication tools have strayed away from instilling participatory democratic values in the public¹⁸.

It is difficult to regard the press as free today because the freedom of press has been turned into the freedom of other publishers and newspaper patrons not the freedom of the journalists. It is not possible to argue that the journalists are free and independent when they make expensive transfers amongst institutions. Indeed, it has become truly impossible to mention any kind of freedom or independence for journalists who cannot defend their rights due to the eradication of unionization and the system that depend on personal contracts. It is extremely difficult for the journalist to produce objective news under the pressure of patron and publisher, pressure groups, auto control, and self-control. Freedom of press is in this sense only relevant for "star" journalists that transfer with high amounts of money.

The phenomenon of horizontal and vertical monopolization imposed by neoliberalism prevents freedom of press, dissemination of various marginal views, and debates on ethnic, political and cultural problems of the daily agenda. As a result, mass communication tools, which are one-dimensional and have the same contents, transpire. So, the news media forsakes an understanding of public goods with concerns of profit. It justifies a commercialized understanding, with ordinary contents, using the mentality of the market mechanism and stating that 'it is the people who wish so'¹⁹.

In the capitalist system, news has been commodified. In order to make the product sellable, it should be fancied up and its value should be maximized. In this process, the product is made easily sellable with added popular and sensational factors. It is obvious that these processes can affect the news text easily. With such additions to the news text, the news drifts away from reality and gains a new dimension. The news has thus turned into a text with fictitious and subjective characteristics.

It is argued in the critical approaches in journalism that because the

ingredient is the “human” it is not possible for the reporter or the news to be objective. The main objection to objectivity is the view that an objective reality is not possible²⁰. Thus, because the reporting as a profession happens within usual parameters, the news is from the beginning biased. During publishing, it is shaped accordingly with the publishing policy of the newspaper. In this approach, we come across the news as partially a fictitious text. Along with the debates on neutrality in news, the way the consumers receive the news determines whether or not these practices are shaped accordingly. One’s socio-economic status, social environment as well as education also lead to different interpretations of news.

Hall et al who have a critical perspective on the formation of news texts state that these texts are formed within the material conditions of the hegemony and social power. The first of these conditions is that the discourse of the news is made within the daily practices of journalism. These practices from time to time are organized as an occupation to go beyond financial limitations and limitations of space. The second condition is the fact that the discourse of the news has been structured around the journalists’ professional ideologies. The transformation of the press into a commercial business and the horizontal and vertical monopolization that comes in the aftermath form the norms and discourses of journalism. The third condition is the determination of the news discourse within the tangible historical conditions of the production of news texts and the moment of their production. Thus, the hegemonic relationships between political and economic centers of power are echoed in the texts. The fourth condition is the structuring of the news discourse within the economic policy of the media. The concern of profit requires the preparation of the content for more receivers. This situation leads to assimilation while limiting the variety and resulting in the selection of more subjects. For this reason the starting point is not the media texts but the societal structures²¹. The organized political and economic relations in this societal structure play an important role in the production of the news.

When we look at the news as a whole we see that it is formed as part (sentence) and whole (text). The motion between this part and whole makes up the meaning of the text. At the same time, the meaning of the

text is dependent on the meaning of each sentence and each text points to the whole. Hence, when we read the first sentence of the text, it gives us clues about the whole. Gadamer calls this clue as the “realization of the meaning beforehand” shaped by the cultural tradition²². While texts are formed, they are related not in a subjective and arbitrary way but to the beliefs and expectations of the society. These beliefs and expectations lead to the interpretation of news through prejudices shaping our cultural horizons²³.

As much as the relationship between the part and the whole, the relationship of the text with other texts is also important. This relationship emphasizes the importance and distinction of the text in question from others. At this point, grasping the relationship of the text with other texts depends on the journalist’s talent and intuition. The journalist who takes up the news in a broader perspective uses these techniques to reach the reality and objectivity. While making the news, he thinks about whether or not it is part of a whole and knows which events of the past, present or foreseeable future have a possibility of publishing²⁴. In objectivity the news has a referent to the reality; yet, this referent gains meaning in the text. According to Edgar, journalism is not objective, because objectivity requires the unspoiled interpretation of an event in action before its dissemination as news²⁵. It is possible to view the reasons of the deterioration as society, value judgments, cultural conditions, and human psychology.

The notion of objectivity has made it clear that while traditional journalism has not fully consolidated, the emergence of internet journalism as a new arena of information is to be questioned. For this reason, it is necessary to look at how objectivity is formed or not formed on news sites.

Internet journalism and the objectivity of news

It was presumed that new opportunities in news making would arise with the advent of internet. The most important opportunity was the fact that the internet was an alternative to the globalized, centralized, and monopolized media with the freeing of information. Indeed, many news sites have been established. Particularly, major newspapers and

television channels formed their own news sites. However, because the newspapers have continued with their traditional ways on the internet with profit motive in mind, the advertised news format has also been sustained. The expectation of “free information” has gone astray due to the organic ties as each news piece had a sponsor and the news served certain groups or forces. Hence, the ongoing debates on the problems of the process of news production continue on the arena of the internet as “cheap for everyone or for free”.

When the contents of the news sites are viewed, such matters come across: The content of the internet news sites is more like journals rather than newspapers. So, the internet websites of news have more of a style of magazine. The news is given within the context of photos of high resolution and moving text and diagrams. The objectivity of the news is at any rate not that important. The news is given as a summary with an emphasis on the sensational part, and then the sensational part is focused on. Because of the summarized nature of the news, the information is not properly dispensed and the “facts” are re-formed as carefree and lighthearted.

It also attracts attention that the internet news site offers opportunities of multiple environments versus a newspaper page. When we add the fact that these opportunities are related to advertisement/marketing/sales organizations, the new information pattern is viewed as a different arena. Because the time period in which the internet acquires the news and disseminates it is much shorter, it prevents control over and verification of news. The internet news portals that compete with each other wish to publish the news in order to get over in the race; and thus, cause problems in the reliability of the news.

Because the internet news sites offer their texts, music and information within the multiple media environment, they have a large audience. Besides, the costs of production are quite low. In Turkey, during the month of December in 2012 the top ranked sites on news sites according to “alexa.com” are *Hürriyet*, *Milliyet*, *Habertürk*, *Sabah*, *Gazete Vatan*, *En Son Haber*, *Haber 7*, *Haberler*, *Ntvmsnbc*, *İnternet Haber*, *Haber 365*, *Zaman*, *Samanyolu Haber*, *Radikal*²⁶. These sites are among the most clicked one hundred sites. The first five according to the number of clicks are those of the newspapers; and the two among the nine

that follow are again newspaper sites but the remaining seven that follow are those sites that are not related to newspapers. The news sites of newspapers are naturally extensions of newspapers. The news practices and the way in which the news is formed on those sites correspond to journalism. Just as in newspapers, the news sources of these sites are news that are formed from those newspapers, interesting news from other newspapers, and those from news agencies. The news sites in the second group are formed from all newspapers and news agencies. Besides, the two groups of news sites use news, photos and videos on the internet and prepare their news with their own editors and reporters. In addition, prompts from emails, twits and facebook are used.

When the news sites are examined as two different groups, these conclusions are drawn: The news sites of newspapers are the extensions of newspapers. They reflect the news as in their newspapers. For this reason, the reporting principle of the newspaper is also relevant for the news site. If there are problems about reporting, those problems persist even more on the internet sites. The news site of the newspaper usually publishes interesting news from other newspapers referencing the source. When and if the news attracts attention, it develops the news and makes its own. On the news sites of newspapers there is no problem up until this point. The problems begin when these sites publish from internet pages, emails, twitt, facebook, and youtube. Even when the source of the news from these sources is precisely known, it is not accredited. Most of the time, photos, visuals and texts with unknown sources are published. It is not obvious how these visuals, photos and texts are received and whether or not manipulative techniques are used. The sources remain unknown. Even the reporter writing the news may remain unknown. Moreover, there is not enough time to control these matters. Especially for sites that are not newspaper sites this is a common situation. It is quite difficult to apply the principles of traditional ethics of reporting to the news taken from such sources.

Another problem is the “disappearance” of the news in these news portals. This form of disappearance is not relevant to traditional journalism. Once a piece of news is given on a newspaper, it becomes permanent. Whereas a piece of news published on the internet can be taken off suddenly. In that way, the permanence is destroyed. In fact, a piece

of news that stays published for a few hours is recorded on sites that function as news engines such as Google, Yahoo etc. Yet, we are still faced with a new style of news making because of the opportunities of publication/eradication/change.

It is seen that the news on internet news sites are generally from agencies, traditional news sources (newspaper, reporter, declaration, interview etc) and other news portals. Whereas, today because the news collection is very fast and instant, traditional methods of news collection are insufficient. For this reason, we see that the news of internet news portals is collected with different methods. For instance, blogs, social media and friendship sites, commentaries as well as knowledge and communication from regular people are made into news. Whether or not the information that is unreliable, carries suspicious agendas or from unknown news sources has informational value should be questioned. Yet, this means that the journalists have to act like a moral police, and to decide whether or not each news piece that comes to the portal is ethically acceptable which takes a lot of time²⁷. There is also the concern that evaluating the news in an ethically responsible way may limit the activity of journalism²⁸. Thus, the journalist, while using a piece of news, has to explain that he is acting with social and ethical responsibility.

Conclusion

The idea of giving news without subjective interpretation in order to provide objectivity in news which is a principle of the liberal press approach loses its relevance in application because in the formation of the news making, all political, social and economic conditions gain importance. It is expected that the objectivity in news is affected by some circumstances imposed by these conditions. The debate on the objectivity of news is for this reason going on.

The process that depends on money and increasing profits during collection, production and publication of news also influences the objectivity of news. As journalism emerged in capitalist Western countries and information flow was formed according to this economic model, while the merciless rules of capitalism dominated journalism, the con-

cerns for justice formed a major contradiction. To that end, specific principles and a metaphor of 'value judgment- free' journalism have been formulated. In the process from the production of news to dissemination, the human factor, institutional and state pressure, autocontrol mechanisms, environment, and conjunctural situations negatively affect the attainment of objectivity in news.

The principles of 'objectivity', 'neutrality' and 'balance' that the liberal approach to media sets forth have become problematic as press has been commercialized. In critical approach to media, the process of language formation of the news is part of the political, military, economic and symbolic elite. For this reason, the news is seen in the capitalist environment as a commodity and the activity of marketing is structured according to the market principles.

Each element that takes place in the content of the news affects the objectivity of news and turns it into a commodity to be consumed in the capitalist market. This situation of the news in traditional journalism is also relevant in the internet journalism which is easier to establish, and more effective to reach people and receive feedback.

The news in the internet is rather collected from traditional newspapers. So, the problematic of objectivity in news persists in this area. The internet journalism reproduces the news that falls on the internet removing it from its context. On these sites, the news is given as summarized with the purpose of popular readers' fast consumption. In this sense, the reality is reshaped. The fact that the publishing of the news is very fast and instant makes it possible that the publication is done without verification and this brings up the issue of reliability.

The utilization of technology in the collection, production and publication of news has brought an alternative and different structure to journalism. Especially in Turkey at the end of 2000s, the financial crisis also impacting the profession of journalism has made it easier to head toward internet journalism²⁹. Thus, the internet news sites have suddenly increased in number and this has made it much faster to update news, and much easier to reach news every hour of the day. It has also captivated the reader with its technique of collecting the views of the readers instantly and its rich visual content.

It is seen that the governance and organization scheme of traditional journalism on internet news sites are performed with a weaker cadre. The preparers and performers of internet pages replace the reporters who follow news on site. These persons are after producing news scanning newspapers, agencies and other sites. When and if a piece of news on a news site is often clicked, this leads to its use by another news site. Besides, it is also seen that the news on internet news sites is superficial with more use of videos and photos, and lacking in-depth analysis.

Today the influence of the principle of objectivity in news is persistent. It is necessary to follow some rules for journalists to give correct and neutral news. Yet, in the application of these rules there have been problems as there is no outside reality and also because of the influence of the human factor. For this reason, the principles of objectivity are not fully applied in newspapers.

The internet news sites have increasingly carried the problem of objectivity in news to the agenda. Indeed, the internet news sites remind one of magazines; they have such content which also visually likens to an encyclopedia. In this structure, although the opportunity to show long news texts is available, the news texts are rather kept short.

The first five news sites among the most clicked ten news sites in Turkey are those that are the extensions of newspapers. These sites maintain the objectivity structure of the newspapers they are linked with. The other five sites are sites unrelated to newspapers. The news that they use are from either newspapers or internet users. Especially the objectivity of the news taken from emails, twitter, facebook, youtube is debatable. Because the style of collection from these sources is instant and very fast, the verification of the news is uncertain and the purposes that it serves remain unknown.

The objectivity principle of journalism formed over the years is applied in a limited manner on the arena of the internet which is accepted as 'less formal/serious'. For this reason, it is early to evaluate the informational structure of news sites that use in a much limited way the accumulations of traditional journalism. Nevertheless, we should learn our lesson from problems that we come across in journalism. The problems related to news production in journalism that have gone through

various capitalist processes are reflected on internet reporting. We see that the structure of the sources of internet news kindles debates on ethics. For this reason, the social scientists should examine the content in the form of a new media.

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- 7 Ayşe İnal, “Tarihsel Gelişimi İçinden Gazetecilik Etiğini Yeniden Düşünmek”, **Televizyon Haberciliğinde Etik**, ed.: Bülent Çaplı-HakanTuncel, Ankara: Fesa mat., 2010, p:14.
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- 27 BülentÇaplı, **Medya ve Etik**. Ankara: İmge, 2002, p:87.
- 28 *Ibid*: p:87.
- 29 *Ibid*: p:139.

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