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REPORTING FROM THE  
BRIDGE



AYDOĞAN VATANDAŞ



In this series of essays with leading figures in the journalism and publishing fields, Aydođan Vatandaş brings his unique investigative approach and perspective as a journalistic bridge-builder to explore the evolution of the media and the role it plays in global understanding as he seeks that middle meeting field of differing cultures and approaches. His interviews shed light on the various ways the US press has reported such topics as the leadership role of Turkey in the Middle East, the death of Osama bin Laden, the role of Hamas, the role of social media in the Arab Spring, Islamophobia, Wikileaks, the role of propaganda in the press, citizen journalism, opinion crafting by both sides, and the intimate relationship between politics and media in the United States.

"Vatandaş's interviews provide a vibrant account of the real issues faced by journalists, and allow us to read between the lines of the news. The net result is an exciting book which delves into the heart of current affairs."

--Katharine Branning

*Author of Yes, I Would Love another Glass of Tea*

"Vatandaş asks the right questions in a concise and thoughtful way. As a result, his guests offer absorbing insights into a range of topics, from the vast changes in the media landscape to the Arab spring, and to Turkey's role in international diplomacy."

--Paul Moses is a Pulitzer Award winner journalist and professor of journalism at Brooklyn College.

*Aydođan Vatandaş is an investigative journalist from Turkey based in New York. He is the author of eleven books, many of which have been bestsellers in Turkey. He is currently the media representative of Turkish Cihan News Agency in New York.*



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## Americans don't trust the press

*Interview with Professor Carol Wilder, The New School, NY*

**I**n April 2003, 35 percent of Americans believed that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) while 10 percent were not quite sure. In October 2003, 30 percent were still convinced that there were WMDs in Iraq.

But six months later it was understood that there were not any WMDs in Iraq. How could the Americans have been persuaded to believe such a lie without evidence?

It was *The New York Times*, one of the leading and most prestigious newspapers in the world, which actually convinced the Americans. Professor Carol Wilder says, "this is a quintessential example of what happens when the press fails."

Carol Wilder is professor of media studies at The New School in New York, where from 1995 to 2007 she was associate dean and chair of media studies and film. From 1975 to 1995 she served on the Communication Studies Faculty at San Francisco State University (SFSU) as professor and chair. She was named professor emerita at SFSU in 1996. She also served on the faculties of Oberlin College and Emerson College. I had an informative interview with Professor Wilder about the intimate relationship between politics and media in the US.

*Let's start first with your experience of the Vietnam War. How did this war influence your worldview and scholarly path?*

Well, there is a popular belief that "the media lost the American war" in Vietnam. That belief has some truth to it but it is certainly something that the American government and the Pentagon believe, so subsequent from Vietnam there have been a lot more restrictions on the press. However, I think it is probably more accurate to talk about the relationship between the press/media and the government. In US history in World

War I nobody was allowed to the fronts. So most of what we know about the war is fiction or semi-fiction, like Hemingway ("A Farewell to Arms"), so the relationship between news media, the government and war probably goes back to time immemorial. In World War II there actually was an office of censorship in the US and the reporters of that time, people like Edward Morrow, they were very much on the home team. There wasn't really much dissent; the Allies had to win this war. So the press, the government and Hollywood worked hand in hand, including a series of wonderful propaganda—or motivational films you could call them—by Frank Capra.

Fast forwarding, Korea is where things began to fall apart a little bit because in the beginning of the war in the '50s, which was a messy, awful period—I mean you can't overestimate how the Cold War influenced Americans' thinking. For example, when I grew up we had to do nuclear attack drills and put our heads under a desk, so there was this tremendous fear of Communism during that period, which is why the US went into Korea without a declared war and initially the government was very open to the press until some of the reporters actually started to report what was actually happening. Douglas MacArthur called them traitors, so subsequently the press and the US government left that war on not such great terms, which was sort of a harbinger of what happened in Vietnam.

Continuing to Vietnam, the US was funding the French and the French had been in control of Vietnam from the middle nineteenth century to 1954, when they were defeated at Dien Bien Phu; the Americans subsidized the latter half of that war and then basically took it over. In 1961, when John Kennedy was first president, there was a small band of reporters in Vietnam, the best known of them was David Halberstam, but there was also Peter Arnett, Malcolm Browne and Neil Sheehan. They were a very small group and there was no censorship either, but they started seeing things happening like helicopters being off-loaded on docks in Saigon and being told that they weren't seeing it, so they began to become skeptical about what they were being told from the government. And even though again David Halberstam had this reputation for

... I mean he did make Kennedy angry with his report-

win; they thought it was a just cause. So this idea that the press was always dissenting, it doesn't hold up with the facts.

**So do you think that this was a failure of the American press in its history?**

Failure? I don't know if failure is the word I choose. There is a tricky relationship between the government and press in relation to war. War correspondents are a special breed of people and they have some wonderful books about the topic, the best I feel is Phillip Knightley's, called *The First Casualty*, which is a history of war reporting from the Crimean War to the present. So to answer your question, I'm not sure the press failed in Vietnam; in fact I think that press actually helped to end that war. Later we can talk about Iraq and the press's role then. But early in the Vietnam War—the American war from 1961-67—most of the public and the press was onboard. *The New York Times* went astray in 1955, but for the most part public opinion was in favor of that war even though in 1963 there had been the Buddhist crisis.

**How do you think that the photograph of the burning Buddhist monk affected public opinion?**

Well you know there is an interesting story about that photograph. It was shot by Malcolm Browne, who was one of the journalists in Saigon at the time, and throughout that year of 1963 there had been Buddhist protests and some had been killed. They had been protesting President Diem, a Roman Catholic, who had been oppressing their religion. Malcolm had gotten to know them pretty well and he had been hanging out at a temple in Saigon and he would get word about things that were happening. He had been told prior to that incident that something important was going to be happening the next day. So he was the one that took the famous photographs, but it was very carefully staged; he calls it "theater of the horrible." Quang Duc, the elderly monk who immolated himself, has become highly venerated. His heart was not burned somehow and in fact in *Wei*, which is in the middle of the country, there is a pagoda with a shrine and the car that drove Quang Duc down to Saigon to self-immolate. In that shrine there is a picture, one of Malcolm Browne's, on one of the windows of the car. A footnote though, the photograph was not even published in

*The New York Times*, one of the world's most respected newspapers, did not publish this photograph at all. Why so? Do you think that there is some kind of self-censorship in the media?

Well, if there is a conspiracy it's a conspiracy of capitalism. Everybody is trying to make as much money as possible and that is the real conspiracy. Capitalism is very much an ideology.

*How does this propaganda model work?*

Well there is a relationship between the media, the people and the government even now and the US government has become much more sophisticated in managing the press since the Vietnam War. I mean subsequent to Vietnam we've had Grenada and a whole host of other conflicts; this Iraq war, with its use of embedding, has been a brilliant cooperative strategy. You have the journalist going along with the troops under a set of rules and they become identified with the troops so they can never be really free to report what's going on and they don't see much more than the small piece that they are a part of. So the Pentagon has become very slick at managing the press. Back in 1971, Peter Davis, a filmmaker who got an Academy Award for his Vietnam documentary "Hearts and Minds," while working for CBS did a documentary called "The Selling of the Pentagon," which was a long time ago. CBS was doing a lot of bold investigative journalism at the time; they don't do that so much anymore, even on "60 Minutes." You don't see them taking that many chances. Journalism though has changed a lot, during the '60s and the early years of Vietnam the line between reporting and opinion was very clearly drawn. Reporters were not supposed to interpret; they were supposed to report and that does not seem to apply anymore.

*When it comes to the Iraq War, do you remember Judith Miller's stories about WMDs in Iraq? What is your opinion of that controversy?*

Well, Judith Miller wrote a series of very persuasive essays in *The New York Times* about WMDs in 2003 right before the beginning of that war and they were scary stuff. It turned out that Judith Miller was a very well connected person who had gone to Princeton and had gotten a master's degree in international relations, had spent time in the Middle East and was considered sort of an expert in American terms. However, it turned

out that the sourcing for these essays was Ahmed Chalabi, who turned out to be a completely fraudulent source pursuing his own agenda. But since it fit right in with the Bush administration's narrative it worked for her. I think *The New York Times* did apologize years later but they didn't mention any names of reporters.

*Do you think that American people trust the press?*

The Pew Research team does regular studies on the press and has found their credibility is pretty low. I think only 25 percent of the people have high confidence in the press. Fifty percent believe some of what they read—all of these numbers roughly speaking—but to answer the question I would say no, they don't trust the press. Democrats trust the press a lot more than Republicans do apparently, which is interesting, but I think that people trust different press. People don't care; they just want to get their opinions confirmed. Overall though, trust in press, trust in government is low. It makes you wonder how we function at all.

*I was very surprised about the media coverage of the UN's report on the flotilla incident; The New York Times covered that story just as a paragraph on page A12. So it seems this kind of behavior is everywhere, what do you think about this?*

I think that this incident is so interesting as it unfolds. The Israeli military put something like 20 videos up on YouTube and one of our colleagues sent us a video that was on YouTube that was probably made by the Israeli military. But it was very well done, very professional, very persuasive. It did not have any source. So you couldn't really think about possible bias if you wanted to deconstruct it. Coverage of this incident internationally as compared to the US would be a very interesting study for someone to do.

*You mentioned Facebook, and of course there is Twitter and many other examples. How do you think these "new media" are going to affect the media landscape? Will people have more of a voice?*

I think the jury is still out on how these new media are going to influence politics. We know that in the 2008 elections it was huge and Barack Obama marshaled a huge online presence and that's what elected him essentially. It was brilliant in the way that they executed that just like

battle plan. On the other hand in *The New Yorker* there was a piece by Malcolm Gladwell, I don't always agree with him, but I do on this and he was saying essentially that the revolution won't be twittered. The point he was making was that on Twitter or Facebook, the ties that one makes on these mediums are not as strong as ties one would make offline. He compares these to those made during the civil rights movement, where there were tight ties made, and a movement that was built through identification and strong leadership. One point that he highlights that may be considered conservative but I agree with him on is that without some kind of leadership, these online social movements are not really going to go anywhere, just as if they were offline they wouldn't go anywhere for the same reason.

***How do you think that the advertising model in the media business affects the objectivity of journalism?***

There are certainly many examples of corporate media discouraging reporters from working on stories. However, as a reporter, and you know this yourself, you may begin going to your editor and pitching a story that is really out-of-the-box. However, they respond with hesitancy, but you still do it. Then the next time they kind of discourage you and then you don't do it. The next time you don't even go to the editor. And then it becomes like a dog that is on the leash of a pole, you forget that you are on a leash. There is a self-censorship that happens, you don't even think about doing those types of stories anymore because you have been socialized not to. It's kind of like getting tenure at a university; it's supposed to protect freedom of speech but by the time they get it, they have nothing left to say. They have been so socialized, so compromised by the system that they don't even think that way anymore. This is very analogous to the system reporters deal with. It is all very invisible. The dog does not even try to run away because it does not realize it is on a leash.

***Let me ask you another question. What struck you most about Turkey?***

Your President Mr. Abdullah Gül's speech in Columbia really struck me. Mr. President quoted Michel Foucault in his speech at Columbia; he is probably the first president to quote Foucault I guess. That actually shows how intellectual a president Turkey has!