



Confessions on a Turkish-Greek dance floor

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BARÇIN YİNANÇ
ATHENS - Turkish Daily News

The journalist symposium, which brought together media representatives from Turkey, Greece and both sides of Cyprus in Athens over the weekend, strikes me with the genuine and honest confessions made by some of the participants. That's why I chose the above title, which refers to the famous American singer Madonna's latest album. Although we've heard that some participants continued to deliver their deliberations during bouzouki night confessions not on a dance floor but rather on the roof of the Titania hotel overlooking the spectacular view of the Acropolis.

The meeting was the second in a series organized by the United States Embassy in Nicosia. One of the first confessions that strikes me came the first day, during the panel on perceptions of US Foreign Policy in Greek and Turkish media. Yiannis Pretenteris of To Vima started his speech by telling us the interesting story of a statement claimed to be made by Henry Kissinger. A columnist classified as coming from the extreme right told us that Pretenteris wrote a column on the statement of Kissinger, who apparently said that Greeks were rough people and we have to put some sense in the heads of Greeks. This was picked up by other newspapers, which prompted Pretenteris to contact Kissinger's office in Washington. The answer he got was that never had Kissinger issued such a statement. After a couple of phone calls, he found out that the columnist who wrote about it picked the information from a local Greek newspaper which quoted a local extreme right Turkish newspaper.

So the truth was in this case just a phone call away... All you have to do for accurate reporting is to adhere to the simple rule of journalism: check and double check. But, I confessed to myself, sometimes we are under so much time pressure and face so much fierce competition that we do occasionally neglect this rule. And that was precisely the starting point of Deborah Potter, the President of Newslab, who, as a former journalist, seemed to know that there is never enough time especially under conflict situations. She did provide some guidelines, which were nothing the audience did not know: verify; try just as hard to prove your story wrong; identify the source; don't let your views affect your reporting; and talk to and report the other side.

Then it was the turn of a Turkish Cypriot journalist to confess that, listening to Potter made him recall his university years when he was an idealist young reporter to be, dedicated to fulfilling all the principles of fair and just reporting. "Real life however," he said, "is not like the one thought by academics." Working for a newspaper affiliated with a political party, he told us that he finds himself doing

biased reporting about certain members of that political party. Living in a small, isolated island, he does not have much choice to change the media outlet when he challenges the editorial board. A phenomenon with which most of the journalists are quite familiar.

Journalists do their work under various constraints. This is obviously not a justification for poor reporting or bad journalism, especially when you think about the tremendous responsibility that lays upon the shoulders of journalists. During the symposium we were once more reminded with vivid examples of the responsibility of media, especially on conflict areas. Carol Daniel Kasbari, who promotes media dialogue between Palestinians and Israelis, told us about a recent survey conducted in Britain concerning the Middle East conflict. It was surprising to find out that many of the British readers thought of occupied territories as occupied by Palestinians; settlers for them were refugees from Afghanistan. Kasbari shared with us certain guidelines on conflict-sensitive writing, which requires first and foremost empathy for the other. Something you don't see too much when it comes to the Cyprus problem.

Each side believes it is the real victim and ignores the victims of the other side. As a journalist, Hasan Kahvecioğlu put forth that Cyprus is a good case study for demonizing the other.

For Greek Cypriot history starts in 1974, when the Turkish army intervened - an act called by the Turkish side as a "peace operation," while labeled by the Greek side as an "invasion." As columnist Kahvecioğlu pointed out, Greek Cypriots don't want to remember what happened between 1963-74 and, as the Turkish side was victimized during that time, the Turkish Cypriots don't realize that Greek Cypriots also suffered after 1974.

I have to confess that the Turkish press rarely reports about the sufferings of the Greek Cypriots. Contrary to the isolated north, Greek Cyprus prospered; this probably blinded us on their longing to go back and recuperate their land and property. I was in Burgenstock in 2004 in Switzerland where the Annan plan, aiming to bring lasting solution to the problem, was finalized. During negotiations I have reported on how much territory would be given back to the Greek side, how many houses will be recuperated or compensated -- mere numbers, percentages.

I had to go to Greek Cyprus to understand that these numbers meant a lot to real people when I talked to our guide who was from the north. He was extremely angered by the refusal by the Greek Cypriots of the Annan plan, and his frustration of not being able to go back or take back its land was apparent in his eyes.

As Semih İdiz from daily Milliyet said, "You can't have sympathy if you don't show empathy." It is however difficult to change all habits and develop new reflexes. It takes time to take down "the internal walls." We have a vivid example in front of us. Although, thanks to the Turkish-Greek rapprochement, there is less biased reporting, we are far from the ideal situation, as journalists from both countries admitted during the symposium.

That's why I have suggested the establishment of "red line", among media representatives. This term is used for the direct telephone line between governmental leaders and military officials that helps them to communicate without losing time in moments of crises. Some colleagues objected, saying they call each

other or exchange e-mails. But what we need is a more institutionalized mechanism not just individual efforts based on personal contacts.

Some newspapers have an ombudsman - what if we had a liaison officer in the newsroom whose job is to check the story with "the other side", or get their views. I think it is an idea worth exploring and we might start working on it in the Turkish Daily News.