

Dominance, collaboration and resistance: Developing the idea of a national news agency in the Ottoman Empire, 1854–1914

Journalism

1–17

© The Author(s) 2020



Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/1464884920924174

journals.sagepub.com/home/jou**Servet Yanatma** 

Visiting Fellow, The London School of Economics and Political Science, UK

Abstract

This article investigates the relationship between the Ottoman state and the operations of the most powerful international news agencies of its time, Havas and Reuters, within the Ottoman Empire. The two agencies started to operate in Istanbul during the Crimean War and soon became the most influential sources of news both within and outside the Ottoman Empire. The article examines how the Ottoman state, perceiving them as a threat, attempted to resist their dominant role in news-production by collaborating with other different agencies and actors. When this failed, it tried to found a national news agency.

Keywords

Havas, history, international, national, news agencies, Ottoman Empire, Ottoman Telegraph Agency, Reuters, state

Introduction

The relationship between the state and news agencies has been one of the ‘Achilles’ heels’ of news-agency research. While privately owned and cooperative agencies have received the most academic attention, state-owned news agencies have largely been neglected. This happened despite the fact that the state ownership form originates from the 19th century and has now become the dominant form of ownership of news agencies around the world (Vyslozil and Wippersberg, 2014). While traditional big international Western news agencies have hitherto received the most academic attention (Rantanen,

Corresponding author:

Servet Yanatma, The London School of Economics and Political Science, London WC2A 2AE, UK.

Email: S.Yanatma@lse.ac.uk

2019), ‘non-Western’ state-owned national agencies have not received similar attention in the English-speaking academic world. As a result, we know a great deal about how Western international news agencies dominated the world’s news market and less about how national news agencies tried to resist their power.

This bias both historically and within contemporary research on news agencies has prevented researchers from seeing how different forms of ownership are interconnected and how they influenced one another (Rantanen, 2019). State-owned news agencies did not appear from nowhere: the state usually became involved when private ownership failed, as happened in Austria (Vyslozil and Wippersberg, 2004), and a government took over a news agency for political and/or financial reasons. The state may be called upon to help when a national news agency is in trouble, but sometimes it has been the state that founded a national agency. This article investigates how the state developed and tried out different strategies to overcome what it saw as the domination of Havas and Reuters over news within, from and to the Ottoman Empire.

Historical research on different state strategies can help us to understand why the control of news and news organizations is so important for the state. The relationship between the state and news agencies in Turkey dates even farther back than 1920, when the state-owned national agency Anadolu was founded (6 April 1920). This article investigates the early historical development of news agencies in the Ottoman Empire and examines endeavours to launch a national news agency even before Anadolu. It seeks to understand why a national agency was seen as needed even before the Grand National Assembly of Turkey and declaration of the Republic of Turkey. The article uses archival research, newspapers and literature published in Turkish and previously unknown outside Turkey.

Literature review

Much research on news agencies has been historical (Rantanen, 2019). Different aspects of international news agency operations have been extensively studied, often using the concept of dominance and/or dependence (see, for example, Boyd-Barrett, 1980; Headrick, 1991; Nalbach, 1999; Read, 1992; Silberstein-Loeb, 2014; Tworek, 2019; Winseck and Pike, 2007). This research shows how powerful early international agencies – Havas in Paris, Reuters in London and Wolff in Berlin – were in forming a news cartel that shared the world’s news market between themselves in the 19th and early 20th centuries (Rantanen, 2006).

There is an increasing body of work on how national agencies resisted their dependence on the international agencies, often through state ownership or control (see, for example, Akami, 2012; Derbordes, 2008; Rantanen, 1990; Shu, 2015). For example, Akami (2012) shows how, in the 1920s, Japan’s new governmental propaganda institutions were closely tied to news agency entrepreneurs’ efforts to create a ‘truly national agency’ (p. 296). Shu (2015: 634–635) studied the relationship between Reuters and the Chinese government’s official news agency, the Central News Agency (CNA), between 1931 and 1945 and argues that both agencies in fact needed the kind of strategic collaboration that brought mutual benefit. In short, international dominance over national news was rarely a one-way street, and the international news agency cartel was established

through collaboration with the very local and national players that often later started to resist its power over them.

Even the studies listed above have mainly concentrated on the largest European agencies of the late 19th and early 20th centuries and have largely failed to consider their activities within the Ottoman Empire. Only one monograph and two articles (see Koloğlu, 1994, 1995; Yerlikaya, 1994) have previously touched on this topic. Gündüz (2015) also contributed to the literature, presenting more than 150 original news telegrams distributed by the Ottoman Telegraph Agency during the Balkan Wars in 1912 and 1913. His study provides a transcription of these telegrams, but does not analyse their content.

Tworek (2019: 121–140) in her recent book explores the German Wolff's agency's activities in the Ottoman Empire in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and shows how the German government saw news as the useful medium to spread its propaganda, especially against the British and the French in the Middle East. The German Wolff agency increased its activities in the Ottoman Empire in the last quarter of the 19th century, but this article concentrates on Havas and Reuters.

Here, I seek to explore how the idea of a national news agency emerged as a response to the activities of Havas and Reuters in the Ottoman Empire. As to the focus of this article on the period between 1854 and 1914, 1854 is the year in which Havas started to report from Istanbul (known as Constantinople in this era) during the Crimean War. The move towards developing a national news agency was a long process and was comprehensively discussed in government circles between 1909 and 1911. The final year considered here, 1914, was when the 'Young Turk' government changed the administration of the agency in a way that enabled it to take control and also changed the name to Ottoman National Telegraph Agency.

The article shows one of the significant endeavours to counter Western domination in international news in this era. This can also provide very useful ground for comparing the past with present efforts such as Turkey's Anadolu Agency, which distributes news in more than 10 languages and the Turkish state-run English-language broadcaster TRT World, as well as initiatives in several other countries, including China, Russia and Iran, that have launched their own outlets to provide their own perspectives in the face of the global domination of Western-based media.

I draw mainly on original documents of the Ottoman period from Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi (Prime Ministry Ottoman Archives, hereafter BOA) in Istanbul, but also use newspapers and previously published literature. I aimed to find all relevant documents on news agencies dating from the 1840s to 1914 through a BOA catalogue search. I searched for key words including not only 'agency', 'news agency' and names of agencies and journalists, but also 'news'. I excluded documents which are not about news agencies. Most of the remaining documents are about either a story from an agency on a particular issue or the denial of a story. The most useful documents, which provided significant information and insights for this research, are about the relationship between the Ottoman State and the agencies and such issues as contracts, subscriptions, internal correspondence between the Ottoman embassies and the Foreign Ministry, censorship of telegraphy, pursuit of journalists, and reports and proposals on how to manage the foreign press. I obtained copies of the relevant documents and transliterated them. All the documents in the catalogue are available for researchers without any restriction.

Havas and Reuters arrive in Istanbul

The first newspapers published in the Ottoman Empire emerged at a very late stage, around the early 1800s, two centuries later than in Europe. The early forms of newspapers and journals were embassy bulletins published in the last decade of the 18th century in Istanbul. The launch of a new official newspaper *Takvim-i Vekayi* (Calendar of Events) took place in 1831. The first private newspapers appeared in French in Izmir in the early 1820s (Baykal, 2013: 15–22). The role of newspapers became increasingly significant in state affairs from the 1860s because they reflected opposition views (Yanatma, 2015: 27–30). For a very useful background on the press in the Ottoman Empire and how Sultan Abdülhamid II, who was on the throne from 1876 to 1909, managed relations with journalists, see Boyar (2006) and Yosmaoğlu (2003).

Both European and Ottoman newspapers used Havas and Reuters as their main sources when reporting on the Ottoman Empire. The number of newspapers and journals dramatically increased, especially after the 1860s. There were at least 47 papers in nine languages in Istanbul by 1876, and readers were mostly government officials, educated people and notables in the capital and in the provinces, as well as foreign ambassadors and ministers (Yalman, 1914: 31, 41–42). The number continued to gradually increase and rose dramatically after the declaration of the second Constitutional Rule on 24 July 1908 (Baykal, 2013: 29–44), often described as the ‘Young Turk Revolution’, which ended the long and autocratic regime of Sultan Abdülhamid II (Zürcher, 2019: 487).

Havas and Reuters were interested in the Ottoman Empire from their initial years: their activities in the Ottoman capital Istanbul go back to the 1850s and the outbreak of the Crimean War (1853–1856). During the War, the first telegraph line was installed by a French company. Also, a British company, escorted by a warship, laid the first submarine cable between Varna and Balaclava, enabling telegrams to be transmitted to Paris and London in 5 hours, when this had previously taken from 5 to 6 days (Bektaş, 2000: 673–675). Following the establishment of telegraph and cable links, Reuters and Havas sent their correspondents to such key locations as St. Petersburg and Istanbul. At this time, however, they had not yet established offices in the Ottoman capital.

Istanbul became a key location for the operations of Havas and Reuters due to the importance of the Ottoman Empire and for a number of other reasons (Yanatma, 2015). First, the ‘Eastern Question’ – the continuing territorial erosion of the Ottoman Empire and the question of how this was to be settled – was one of the most important international issues of the 19th century and of concern to all the Great Powers of the time, namely, Britain, France, Russia and Germany. This issue remained a pressing and central item on the political, economic and diplomatic agenda in European capitals for a century or more (Tchaprazov, 2009).

A second aspect was the integration or relationship of the Ottoman economy with Europe in the 19th century, since one of the initial motivations of Havas and Reuters agencies was to produce news for their customers about the trade and economy. Bankers and merchants needed information on such issues because the British Empire, France and Germany were the dominant players in the Ottoman economy, particularly after the incurring of Ottoman debts to Europe (Kasaba, 1988).

Third, Istanbul was a profitable market in which Havas and Reuters could sell their services. The Ottoman state would become one of their main customers and was able to pay significant sums for these services. The Ottoman government and ministries needed the agencies' services in order to influence public opinion both at home and abroad. In addition to the government, newspapers, bankers and businessmen were also interested in their services.

Therefore, even after the Crimean War, both Havas and Reuters were keen to increase the distribution of news to and from Istanbul. By September 1855, Istanbul was linked by telegraph to Europe through Varna and Bucharest and the Ottoman government largely controlled the telegraph facilities (Davison, 1990: 136). This paved the way for faster communication between Istanbul and western European capitals like Vienna and Paris. Both Havas and Reuters had sent their own agents to Istanbul by the mid-1860s, followed by Wolff in the late 1880s (BOA, BEO, 2621/196529, 10 Ca 1323/12 July 1905; BOA, DH.EUM.VRK., 25/9, 4 C 1333/19 April 1915).

In the mid-1860s, Reuters and Havas announced an 'accelerated daily telegraphic service' to and from Istanbul. They, under the name of Reuter-Havas-Bullier, jointly began to distribute telegrams from March 1870 (Agence Reuter Havas et Bullier, 1870). Their cooperation continued for a year. At the end of 1872, Reuters and Havas began forwarding telegrams under the name of 'Reuter-Havas' and continued with this for at least 3 years. The Ottoman ruling elite, intellectuals and journalists, who played an important role in influencing public opinion, largely depended on European news sources. Newspapers both in Turkish and in other languages, such as French, English, Armenian and Greek, published telegrams from Havas and Reuters (Efendi, 1997: 119).

Havas and Reuters seen as a threat to the Ottoman state

In order to understand how the Ottoman state perceived the role and activities of Havas and Reuters within its territory, it is important to investigate its response and policies towards them. The last decades of the 19th century were a challenging time for the Ottoman Empire, which faced a coming war against Russia. The uprisings in the Balkans and the state's financial bankruptcy only compounded the troubles (Zürcher, 2017). The Empire's image was blemished in the eyes of the Western world, and Sultan Abdülhamid II, who ruled the Empire for 33 years from 1876 to 1909, was deeply concerned about this (Deringil, 1998: 35).

Havas and Reuters were seen as playing a key role in spreading a negative image of the Empire. Ottoman bureaucrats and diplomats considered them to be at the centre of all negative coverage, since Western newspapers largely relied on their services in their foreign news reporting. The Ottoman government saw their coverage as a threat and as posing a serious problem for the interests of the Ottoman state with their 'hostile and malicious reporting' (BOA, Y.PRK.HR., 4/80 2 Ca 1296/24 April 1879 and BOA, BEO., 1145/85844, 1 S 1316/21 June 1898). A high volume of documents reflecting the interests of the Ottoman state in the archive reveals themes and issues that the Ottoman state was discontented with and annoyed about. These included the 'Armenian

Question' (the term used in the BOA catalogue), the Balkan crisis, uprisings against the Empire and telegrams alleging that the Ottoman sultan was sick.

The 'Armenian Question' was certainly the most prevalent topic in the international news agencies' coverage. The Ottoman ruling elite which included ministers, Ottoman ambassadors and Ottoman officials in charge of press issues believed that Western public opinion, and especially the European press, was always sympathetic towards the Armenians. From the Ottoman State's point of view, the common theme in telegrams followed a similar line: 'that public order in the Ottoman Empire was completely disturbed, Armenians were exposed to torture, Muslims and Kurdish people were systematically attacking Armenians, and that Muslims were forcing Armenians to change their religion' (BOA, A.MKT.MHM., 750/24, 21 Ca 1312/20 November 1894; BOA, HR.SYS.2856/44, 19 April 1895, BOA, HR.SYS., 29/88, 24 January 1895, and Yanatma, 2015: 53).

The Ottoman government became more and more sensitive about the 'Armenian Question' and started monitoring news in Europe more closely. The Ottoman embassy in London and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Istanbul were alarmed when the London *Daily News* published a story in 1893 that some Armenian prisoners were being exposed to torture and maltreatment (BOA, HR.SYS., 2825/77, 27 July 1893). The embassy immediately made an inquiry and informed the ministry. The cable read,

It is evident that it was sent from a special correspondent who is more likely an Armenian living in Istanbul or London . . . I have already contacted the company [Reuters] to notify about our disappointment since the company became an instrument for the false and defamation news stories about the Ottoman Empire. I also asked for a correction. (BOA, Y.A.HUS., 278/148, 25 July 1893)

The Balkan crisis was another topic that Havas and Reuters frequently covered. According to Ottoman officials, the foreign agencies claimed that the Ottoman government was suppressing revolts and mistreating non-Muslim people in the region. A common theme in their news coverage was that Ottoman soldiers committed crimes of torture and rape (BOA, DH.MUİ., 2/-1/44, 16 Ş 1327/2 September 1909).

Furthermore, the Ottoman ruling elite believed that reporting on the Muslim world in general, and the Middle East in particular, was provocative and tried to show that there was uneasiness towards the Ottoman government. Havas and Reuters were frequently reported to deliver news about conflicts and armed battles between the Ottoman army and local groups in the Ottoman Empire (BOA, BEO., 3364/252248, 3 Recep 1326/1 August 1908).

Ottoman state documents clearly show how worried the ruling elite, especially diplomats and state officials, were about international news agencies' and foreign press coverage of the Ottoman Empire. In these documents, the most common adjectives used are *muzır* (hurtful and detrimental), *garazkarane* (rancorous and spiteful), *kötü niyetli* (malicious) and *düşmanca* (hostile). *Tahkîr edici-aşağılayıcı* (humiliating and insulting) is also sometimes used (BOA, HR.SYS., 25/79, 25 September 1889, and BOA, HR.SFR.3 . . . 517/18, 22 February 1902). The ruling elite came to believe that foreign news agencies were a serious threat and intentionally targeting the Ottoman state. This led them to conclude that serious action was needed to change the situation.

The response of the Ottoman state

Ottoman governments tried to address what they saw as ‘attacks’ by the foreign press, including Havas and Reuters, by introducing press regulation and launching new institutions. An Administration of Press Affairs, Department of Foreign Press and Directorate of Foreign Press were established in the second half of the 19th century to control what was seen as the increasing influence of the foreign press. Officials produced a number of reports and proposals concerning how to establish more control over the press. The Ottoman ambassadors in Paris and London also provided information and analysis about the role of the foreign agencies in their letters to the Ottoman Ministry of Foreign Affairs (BOA, BEO., 671/50302, 28 S 1313/20 August 1895, and BOA, Y.A.HUS., 314/134, 10 C 1312/9 December 1894).

The Grand Vizier, Halil Rıf‘at, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, İsmâ‘îl Hakkı, and the Head of the *Şûrâ-yı Devlet Reîsi* or Council of State, Mehmed Sa‘îd, also together prepared a report in which they suggested working with Reuters and Havas, underlining that there was no alternative. They reiterated that controlling the importing of foreign newspapers was not possible, and official denials and corrections were not influential or credible in the eyes of the European press. They suggested that agencies like Reuters and Havas, and other correspondents, should be won over, advising that more desirable content and articles could be published through them once their cooperation was achieved. They wrote,

This system needs a budget around 5000 *liras* annually to get their support and loyalty . . . This has already been agreed with Reuters by speaking with its representative. The support of Havas can also be secured. (BOA, Y.A.HUS., 339/35, 22 Ca 1313/10 November 1895)

Ottoman governments tried to counterbalance the news provided by Havas and Reuters by publishing denials and corrections, producing and publicizing news favourable to the Empire in European newspapers, and preventing the agencies’ hostile news stories (Koloğlu, 1998: 71–85). The government provided various incentives, such as free use of the telegraph, subsidies in the form of salaries or grants, the awarding of Ottoman decorations and exclusive rights to supply news. However, the agencies continued to make demands in relation to subscription fees and free use of the telegraph. Their priority was to ensure the receipt of subscription fees from the government (BOA, BEO., 1145/85844, 1 S 1316/21 June 1898 and BOA, Y.A.HUS., 317/117, 29 B 1312/26 January 1895).

However, a conflict was inevitable when the interests of Havas and Reuters and the Ottoman state clashed in pursuit of their own different interests. The Ottoman state made an effort to render opposition activity more costly, and thus to encourage self-censorship, whereas the agencies tried to show that they largely controlled the information network in Europe. In response, the Ottoman state implemented various forms of censorship, exercising control over the telegraph and issuing warnings and threats of deportation, withdrawal of subscriptions and the cutting off of subsidies to Havas and Reuters. In return, Havas and Reuters, by distributing negative news about the Ottoman Empire, tried to force the Ottoman government to accept their demands for subscription fees and

for free use of the telegraph. Official Ottoman government documents frequently describe the behaviour of Havas and Reuters in terms such as ‘extortion, blackmail and threats’ (Yanatma, 2015: 140–192, 244).

In 1893, Havas refused a request from the Ottoman government to publish denials of some of its reports published in European newspapers. According to the official Ottoman document, the reason was that the Ottoman embassy in Paris had not subscribed to Havas news services. The Director of Foreign Press, Abdullah Macid Bey, wrote that the deputy representative of Havas in Istanbul had told him Havas was more likely to refuse to publish denials by the Ottoman government because the Ottoman Ministry and the embassy in Paris were not subscribing to the French agency (BOA, İ.HR., 341/1310, 23 Za 1310/8–9 June 1893; Yerlikaya, 1994: 19).

In 1897, the Ottoman government cancelled its contract with Havas, against advice from Ottoman officials. One reason may have been a substantial increase in subscription fees and the economic problems of the Ottoman government (BOA, BEO., 928/69566, 28 L 1314/1 April 1897). The directors of Havas then warned the Ottoman ambassador in Paris that it would pursue the policy of free flow of information against the Ottoman government unless the Ottoman state continued its subscription. The ambassador reported that ‘the aim of Havas is to coerce the Ottoman state for a new contract by hostile reporting’ (BOA, BEO., 1145/85844, 26 C 1313/22 November 1897).

The Ottoman government closely monitored whether subscriptions and subsidies were successful means of ensuring the publication of positive news stories, as well as controlling the stories written by reporters working for Havas and Reuters (Yanatma, 2015: 191). The government asked the press directorate to prepare a list of foreign reporters who were continuing to write against the Ottoman state, including the agents of news agencies receiving subsidies. The government ordered a check on subsidies paid and news stories. The subsidy to one news agency reporter was suspended during the inquiry (BOA, Y.A.RES., 71/29, 2 S 1312/5 August 1894).

However, these methods and measures did not work. The demands of Havas and Reuters gradually increased, while the Ottoman state was decaying. The problem required a long-term and comprehensive approach, whereas the Ottoman state, particularly during the reign of Sultan Abdülhamid II, was anxious and had no time to lose. The Ottoman ruling elite finally concluded that foreign journalists could not serve Ottoman interests in the long run. The Grand Vizier, Said Pasha, submitted a report to Sultan Abdülhamid II in 1882 that reflected his own views on the foreign media, including the news agencies:

It is not logical to expect that any foreign journalist considers the interest or benefit of the host country that he is working in, rather than the embassy, tribe and people which he belongs to, even if he is a good guy . . . It is their interest and mission to report any slight incident to Europe in a horrible and strange way. (BOA, Y.EE. 82/58, 2 S 1300/13 December 1882)

In the pursuit of the ‘national’ news agency

The Ottoman government had preferred to tackle the need for reliable communication by buying services mainly from Havas and Reuters. In the eyes of the Ottoman ruling elite,

this was the most suitable, easiest and least expensive way of distributing news. However, the Ottoman state became concerned about the increasing power of these agencies as it attempted to reach the European public by using their services. The relationship with Havas and Reuters had become more difficult and the Ottoman government, because of its economic problems, could no longer meet their demands for ever-increasing subscription fees.

Ottoman diplomats and civil servants had by now come to a view that Havas and Reuters were first and foremost the news agencies of the British Empire and of France, and reflected those interests. In the 1880s, the Ottoman ruling elite reached the conclusion that it would have to found a national news agency because foreign news agencies would not serve the interests of the Ottoman Empire. Saffet Pasha, in his proposal to Sultan Abdülhamid II, pointed out that while Havas and Reuters were supplying news and information to newspapers in their own countries, there was no national news agency in the Ottoman Empire. More importantly, he underlined that all the paying of millions of *akçe* to win over foreign publications had failed (BOA, Y.EE. 44/149, 29 S 1300/9 January 1883).

The Ottoman state did not have the professional journalists or financial resources to launch its own national news agency. Instead, foreign journalists and businessmen, whose aim was to make money, offered to establish news agencies to serve the Ottoman government. As the examples below show, they clearly asked for financial support in their proposals. The government did sign short-term contracts with these, but their services did not meet the needs of the Ottoman state since the agencies sought primarily to maximize their own profits. The Ottoman state needed a more comprehensive and long-term policy in order to reach a better solution. However, it was very difficult to penetrate the European news distribution network, given the extent to which Reuters, Havas and Wolff dominated the industry.

One of the first Istanbul-based news agencies was Agence de Constantinople, founded in 1889. Julius Grosser, correspondent of the German *Kölnische Zeitung* newspaper in the city, founded this news agency. He was an experienced news agency editor who had previously worked as the representative of Havas in Istanbul and had spotted the need for a news agency based in the Ottoman capital (Rilke, 2009: 162).

Agence de Constantinople can be seen as the first agency founded in the Ottoman Empire, although it operated in French. Grosser had received an offer to collaborate with Reuters and with Korrespondenz Bureau of Austria. The project of those two agencies was to displace Havas in Istanbul, reflecting the intense conflict between Havas, Reuters and Wolff between 1887 and 1889 (Rantanen, 1990: 44). Grosser was an ideal person for this task, with his experience and networks with Ottoman officials, military officers and foreign embassies. The newspapers in Istanbul, the Ottoman Bank, all the foreign embassies, the Ottoman government and a number of individuals subscribed to the services of his agency, which distributed not only political news but also news from Europe about trade and stock markets – all in French. Grosser's wife, Anna Grosser Rilke, continued to run the agency after her husband's death in 1895 and it operated until the end of World War I (Rilke, 2009: 162). As Tworek (2019) has shown, journalists played a significant role in 'helping to cement German-Ottoman relations' before World War I (pp. 124–125).

Another agency, using the title *Agence Ottomane*, was founded in 1894. Its founder, Nicola Nicolaides, was a Greek from Istanbul who lived in Paris, where he published the newspaper *L'Orient* (Keskinliç, 2014). He wrote a letter to Sultan Abdülhamid II about his plans to launch a news agency to serve Ottoman interests and requested financial support. While the Ottoman government replied positively to this proposal, it opposed the suggested name, *Agence Impériale Ottomane*, but approved *Agence Ottomane*. However, the agency's operations were short-lived because the Ottoman government was displeased with the content of its news stories and the way these were perceived as the voice of the Ottoman state. An agency with this name evidently operated for some years in the 1890s, as can be seen from bulletins available in the Ottoman archives (BOA, BEO 480/35945, 22 Ra 1312/23 September 1894, and BOA, Y.PRK.GZT. 13/59, 1898).

The Ottoman government also received several proposals from European entrepreneurs suggesting that they establish an Ottoman agency in Europe or supply agency services to serve the interests of the Ottoman Empire. It appeared that they mostly had commercial interests in mind. In 1902, the French *Agence Fournier Company* offered 'to be charged with distributing true news and articles containing any information or perspective in favour of the Ottoman state to newspapers in Paris, London, Berlin and in other countries through telegraphic dispatches from Istanbul'. The offer stated that the Ottoman government was paying a huge amount of money to ensure that news would 'tell the truth', but this goal was not being achieved and the money was going to waste. The proposed arrangement would cooperate under the control and monitoring of officials in Istanbul and in Ottoman embassies abroad (BOA, BEO 1873/140455, 20 Ra 1320/27 June 1902).

However, the archive provides no response from the Ottoman government to this proposal, and no newspaper publication of articles from this agency has been detected. Recently discovered archival documents concerning the first national news agency, the Ottoman News Agency, date from 1906. Tevfik Pasha, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, in a petition to Sultan Abdülhamid II, stated that the Ottoman government had broken off relations with both *Agence de Constantinople* and *Agence Nationale*, and argued, as he had many times before, for the necessity of founding an Ottoman agency (BOA, BEO 2867/214987, 13 Ca 1324/5 July 1906). The Sultan responded favourably to his proposal and gave instructions for an Ottoman news agency to be founded (BOA, BEO 2867/214987, 17 Ca 1324/9 July 1906).

Despite the decision to launch an Ottoman agency, archival documents from two more years give no proof of any immediate action. In 1908, two individuals from the Ottoman Empire proposed to establish a national news agency. The first applicants were Mosier Antuan and his friends who applied to receive a licence to found a news agency with the name of *Agence Ottoman Telegraphic*. In their petition, they stated that their aim was to distribute news to Europe in order to 'deny the false stories against the Ottomans'. The agency would also distribute news to the Ottoman provinces about Ottoman state affairs and supply news from these provinces (BOA, DH.MKT. 2618/56, 3 N 1326/31 August 1908).

About 3 months later, in 1908, the Assistant Director of Foreign Press (*Matbuat-ı Ecnebiye Müdür Muavini*), Grati Efendi, appealed to the Ottoman government for permission to found the Ottoman Telegraph Agency in Istanbul. He argued that such a news

agency would be very useful to the Ottoman state. After consultations with the Ministry of Post and Telegraph, the Ottoman government decided to ask the Ottoman embassies in Europe to investigate in what circumstances a news agency could operate and how news agencies operated elsewhere (BOA, DH.MKT. 2682/70, 20 Za 1326/14 December 1908).

The Ottoman Telegraph Agency and the Ottoman National Telegraph Agency

The discussions and attempts to launch a national news agency continued after Sultan Abdülhamid was dethroned on 27 April 1909 – a dramatic political change in the Ottoman state. According to several secondary sources, the Ottoman Telegraph Agency was founded in 1911 by Salih Gourdjı (Gündüz, 2015, and Şahin, 2012), but no archival records have as yet been found. Koloğlu detected a telegram from Agence Ottomane published in a local newspaper, *Trabzon Meşveret*, on 7 August 1909, but he is not sure that this dispatch was from the agency of Salih Gourdjı (*Gürcü*) (Koloğlu, 1994: 29–30). My research in the Ottoman archive shows that he was in Istanbul in June 1909, at the latest, and applied to the Ottoman government on 19 June 1909 to found a news agency with the name of Agence Gourdjı. He asked both for permission and for a salary (BOA, BEO 3589/269102, 13 C 1327/2 July 1909). The name of the agency in the application was not the Ottoman Telegraph Agency, but Agence Gourdjı. Two months later, Salih Gourdjı requested the privileges given to other agencies and newspapers, since he would distribute and publish the semi-official notifications of the Ottoman government. In the following months, the government and Salih Gourdjı signed a contract for cooperation (BOA, MV.130/73, 25 B 1327/12 August 1909).

It is not known whether the Ottoman News Agency was already operating nationally in 1909. It was collaborating with the Ottoman government, and the title of the agency was still Agence Gourdjı in March 1910 (BOA, MV. 137/103, 27 S 1328, 10 March 1910). My research suggests that the name Ottoman News Agency is first used in documents found in the archives from July 1910 (BOA, DH.MUİ. 107/44, 25 C 1328, 4 July 1910).

While collaborating with Agence Gourdjı, the Ottoman government was still looking for other options for a national news agency. In 1910, the Director of Domestic Press (*Matbû 'ât-ı Dâhiliye Müdüri*), Fazlı Necib Bey, visited news agencies in several European capitals, including Berlin, Vienna and Sofia. He wrote a report based on his observations and offering his views and suggestions. It was then decided to set up a commission consisting of officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of the Interior and Directorate of Post and Telegraph to found a telegraph agency under the Ottoman state. The agency would operate under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (BOA, DH.İD. 79/3 30 Eylül 1326/11 November 1910; BOA, DH.İD. 79/3, 7 Za 1328/10 November 1910).

Salih Gourdjı, who was eager to start a national news agency, was closely following all these discussions. At about the same time, in 1910, he and his colleague Hüseyin Tosun applied to the Ottoman government to found a semi-official news agency with the name Ottoman Telegraph Agency (BOA, MV.147/1, 4 Z 1328/7 December 1910). They

stated that all governments, even the small and newly established ones such as those of Romania and Bulgaria, had, with great sacrifices, constituted their own national news agencies by taking into consideration the needs, requirements and impetus of the political world. No news agencies like these had yet been constituted in the Ottoman Empire, they argued, and the agencies in Istanbul were pursuing their own goals and serving their own interests. Their point was that the interests of the Ottoman state, specifically in foreign policy, were not being protected due to the lack of a semi-official news agency, while the foreign agencies distributed 'malicious stories against the Ottoman government' (BOA, DH.İD. 79/3, 24 Teşrin-i Evvel 1326/6 November 1910).

After many letters between different ministries and officials of the Ottoman government, a motion finally reached the agenda of the Ottoman Chamber of Deputies (*Meclis-i Mebusan*) on 25 April 1911. The title of the motion was

The Law on the Telegraph Agency that its foundation in a semi-official structure is considered as required, provides exemption for the fees of telegrams in sending to the centres in the Ottoman domains which will be decided by the Ottoman government. (*Meclis-i Mebusan*, 12 Nisan 1327/25 April 1911)

The motion was discussed in detail and received some criticism. Some of the deputies opposed the motion because it deployed a private company for this mission. İbrahim Lütfü Pasha saw it as a French enterprise (*Meclis-i Mebusan Zabıt Ceridesi*, 1991: 525, Devre 1, İçtima Sene 3, İnikat 85). Fazlı Necib Bey stated that the government needed a telegraph agency for the country. He underlined the fact that all constitutional governments protected telegraph agencies, and these agencies, like Fournier in Austria, Reuters in Britain and Corriere in Italy, worked with the help of those governments. Fazlı Necib Bey said. 'With our own agency, we will inform the truth all over the world before these issues have been published in the world press' (*Meclis-i Mebusan Zabıt Ceridesi*, 1991: 525–526).

After arduous discussions, the motion was approved and became law on 25 April 1911 (*Meclis-i Mebusan Zabıt Ceridesi*, 1991: 529). The question remains to what extent the Ottoman Telegraph Agency was a semi-official news agency, and this needs comprehensive further research. The telegrams of the Ottoman Telegraph Agency were widely used by newspapers not only in Istanbul but also in the Ottoman provinces. This must have been the reason why Sir Louis Mallet (1914), British ambassador to Istanbul, was unhappy with the role of the agency, complaining that 'this semi-official telegraphic agency practically works under the Ministry of Interior' for German propaganda (p. 3).

In 1912 and 1913, the Ottoman Telegraph Agency mostly generated and distributed news about the Balkan Wars. The telegrams, now published by Gündüz (2015), demonstrate that almost all the information, which was highly dependent on military sources, was provided by the Ottoman government. The words 'us' and 'the enemy' were frequently used in its telegrams. An analysis of its news coverage suggests that it was an official voice of the Ottoman government, although it was a private company.

Many Turkish secondary sources state that this agency was abolished in 1914, and that the Ottoman government established the Ottoman National Telegraph Agency (*Millî Osmanlı Telgraf Ajansı*) in the same year (Şahin, 2012). The main reason for this change

seems to have been political. After signing the treaty for the Ottoman–German Alliance in August 1914, the Ottoman state became an ally of Germany and joined in World War I. The founder of the Ottoman Telegraph Agency was not a supporter of the Ottoman–German alliance. He was dismissed just after the Ottoman Empire signed a treaty of alliance with Germany in September 1914. Gourdjı claimed that the German ambassador in Istanbul offered him 40,000 marks to finance his agency in May 1914, and that he refused this offer. The bid was raised to 100,000 marks and again declined by him (Took News Agency on Order of Berlin, 1918). The Italian ambassador in Istanbul, Marquis Camillo Garroni, claimed that Salih Gourdjı was corrupt and had received money from the ambassadors of France and Russia for publishing material favourable to these two states (Kolođlu, 1995: 8).

Since the Ottoman National Telegraph Agency has not yet been studied and a catalogue search in the Ottoman state archives provided a very limited number of documents on this agency, it needs further comprehensive research. It is evident that the Ottoman government made a new contract with the new agency administration in November 1914 after the dismissal of Salih Gourdjı. Hüseyin Tosun, who was Erzurum Deputy at the time, was the director of agency (BOA, BEO, 4332/324854, 27 S 1333/15 January 1915).

It seems that the name of the agency was changed by adding the word ‘national’. The reason for this change may have been that it became a ‘national agency’ at a time of high nationalism in the Ottoman state for purposes of war propaganda. The agency was still operating in November 1918. It is not clear when the Ottoman National Telegraph Agency was closed down, but secondary sources state that it finished its operations at the end of 1918 (Kolođlu, 1994: 41).

After the Ottoman National Telegraph Agency ceased its operations, Agences la Turquie Havas Reuters started to operate in Istanbul, most probably late in 1918. It was jointly founded by the representatives of Havas and Reuters, Mathu and Ferguson, respectively. The board of directors included an official from the Ottoman Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Kolođlu (1994) suggests that the agency distributed news favourable to the British Empire and France, but he provides no further evidence of this (pp. 41–42). Kolođlu’s view may be that of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1989), the founder of the Republic of Turkey, who criticized Agences la Turquie Havas Reuter for sending false news about the Council of the Sultanate’s (*Saltanat Sûrâsı*) peace negotiations between the Ottoman Empire and the Allied Powers in 1919 (p. 33). Atatürk himself ordered the launch of a new agency, Anadolu, during the Turkish War of Independence in 1920 and himself examined dispatches in its early days (Bengi, 2012: 302–303).

Conclusion

This article has sought to explore how the idea of a national news agency emerged as a response to the activities of Havas and Reuters in the Ottoman Empire. It has thus revealed the complex relationships between international, national and local news organizations when there was no national news agency. In fact, it is not easy to classify the agencies established at that time according to these categories. The initial ventures mostly came from foreigners, who also played a key role in the development of the early press in the Ottoman Empire. The idea of a national news agency only emerged when

everything has failed: financial support to the private agencies, bribery and censorship. In short, the state gradually became convinced that a news agency had to become state-owned or state-run to protect its own interests in news.

Although the Ottoman Empire contractually belonged to the international agencies as their exclusive territory, this article shows that contractual arrangements have to be established on the ground. The view of both Havas and Reuters – and there were periods when they were competing against each other – was that it was essential to establish and secure a consistent and profitable flow of news to and from the Ottoman Empire, especially in times of conflict and war. This turned out to be difficult, since it required arrangements with local and national players and especially with the Ottoman state. However, being first on the scene, having the advantages of professional experience, technology and often the support of their governments, they soon dominated news distribution between Istanbul and the Ottoman Empire and Europe.

From the point of view of the Ottoman ruling elite, these agencies were the main sources of negative coverage of the Ottoman Empire in the European press. When they tried to change this situation, they largely failed. National and foreign journalists and businesspeople also tried, by collaborating with the international agencies and/or with the Ottoman government. The idea of having a national news agency was gradually strengthened, but this was only finally achieved when Anadolu was founded.

The main question is whether either the Ottoman Telegraph Agency or the Ottoman National Telegraph Agency was successful in its attempts to nationalize the news service. While their telegrams were frequently used in Ottoman newspapers, they were unable to change the coverage of the Ottoman state in European newspapers because the international agencies dominated news distribution in Europe. It turned out to be difficult to penetrate this established network, even with state support (the Ottoman state was financially weak during this period). The Ottoman government saw news distribution mainly as transmission, and not as journalism with its own distinct conventions, professionalism and practices. They considered that foreign journalists pursued the interests of their own people and states, and that news agencies attempted to make money by distributing ‘hostile’ news, which was perceived as ‘blackmail’. Perhaps mainly for this reason, the Ottoman National Telegraph Agency, as officials themselves acknowledged, could not meet the standards of news agency operation set by the international agencies (BOA, HR.SYS. 2103/12, 29 January 1917).

But why is it important to study the agencies in the Ottoman Empire? First, it shows how important news agencies were in international politics in this era. Second, it will clarify the relationships between international and national agencies. Third, studying them will help us to understand why a state-owned agency was eventually seen – not only in the Ottoman Empire – as the only available option. This in turn calls for more comparative research on other countries in order to understand why state-owned agencies gradually became dominant in many countries including, when Anadolu was founded, in Turkey.

Acknowledgements

The author is grateful to Prof. Terhi Rantanen for her very valuable contribution and support. He is thankful to Prof. Ferdan Ergut for his helpful comments in the earlier stages of this research. He also thanks the reviewers for their very helpful comments, and Jean Morris for proofreading.

Archival sources

Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi (Prime Ministry Ottoman Archives), Istanbul.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD

Servet Yanatma  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8650-5373>

References

- Agence Reuter Havas et Bullier (1870) *La Turquie*, 22 March.
- Akami T (2012) *Japan's News Propaganda and Reuters' News Empire in Northeast Asia, 1870–1934*. Dordrecht: Republic of Letters.
- Atatürk MK (1989) *Nutuk (Speech)*, vol. 1. Ankara, Turkey: Kültür Bakanlığı Yayınları.
- Baykal E (2013) *The Ottoman Press (1908-1923)*. Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Cambridge, Cambridge.
- Bektaş Y (2000) The Sultan's messenger: Cultural constructions of Ottoman telegraphy, 1847–1880. *Technology and Culture* 41(4): 669–696.
- Bengi H (2012) Tarihsel süreç içinde Anadolu Ajansı'nın özgün kurumsal yapısı [The unique institutional structure of the Anadolu Agency in historical process]. *Ankara Üniversitesi Türk İnkılâp Tarihi Enstitüsü Atatürk Yolu Dergisi* 50: 299–341.
- Boyar E (2006) The press and the palace: The two-way relationship between Abdülhamid II and the press, 1876-1908. *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* 69(3): 417–432.
- Boyd-Barrett O (1980) *The International News Agencies*. London: Constable.
- Davison R (1990) *Essays in Ottoman and Turkish History, 1774-1923: The Impact of the West*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.
- Derbordes R (2008) Representing 'informal empire' in the nineteenth century: Reuters in South America at the time of the war of the Pacific 1879-93. *Media History* 14(2): 121–139.
- Deringil S (1998) *Well-Protected Domains: Ideology and the Legitimation of Power in the Ottoman Empire, 1876-1909*. London; New York: I. B. Tauris.
- Efendi BA (1997) *İstanbul'da Yarım Asırlık Vekayi-i Mühimme* [The Significant Events in a Half-Century of Istanbul]. İstanbul, Turkey: Kitabevi.
- Gündüz A (2015) Osmanlı Telgraf Ajansı kayıtlarına göre Balkanlar'dan haberler [News from the Balkans according to the records of the Ottoman Telegraph Agency]. *Yeni Türkiye* 5(70): 6204–6238.
- Headrick DR (1991) *The Invisible Weapon: Telecommunications and International Politics 1851-1945*. New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kasaba R (1988) *The Ottoman Empire and the World Economy: The Nineteenth Century*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Keskinkılıç E (2014) *Bir Gazetecinin Gözüyle II: Abdülhamid: Nicolas Nicolaides* [Abdülhamid II Through the Eyes of a Journalist: Nicolas Nicolaides]. İstanbul, Turkey: Yitik Hazine.
- Koloğlu O (1994) *Havas-Reuter'den Anadolu Ajansına* [From Havas-Reuter to the Anadolu Agency]. Ankara, Turkey: Çağdaş Gazeteciler Derneği Yayınları.
- Koloğlu O (1995) Osmanlı Telgraf Ajansı'nın kurucusu Salih Gürcü [Founder of Ottoman Telegraph Agency: Salih Gourdj]. *Tarih ve Toplum* 23(134): 5–9.

- Koloğlu O (1998) *Avrupa'nın Kıskaçında Abdülhamit* [Abdülhamit in the Grip of Europe]. İstanbul, Turkey: İletişim.
- Mallet L (1914) *Despatch from His Majesty's Ambassador at Constantinople (Louis Mallet) Summarising Events Leading Up to Rupture of Relations with Turkey, and Reply Thereto*. London: Harrison.
- Meclis-i Mebusan Zabıt Ceridesi (1991) *Meclis-i Mebusan Zabıt Ceridesi* [Minutes of the Ottoman Chamber of Deputies]. Ankara, Turkey: TBMM Basımevi.
- Nalbach AS (1999) *The ring combination: Information, power, and the world news agency Cartel*. PhD Thesis, University of Chicago, Chicago, IL.
- Rantanen T (1990) *Foreign News in Imperial Russia: The Relationship between international and Russian News Agencies, 1856–1914* [Annales Academiae Scientiarum Fennicae, Dissertationes humanarum litterarum No. 58]. Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedekatemia.
- Rantanen T (2006) Foreign dependence and domestic monopoly: The European news cartel and U.S. associated presses, 1861-1932. *Media History* 12(1): 19–35.
- Rantanen T (2019) News agencies from telegraph bureaus to cyberfactories. In: *Communication: Oxford Research Encyclopedias*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Available at: <https://oxfordre.com/communication/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228613.001.0001/acrefore-9780190228613-e-843>
- Read D (1992) *The Power of News: The History of Reuters*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Rilke AG (2009) *Avrupa Saraylarından Yıldız'a: İstanbul'da Bir Hoş Sada* [From European Palaces to Yıldız: A Nice Echo in Istanbul]. İstanbul, Turkey: İş Bankası Yayınları; Leipzig: O. Beyer.
- Şahin M (2012) *Ajans Gazeteciliği ve Haber Ajansları* [Agency Journalism and News Agencies]. Ankara, Turkey: Pelikan Yayınları.
- Shu S-C (2015) Managing international news-agency relations under the Guomindang: China's Central News Agency, Zhao Minheng, and Reuters, 1931–1945. *Frontiers of History in China* 10(4): 594–644.
- Silberstein-Loeb J (2014) *The International Distribution of News: The Associated Press, Press Association, and Reuters, 1848–1947*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Tchaprazov SV (2009) The eastern question, western Europe, and the Balkans in Fin-de-Siècle Literature. PhD Thesis, University of Minnesota, Minnesota, MN.
- Took news agency on order of Berlin (1918) *The New York Times*, 20 August.
- Tworek HJ (2019) *News from Germany: The Competition to Control World Communications, 1900–1945*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Vyslozil W and Wippersberg J (2014) *Group 39: History of an Exceptional Alliance of News Agencies: Character, Business and Policy of Independent News Agencies in Europe*. Vienna: APA.
- Winseck DR and Pike RM (2007) *Communication and Empire: Media, Markets, and Globalization, 1860–1930*. Durham, NC; London: Duke University Press.
- Yalman AE (1914) *The development of modern Turkey as measured by its press*. PhD Thesis, Columbia University, New York.
- Yanatma S (2015) *The international news agencies in the Ottoman Empire, 1854-1908*. Unpublished PhD Thesis, Middle East Technical University, Ankara, Turkey.
- Yerlikaya I (1994) Abdülhamid döneminde yabancı gazete ve haber ajanslarının şantaj ve yolsuzlukları [Blackmail and corruption of foreign newspapers and news agencies under Abdülhamid II]. *Toplumsal Tarih* 1(3): 17–19.
- Yosmaoğlu IK (2003) Chasing the printed word: Press censorship in the Ottoman Empire, 1876–1913. *Turkish Studies Association Journal* 27(1–2): 15–49.
- Zürcher EJ (2017) *Turkey: A Modern History*. London: I. B. Tauris.

Zürcher EJ (2019) The Young Turk revolution: Comparisons and connections. *Middle Eastern Studies* 55(4): 481–498.

Author biography

Servet Yanatma is a Visiting Fellow in the Department of Media and Journalism at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) and a Freelance Journalist in the United Kingdom. He holds a PhD degree in history from the Middle East Technical University in Ankara. His research interests are news agencies, the political economy of the media, media ownership, public diplomacy, online news consumption, and the media and politics in the late Ottoman Empire and in modern Turkey.