Koloğlu describes the rumbustious post-revolution press scene of 1908, characterised by the emergence of hundreds of newspapers and periodicals, with the metaphor of an “explosion.”¹ The freedom discourse of the Young Turks, during their long opposition to Abdülhamid II, sparked this explosion. For the first time, though not for long, all the ideologies jostling together in Ottoman society had access to media in which to express themselves freely. Political and ideological debates formerly held in closed and private circles became public in these newspapers and periodicals, most of which did not last. This was also a period when the seeds of the modern Turkish press were planted, in terms of capitalisation, professionalisation, ideological differentiation, and technical advance.

In order to understand the diversity and profundity of Ottoman thought at the time, one needs first to explore the countless periodicals. Some remarkable periodicals were published between the years 1908 and 1918. Most of them became prominent through their content and ideology, and brought fame to their editorial staff. Examples include the great journal of Turkish nationalism Türk Yurdu [The Turkish land], the voice of the Islamic movement Sırat-ı Müstakim [The straight way], the flagship of liberalism and positivism Ulum-i İktisadiye ve İçtimaïye Mecmuası [Journal of economic and social sciences], the leading women’s journal Kadınlar Dünyası [World of women], and even the legendary Servet-i Fünun [Wealth of sciences], from the era of Abdülhamid but continuing for many years after.

Şehbal, however, differed primarily in its printing quality, visuals, paper, layout, binding, and aesthetic presentation. Although it had a talented editorial staff and valuable content, its “form” shone out at once; therefore in the history of Turkish journalism Şehbal deserves close examination.

¹ Orhan Koloğlu, 1908 Basın Patlaması (İstanbul: Bas-Haş, 2005).
First, in terms of printing quality, Şehbal remained almost unrivalled for decades, if we except the short-lived Musavver Hale [Illustrated nimbus] and the elegant Resimli Kitap [The illustrated book]. Its true rivals appeared a few decades later, in the Republican era. Thus we aim in this article to analyse a periodical which pushed the limits of its time, and was awarded a gold medal in Turin for the quality of its printing in 1911, two years after its first publication.

The 1908 Revolution, the Press, and an Intellectual of the Second Constitutional Period

The Abolition of Censorship and the Press Boom

The autocratic regime of Sultan Abdülhamid II, which started in 1878 and gradually hardened over the years, can be summed up in two words: “spying” and “censorship.” The wish of Abdülhamid II to control all elements which threatened to affect public opinion made censorship an essential institution of the regime, and an effective administrative instrument for him.2

Because of this censorship, the people in oppressed Istanbul were not aware of events taking place on 23 July 1908 in Rumeli (centres such as Bitola and Thessaloniki) and the declaration of freedom by İttihat ve Terakki Cemiyeti (the Committee of Union and Progress). The small and discreet official announcement published on the front pages of Istanbul’s newspapers the next day, that elections would be held and a new National Assembly formed, surprised everyone.

The journalists in Istanbul, of whom some were members of the Committee of Union and Progress, held a meeting the same day and decided not to send sample copies of their newspapers to be checked by the censor, but to spend the night at the printing houses in order to prevent the censor’s officers from entering. On Saturday, 25 July 1908, for the first time in thirty years, newspapers in Istanbul were published uncensored.

Babiali (the centre of the press in Istanbul) played the leading role in turning the confusion and hesitancy of 24 July into the enthusiasm of 25 July. Newspapers awakened the sleeping city to march through the streets. The printing houses of İkdam and Servet-i Fünun (leading papers

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