

# The Myth of Journalistic Impartiality under Austerity

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Eurocrisis in the  
Press

By [Yiannis Baboulias](#)

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“Stuff is biased” lamented a Greek journalist after a piece of mine was [published](#) in the *New Statesman* last February. In the piece, I was making the case that four young anarchists who had been arrested after a failed bank robbery were subjected to torture by the Greek police. Nowhere was I hiding what they did. By simply looking at the evidence, I made my case. The police’s side did not feature in any prominent way in that piece, or its [follow-up](#), mainly because their announcements were inconsistent, and the evidence they provided shaky or fake. Their side though, and the Ministry of Citizen Protection’s, who jumped to their defence, was the only thing on Greek TV channels and newspapers (with few exceptions) for days. On the same day the piece was published “reports from foreign media simply seek to demonise the Greek police, not thinking that these people have mothers too” a pro-austerity TV station broadcasted, its aggressively partial pundit failing to mention who he was talking about (only the *New Statesman* and *The Guardian* had run the story on the day).



The notoriously partial Greek media and their employees leap into action every time “the other side” does them an injustice. As with the [supposedly](#) left-wing biased BBC in Britain, this behaviour appears to be pretty consistent throughout Europe, especially when it comes to the heated debates around austerity and the handling of the European situation. But would it serve me, or any journalist who covers these issues, to offer precious inches of his/her column simply to represent the dominant discourse, when the government-friendly media refuse to extend the same courtesy?

Looking to Greece, the case can be made that no left-wing journalist or critic of the government owes anything to those fundamental principles of journalism: balance and impartiality. These principles, put in place to ensure that those in power cannot abuse the media to their advantage, now only serve to allocate more than their fair share to the dominant narrative. Statistics from Greece paint a shocking picture: according to a [report](#) by *Paron* newspaper, the coalition government’s announcements and speakers, take up 63.4% of the time political parties are allocated on television. The troika and European officials do very much the same for the time remaining, taking up a total of 57.2% of international coverage.

This can be really troubling when faced with cases such as the one [featured](#) in *The Guardian* last year, in which fifteen anti-fascists were reported to have been tortured by the Greek police in October 2012. Not one mainstream news outlet reported on the subject in Greece. All of them carried the Ministry of Citizen Protection’s threats to sue *The Guardian* for publishing the story. Since the spring of 2013, they have [embarked upon](#) convincing the Greek people that the economy is taking a turn for the better, skipping the part where because of over-taxation, massive unemployment and falling tax-revenues, the state makes [500 million Euros less](#) than the targets it set in the beginning of the year. Just last month, a slim budget surplus was [reported](#) everywhere, 24/7, for weeks, with the sum not including the municipalities’ budget for instance. A debt of 8 billion Euros to private companies has also mysteriously disappeared from the reports. The story still went out exactly as the government wanted it to.

The situation in the rest of Europe is not much better. For instance, a big chunk of the German press pays no respect to the commitment to balanced reporting and impartiality. When the German *Financial Times* [printed](#) an article in Greek, warning Greek voters not to vote for left-wing SYRIZA in the days before the 2012 elections, the country’s politicians barely blinked. In what way can this be considered balanced? Was there a different perspective

presented in the leading article of this supposedly well-respected financial daily? Or when, much lower down the journalistic food chain, *Das Bild* [calls](#) Greeks lazy and profligate on a weekly basis, even now that it has emerged from every possible side that the Greek programme could not possibly have [worked](#), and that the German government was fully aware of this? Or was a critique of the Dutch government, and its extreme stance towards the South, anywhere to be found, given the private debt bubble they have been sitting on (as was [reported](#) recently in the British *Financial Times*)?

For many young journalists, the idea of an impartial “view from nowhere” is suspicious, to say the least. As the British journalist Laurie Penny [wrote](#) for *Jacobin* in a piece under the title ‘A view from somewhere’: “the fallacy of bland and faceless reporting hurts journalism, by allowing bias and prejudice to masquerade as hands-off objectivity, by giving reporters license not to be honest about how their outlook affects their output”.

I would add to this, that for those of us who are honest about where we come from and what we support, as long as we stick to the evidence and speak truth, there is no need to lay any claim to a moral high ground that simply does not exist.

Allowing for the dominant spin to abuse the limitations of each format, crying “wolf” at every turn, when throughout Europe the mainstream media are used to tarnish any sort of dissent (from Greece, to Sweden, and also here in Britain) without any sense of obligation even to the merest of truths sometimes, is a duty that we now have. If evidence supports what you are saying, there is no need to waste column inches or airtime to fit in lies, half-truths and prejudice. As long as the public is exposed to programmes demonising e.g. benefit claimants (I am looking at you, BBC), the point of journalism is not to “play well with others” but, as ever, to speak truth to power. And the unquestionable repetition of pro-austerity rhetoric is definitely not that.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Euro Crisis in the Press blog, nor of the London School of Economics.*