

What is wrong with the Greek media?

LSE Phd researcher **Vaios Papanagnou** reviews a new report on **Media Policy and Independent Journalism in Greece** and draws an analysis of the state of the country's journalism.

The unravelling of the Greek media system has been spectacular. This was not only due to its centrality in the public space, but more importantly because of the intensity of its destruction. The annihilation of the two financial pillars that supported the Greek press, advertising and the banking system, sent the industry, which traditionally relied on advertising revenue to balance low circulation, into a steep freefall. For their expansion in the last 20 years the media had leaned heavily on the banks for funding. The current dire state that media find themselves in is documented insightfully and in depth in the report on **Media Policy and Independent Journalism in Greece** by Petros Iosifidis (City University) and Dimitris Boucas (LSE).

As the report finds, the crisis accentuated the core malaise of the Greek media, the infamous 'diaploki'. The interviewees of this report describe this interlocking of power relations as a triangle:

“Those who own the largest media corporations also hold leadership positions in significant economic sectors. The problem increases when we take into account that due to the structure of the Greek economy, their economic activities (oil, shipping, construction etc.) depend largely on the state. As a result, when part of this activity is not lawful or involves preferential treatment or clientelist relations, it is in the interest of these entrepreneurs not to provide objective and transparent information in the media outlets that they control.”

The concentration of financial, state and media power into a handful of organisations and individuals has been facilitated by the legislative framework introduced by successive Socialist and Conservative governments in the course of the last 20 years. The policies that were supposed to regulate the mediascape have proven ineffective and thus allowed for the creation of large conglomerates that operate across multiple media platforms. As the report shows, the degree of connivance between the state, media and financial elites is exemplified in the case of Digea, a company that offers digital terrestrial television services and is jointly owned by the big TV stations: it is effectively a monopoly. In the recent auction for the allocation of digital frequencies it was the only candidate; at that time ERT, the public broadcaster, had been abruptly shut down by the former government.

Controversially, Greek TV stations do not hold permanent transmission licenses; they operate on temporary licenses renewed by the government. The left wing government of Syriza campaigned against this practice, aligning themselves with the disgruntled majority that called for the dismantlement of the oligarchic system. In the wake of their election to power the government declared that the stations would have to pay the state retroactively for their broadcasting; that there will be a new auction for the re-allocation of frequencies; and that the status of Digea will be reconsidered. While a solid legislative framework is still to be voted in, the oligarchs contest the legality of the government's objectives and retort to the practice of exerting political pressure through their media outlets.

Greece is a country where the media are strongly determined by political parallelism. An effect of that is documented in the report: in 2013, amidst massive cutbacks, the state's advertising increased to €34.7 million, compared to the previous year's €23.2 million. This was part of the ND-PASOK government's strategy to ensure that media continued to present the deployment of austerity measures as a 'success story'. The narrative of 'there is no alternative' was fiercely constructed in television news, where Syriza was presented as a populist party with extremist

ideas and practices, the other side of the neo-nazi Golden Dawn. Supporting austerity made no business sense either; for Mega Channel (previously the country's favourite station, now austerity evangelist) this disconnection from the public translated into scraping for second or third place.

There is nonetheless more nuance in how the politicisation of the media field works and it can be best gauged by looking at the legacy news media. Traditionally claiming the popular centrist position, they advocated for austerity during the crisis. Nonetheless, a certain degree of variance has been allowed. Slight deviations from full support of the government were permitted in the cases of its more extreme policies or the exposure of sinister transactions. In these newsrooms one or two divergent voices that articulate a moderately left discourse are strategically allowed. While this time honoured tactic of ambivalence never crossed the line towards outright support for the opposition, it served two purposes: keeping up the semblance of independent journalism and asserting the oligarchs' power to influence the public.

In this politicised journalistic field the occasional deviations from the official governmental line rarely come from an autonomous editorial aim to expose spin or investigate malpractice. They predominantly reflect shifts in relations of power in the political system. As groups or individuals vie for power, they are able to feed the press with leaked information that exposes their competitors. Access to power, in the form of privileged social connections with the business and political elites are used strategically within organisations towards ascending to and maintaining senior positions. This affects the journalistic product; commentary pieces are prioritised instead of reporting which is typically shallow: most reportages read as advocacy arguments supported instrumentally by 2-3 sources. After massive layoffs and cutbacks fewer reporters write more copy for print and online, and consequently quality suffers. Furthermore the Greek newsrooms increasingly look like those of days past when the profession was closed, populated mostly by the elites and their courts. Lower level journalists in fear of redundancies show their deference to management in all manners, not least through naturalised processes of self-censorship.

The majority of the report's informants come from the 'alternative' media that have been formed in the last 5 years. These are mostly peripheral players in the Greek media field. While they lack large audiences, they can operate autonomously from the power of the oligarchs. In fact they perform a journalistic identity, termed by Greek Journalism scholars '**radical journalism**', whose central values refer precisely to the attack and exposure of the intertwining power relations from a left perspective.

While they perform an essential critical position in the public space they are still part of a homogenous field. They suffer from the same limitations in terms of professionalization as their mainstream competitors: limited resources, affinity for opinion pieces, and advocacy reporting. They too are politicised within the wider left wing, and differentiated between them in a manner that reflects the left's fragmentation, and the governing party's internal conflicts. Their peripheral position does not allow them to effectively renew the journalistic field. This is also due to the milieu of journalists; in so far as they have been professionally educated in the mainstream media, and come from similar backgrounds, they largely share the same practical consciousness as their mainstream counterparts. While modern journalists have done away with objectivity as the '**view from nowhere**', the view from somewhere, even the left, does not automatically validate journalism in terms of its democratic function.

This blog gives the views of the author, and does not represent the position of the LSE Media Policy Project blog, nor of the London School of Economics.

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