The Impact of Austerity on the Greek News Media and Public Sphere

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Introduction: Capitalism, Crisis and the Media

The case of contemporary Greece demonstrates that despite the ongoing capitalist crisis neoliberalism has been entrenched rather than discredited. According to Hall, Massey and Rustin, “[t]he burden of ‘solving’ the crisis has been disproportionately off-loaded on to working people, targeting vulnerable, marginalised groups” (2013: 4, 5); and has served as an excuse for the “further restructuring of state and society along market lines, with a raft of ideologically-driven ‘reforms’ designed to advance privatisation and marketisation”.

The dynamic of change unleashed in the context of capitalist crises concomitantly involves significant ideological and institutional shifts in the field of politics and culture (Harvey 2014: ix). The media system is central to this very process as media portrayals constitute how the ‘reality’ of the crisis is constructed, mapped out and contextualized. This paper addresses such recent shifts within the Greek media system in relation to its political role, the breadth of opinions represented and the open spaces it provides to alternative views. It also discusses some examples from my research on the representation of the crisis in Greece from 2011 to 2015, which is part of an interdisciplinary project addressing media coverage of crisis in the European Union (Coen and Nikolaidis forthcoming 2016, Nikolaidis 2015a, 2015b).

Public Communication During the Crisis: the Greek Case

The effects of the crisis on the media field may be seen as being driven by a combination of polarization and fragmentation. It is characterized by three key developments. First, the chief tendency of the mainstream, privately owned and market-driven media has been to provide ideological legitimacy to the so-called memorandum/bail-out agreements, the policies of austerity stemming from them, and the political elites implementing them. Second, while mainstream Greek journalism sustained and reproduced the hegemonic neoliberal agenda (Doudaki 2015, Mylonas 2014), a simultaneous counter-tendency has emerged: the growth of a multitude of alternative news outlets mostly online. These have been a source of critical views on the memorandum policies. Katalipsi ESIEA, the blog of the 2009 occupation of the Athenian Union of Journalists headquarters (Siapera, Papadopoulou and Archontakis 2014), is a typically radical example highlighting, among other things, the impact of austerity in the form of redundancies and exploitative precarious labour in the Greek media industries.

Third, is the closing down of the public broadcaster ERT in 2013, a development which made the clash between the mainstream and alternative online news agendas all the more stark. ERT was abruptly shut down by the previous Conservative-led government as part of its policy of cuts. The staff occupied the headquarters and continued to broadcast online with the support of EBU and Greek alternative news websites until they were evicted by riot police. ERT was succeeded by a failed attempt to establish a new broadcaster, and was eventually restored by the current government.

The closing down of ERT has been rightly seen as a blow to media pluralism (Iosifidis and Boucas 2015: 19), but it is also part of a wider set of pressures on journalists, including censorship, self-censorship, prosecution and police violence (Syllas 2013). As a result, the country has the European Union’s second lowest ranking in the 2015 World Press Freedom Index (2015), having fallen 56 places during the years of the crisis.
The Political Economy of a Media Oligopoly

An analysis of public communication in such a context of crisis and change needs to take into account the ways in which major media organizations operate as privately owned and profit-orientated capitalist enterprises. Not least of all because the Greek case is characterised by highly concentrated ownership across media sectors (Leandros 2010), and has often been seen as constituting a media oligopoly with connections to political elites (Iosifidis and Boucas 2015: 14). The existing concentration of media power is the outcome of major structural shifts in media ownership during the 1980s. Finance, originating mainly from construction, shipping and the oil industries, was then invested in the print media sector. Along with the remaining traditional publishers, private capital then gained control of broadcasting through the emergence of private television, which has remained practically unlicensed and unregulated (Nikolaidis 1999).

Furthermore, privately owned media organizations have accumulated severe levels of debt (Darzanou 2013). They largely operate through bank loans, into which a judicial inquiry was recently launched (Kitsios 2015), as well as through favourable treatment of their debt by pro-memorandum political elites (Papadopoulos 2013). Media debt characteristically includes more than 24m euro of unpaid tax for the use of broadcasting frequencies during the 2011-2014 period. The overall picture is that private economic interests have achieved significant control over the public sphere in Greece under politically privileged and economically unhealthy terms. This is not to suggest that there is a deterministic, cause-and-effect type of relation between capitalist control of the media and journalistic content. It is, however, to suggest that the market is not neutral, and that the economic aspects of media companies set the general limits of their operation. Thus, the activity of private and concentrated media ownership in a deregulated market is first and foremost a political issue, which threatens to undermine the quality of contemporary democracy (Nikolaidis 1999, 2008). The latter is characteristically demonstrated in the coverage of the economic crisis.

Mainstream Media and the Politics of Austerity

The Greek case reveals an increasingly homogenised content appearing across the mainstream media. This has resulted in a coherent support for the bail-out agreements, the implementation of the neoliberal policies they involve, and hostile coverage of opposition and critique by left-wing parties and movements. The editorials and opinion columns of the mainstream newspapers To Vima and Kathimerini, ideologically positioned in the centre and the right respectively, are exemplary of this. They both share a distinctly ideological narrative that depoliticises the crisis by neutralizing its systemic character.

The crisis is discursively constructed as a national emergency. This demands a consensus response from all the major political parties (Kathimerini 2014c, To Vima 2011a) in order to avert imminent financial and social meltdown (Karakousis 2011). Under such terms, austerity is legitimized as an objective economic necessity and/or a necessary lesser evil (Mandravelis 2011). Unsurprisingly, economic recovery is often interpreted in explicitly pro-business terms. To Vima urges workers unions to willingly succumb to wage losses so as to “facilitate” industrialists in their activities (2011b), and appeals to the patriotism of businessmen in the hope of turning Greece “into a contemporary El Dorado” (2012). Kathimerini celebrates both the identification of countries as brands (2014a) and the equation of politics with management (2014b).
The interpretation of the crisis in national terms constitutes the prevalence of consensus politics which, at the same time, is also manifested in mainstream media attacks on left-wing critics of the bail-out agreements and austerity. In one characteristic example, the left is repeatedly addressed as “loony” (Mandravelis 2012, 2015), in a fashion reminiscent of Thatcher era British tabloids. The Greek case, however, is paradigmatic of a far more aggressive rhetorical strategy, the so-called ‘theory of the two extremes,’ aiming to delegitimise the left by equating it with the violence of the Nazi party Golden Dawn. In two notorious examples, this strategy was manifested in almost identical titles in different newspapers (Kasimatis 2012, Pretenteris 2012). Ironically, it was the mainstream media that contributed to the rise of the Nazi party amidst the crisis (Psarras 2012). Golden Dawn was whitewashed through high profile interviews on private television (hori mantri 2015) and fake news was manufactured in their favour (Ios 2013). Just five days before the murder of the anti-fascist musician Pavlos Fyssas by Golden Dawn, which obliged authorities to begin long-overdue prosecutions of the party as a criminal organization, they were still considered as a potential part of a conservative alliance (Papadimitriou 2013).

**Alternative Media and Meta-Journalism**

Such an overwhelmingly flawed performance of the media’s democratic role was also displayed during the recent referendum on further austerity measures. The mainstream media were accused of fear mongering and bias in favour of the ‘Yes’ vote. Subsequently the Athenian union of journalists referred nine prominent private television journalists to its disciplinary board. In two well-known Facebook posts which went viral, content analysis of television revealed the striking imbalance of coverage of the rallies for the ‘no’ and the ‘yes’ vote, which strongly favoured the latter (Petropoulos 2015a, 2015b).

Alternative media has offered an important counter to the mainstream. In Greece it is a multifaceted field consisting of independent websites and magazines, crowdfunded documentaries, digital radio stations, and a thriving community of bloggers and social network users. It has been enriched by the online presence of anti-austerity groups, the antifascist movement, grassroots syndicalism and left-wing organizations. As a whole, this field represents key features of citizen journalism and includes an active tradition of open publishing.

However, it also has limitations. First, the emerging relationship between, on the one hand, alternative news and social movements and, on the other, commercial social media platforms, displays the effectiveness but also the contradictions that characterize cases such as Occupy (Fuchs 2014). Secondly, the exploitation of digital platforms by the Nazi party Golden Dawn (Kompatsiaris and Mylonas 2015) remains a politically dangerous blind spot.

The political and journalistic implications of the emergence of bottom-up pressures online may be demonstrated in the case of Twitter, where the mainstream media have been given hashtags consisting of the names of private television stations and the slang word for ‘ridiculous’ (#mega_xeftiles, #skai_xeftiles, etc.). In one characteristic case, a trending hashtag titled ‘flying anarchists’ (#iptamenoi_anarxikoi) was used to effectively ridicule and contradict the coverage of clashes between police and protestors on the private television channel Ant1. Its reporter claimed to have access to exclusive information on, among other things, an “airborne anarchist brigade”, and was eventually held accountable by the online community for his adoption of the perspective of the police (Haralampopoulos 2014). This example demonstrates the potential of challenging official definitions and contesting the
power of sources from below. At the same time, however, it also demonstrates that, despite important meta-journalistic victories against the mainstream media, the latter maintain their dominant reach towards large audiences, and that official power holders continue to enjoy privileged access to them.

**Austerity, Consensus Politics and the Media System**

The multi-layered economic, political and social changes driven by the current crisis pose continuous challenges to the political role of the media system. Current ideological and institutional shifts suggest the formation of an unprecedented elite political consensus in support of the neoliberal restructuring of Greek society. Pivotal to this development has been the shift of the SYRIZA-led Government away from its anti-austerity electoral platform, and its endorsement of a third memorandum agreement to more austerity measures and privatizations. Perhaps more importantly, however, the prevailing consensus has also entrenched national narratives. These frame the crisis in terms of an opposition between Greece and powerful EU member states such as Germany, at the expense of a critique of neoliberalism and class politics both in Greece and across the EU.

The extent to which alternative online media may be able to rejuvenate public communication in an era of consensus politics remains to be seen. However, the implementation of austerity, as a principle means of devaluing labour power and redistributing wealth towards capital, depends upon the disciplining of the affected workforce and the ideological assimilation of opposition. Thus, the direct connection between the economics and the politics of the crisis suggests that law and order news remain a key media topic necessary for contesting official definitions.

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