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Transparencia mediática, oligopolios y democracia
¿Quién nos cuenta el cuento?
Indicadores de rentabilidad social y políticas en radio y
televisión: América Latina y Europa Mediterránea

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Lara Espinar Medina (Coordinadores)

Separata

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Título del Capítulo
«Democracy and media transparency:
systemic failures in greek radio ecosystem
and the rise of alternative web radio»

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El libro *Transparencia mediática, oligopolios y democracia ¿Quién nos cuenta el cuento?* está integrado en la colección «Periodística» de Comunicación Social Ediciones y Publicaciones.

Nos encontramos ante un hecho incuestionable: desde hace décadas el proceso de concentración mediática es la norma en los estados contemporáneos y el poder político se ve supeditado a las líneas editoriales de los oligopolios mediáticos que tratan de conducir y representar a la opinión pública desde la opinión publicada. Así, las corporaciones de medios se han convertido en armas de propaganda de un modelo que se resiste al cambio y son el sustento del imaginario imperante en torno a la felicidad proporcionada por el consumo. La ausencia de regulaciones efectivas y la concentración mediática rompe el equilibrio de poderes que define a los sistemas democráticos.

Transparencia mediática, oligopolios y democracia ¿Quién nos cuenta el cuento? pretende desvelar esta situación mediante la aplicación del Indicador de Rentabilidad Social en Comunicación (IRSCOM®) desarrollado por Laboratorio de Comunicación y Cultura (COMAndalucía) de la Universidad de Málaga, una herramienta que busca hacer transparente el comportamiento de los medios y permitir la introducción de mejoras mediante el reflejo de sus fortalezas y debilidades, posibilitando asimismo la implementación de políticas públicas eficaces en pos de la transparencia mediática y la rentabilidad social de la Comunicación.

La obra acomete en una primera parte el estudio de la situación del mercado de medios radifónicos y de televisión en España y, en una segunda parte, el diagnóstico de situación en buen número de países latinoamericanos y de la Europa mediterránea que permitan la aplicación de este indicador en sus respectivos países.

> «Relevar los déficits democráticos, resaltar sus fallos normativos y de control, es ya iniciar el camino para la fijación de unas alternativas democráticas en políticas públicas de comunicación» (Del *Prólogo* de Enrique Bustamante.)

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Democracy and media transparency: systemic failures in greek radio ecosystem and the rise of alternative web radio

Lambrini Papadopoulou
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1. Introduction

Independent and free media are considered to be an essential component of any democratic society. Especially in countries that have been hit hard by the economic crisis and austerity measures, such as Greece, the need for independent journalism to act as watchdog, on behalf of civil society is more important than ever. However, the clientelistic relationships upon which the whole Greek media landscape is built, leaves little room for a journalism that investigates, exposes and holds those in power accountable. It is within this context, we argue, that alternative web radio stations are emerging, taking advantage of the internet technology in order to create bottom-up journalistic initiatives that challenge the current narratives and seek to constitute a new paradigm of journalism.

This paper sets out to examine the general characteristics of the Greek media ecosystem but also goes on to examine the particular conditions that led to the current media crisis. It also discusses the legislative framework surrounding Greek media. Finally, this paper aims to provide a brief overview of the alternative web radios that have emerged in the current media ecosystem, by presenting in three Greek alternative web radio stations, describing their basic characteristics, principles, structures and their views on journalistic practices.

2. Greek media landscape: clientelism, concentration, diaploki and rousfeti

Various researchers have outlined the long-lasting peculiarities of the Greek media landscape and the relationship between media and powerful people, trying to shed light on the degree and shapes of media concentration and control as well as on the effects of this widespread phenomenon.

Hallin and Papathanassopoulos (2002) in their research on the media systems of southern Europe used the notion of clientelism in order to describe the media ecosystem in Greece. They defined clientelism as a pattern of social organization in which access to social resources is controlled by patrons and delivered to clients in exchange for various kinds of support, typically contrasted with forms

of citizenship in which access to resources is based on universalistic criteria and formal equality before the law. They argued that clientelistic relationships have been central to the social and political organization of Greece where the notion is also known as *rousfeti*. Anagnostou, Psychogiopoulou and Kandyla (2010) have also pointed out that the development of media in Greece has been inseparably linked to the country's political system and the various social and economic interests that are represented in it. Another term that is used to describe the Greek media ecosystem is *diaploki*. The term was introduced in 1993 by former Prime Minister, Konstantinos Mitsotakis, who reportedly said that he lost his power because of *diaploki*, referring to the collusion or interlocking relationship of the politics and government of Greece's Parliamentary Republic with the owners of the radio stations (Sims, 2003).

The result of *diaploki* and the clientelistic relationships is a deficit in media pluralism and the concentration of media ownership in the hands of a powerful few.

Leandros (2010) points out that media pluralism is a concept that embraces aspects such as diversity in the ownership of media outlets, variety in the sources of information and the range of content available to the public. Diversity of ownership, citizens access to a variety of information sources, viewpoint diversity, and program diversity are thus, essential for media pluralism. However, as he points out, whereas in other countries efforts were made and legislation was passed to discourage or forbid the concentration of media, in Greece regulatory responses to the problems of media concentration and cross ownership were contradictory and ineffective. Even when legislation existed, media owners tended to ignore it. On the other hand, legal provisions, anti-concentration rules and restrictions that attempted to limit the concentration of media ownership were passed through the Parliament, but were never enforced. In this way the government satisfied the media owners who aspired to strengthen their position in the new communication map of the country (Leandros, 2010).

The result was the creation of a powerful oligopoly around a small number of media corporations that own national dailies, radio and TV stations, many magazines, and book publishing houses, and extend their activities to the new media, telecommunications and culture in order to try to influence public opinion and to exert pressure in the political arena to the benefit of their business interests (Papathanassopoulos, 2001).

3. A brief history of Greek radio: savage deregulation and systemic failures

Greek radio hasn't escaped from the instrumentalization described above, since the electronic media industry was thrown into anomie right from its inception (Leandros, 2000). According to Papathanasopoulos (1997), greek broadcasting has a symbiotic relationship with the political controversies of the country — both radio and television were born and established. More specifically, radio was formed in the late 1930s under the Metaxas dictatorship, thus regarded as «arm of the state». The same situation continued during the Dictatoship and state

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monopoly wasn't really abolished even after the restoration of parliamentary Democracy in 1974.

Over the 1980's and 1990's a restructuring process took place. The main characteristics of this change were reflected in the following events: a) the unregulated commercialization of broadcasting sector, giving rise to the formation of a chaotic image in the audiovisual area, b) the enlargement of the advertising market, which serves as the economic mainstay of the media enterprises helping them to develop their plans and increase their content, c) the technological progress of the publishing and printing sector that contributes to improving the quality of newspapers and magazines with reduced cost and hence to stimulating the public demand (Veneti & Karadimitriou, 2013).

In 1983, the movement to privatize greek radio emerged, envisioning the idea of free radio and advocating pluralism (Sims, 2003). The trigger for the greek deregulation was given in 1987 within the radio sector. The country's three greatest municipalities, i.e. the towns of Athens, Thessaloniki and Piraeus, established and operated municipal radio stations, with no prior official license to broadcast. This episode served as the inaugural signal for the launch of a «savage deregulation» (Hallin & Mancini, 2004).

The liberalization of the radio and television market in the late 1980's inaugurated a period of regulatory uncertainty, initially due to the state's inability to cope with the deregulation challenge and subsequently perpetuated as a means to keep the broadcasting media in check, influence their content and hopefully secure positive coverage (Anagnostou *et al.*, 2010).

Since the late 1980's, when the greek audiovisual market was liberalized, a series of legislative acts have been adopted as part of the state's media policy to regulate the domestic media market. Successive governments, each one with its own agenda and media favourites, have sought to dictate the conditions of electronic media performance. Successive legal acts, lead to an overregulated and extremely detailed, albeit complex, legal framework (Anagnostou *et al.*, 2010).

In 1989, the Government set up the Greek National Council for Radio and Television (NCRT), an administrative authority with the exclusive competence for the control of the broadcast media. Its initial responsibilities illustrated the wish of the political majority of the time to retain control of the newly liberated broadcasting sector. In fact, according to Anagnostou *et al.* (2010), the NCRT was not granted substantial autonomy and its role remained mainly consultative, also regarding the «hot» topic of granting licenses for broadcasting, until 2000, when Law 2863/2000 upgraded its functions.

The gradual expansion of the competences of the NCRT, has not matched an equivalent increase in its resources. The effectiveness of NCRT's activity is substantially hindered by the lack of personnel, outgrowing premises and insufficient information technology equipment, in addition to unwieldy bureaucratic mechanisms and limited coordination with other authorities (Anagnostou *et al.*, 2010).

In less than ten years' time, the establishment of a considerable number of radio and television stations, contributed to the creation of over-crowding in the airwaves. Political promises to decongest overcrowded airwaves via license allocation

have never materialized until today (Barboutis & Gazi, 2007) and the deliberate absent of state care for regulating the field created a picture of «unregulated commercialization» of the broadcasting environment (Leandros, 2000).

By 2008, there were 1094 radio stations —most of them of a local penetration— and in the case of television, the two public service television channels (Hellenic Broadcasting Corporation- ERT) established in the mid-sixties, were surrounded by a multitude of about 116 local, regional, and some of them with national penetration private television channels. The fact that after 1998 the number of radio stations operating in Greece remains largely unknown, speaks for itself.

Hallin and Papathanassopoulos (2002) pointed out that Greece is (together with Spain) the only remaining country in Western Europe in which the ruling party directly controls public broadcasting. Indeed, greek government controls ERT's managing board by appointing the majority of its members. Moreover, the board changes every time the administration changes.

Evidently, as Anagnostou *et al.* (2010) point out, the failure of the greek state to license the broadcasting sector has had serious repercussions on the level of independence of the latter. It also created and reinforced mutual dependencies between private media operators and the government, potentially undermining standards of objectivity and impartiality in news broadcasting.

This landscape has created unfavorable conditions for independent journalism such as lack of resources and staff, poor work conditions, very low pay, court cases that bear a heavy financial burden and threats against one's life and family (Iosifidis & Boucas, 2015).

4. Credibility issues for greek media

The use of greek journalism as a means of influence of various businessmen has had major implications for its credibility. A recent public opinion survey conducted across 38 countries by the U.S. —based Pew Research Center (2018) has found that greeks are the most skeptical in the world towards their country's media and the way news and current affairs is reported. More specifically, only 18 percent of greeks believe that their national media are doing a good or somewhat good job of reporting on political issues. This is the lowest percentage among the 38 countries surveyed. The Pew Research Center's survey also finds that only 25 percent of greeks trust their media to accurately report news regarding politicians and public officials.

Reuters Digital News Report (2017) also found out that greeks have the lowest levels of trust in news and the greatest concerns about business and political influence over editorial content. More specifically, only 6% of the respondents believe that news are free from undue political influence and 6% of the respondents believe that news are free from undue commercial influence.

According to the recent Eurobarometer (Standard Eurobarometer 88, 2017) only 22% of the respondents said trust television, 33% the written press, 42%

the internet and 27% the social media. Radio seems to be the only legacy media that is highly trusted by the greeks, 44% of the respondents said that they mostly trust radio.

5. *The rise and the importance of alternative web radio*

It is within this context of economic collapse, crisis of trust and information deficit, we argue, that alternative web radio stations are emerging in Greece, trying to address these issues by challenging the traditional organizational forms of mainstream media and restoring journalistic values.

John Downing in his work (1984) was the first researcher that described radical alternative media in terms of ten defining characteristics: that they are not only alternative but also radical; that they can be progressive but also regressive, such as fascist media; that they can belong to specific communities (for example ethnic or religious communities); that their radicalism can vary in degree and intensity; that they can exist in a polarized and polarizing fashion especially in illiberal regimes; that they can be found in a great variety of formats; that ultimately, they are radical because they break somebody's rules, although not all of them and not in every respect; that they are typically under-funded, small-scale and unnoticed; that they serve two purposes: to express opposition and to build support, solidarity and networking against certain policies or the very *statu quo*; finally, they tend to be more democratically organized and managed than conventional media.

Alternative web radio stations in Greece, we argue, share many of those characteristics; they are small scale, self-managed and collectively organized, they aim to challenge the mainstream narrative presented by traditional media, without aiming to gain any profit.

Another important characteristic is that they make great use of internet technology and social media to promote their content and get in touch with their audience. As Iosifidis and Boucas (2015) point out, the internet is beginning to host alternative voices and watchdog-type journalism and thus offers the potential for strengthening pluralism and transparency. Papadomanolaki (2011) also suggests that the spirit of free-form radio is apparent in projects that involve digital streaming technologies since the digitization of transmission brings about a challenging new spectrum of possibilities. When applied in the context of locality, community and site specificity, streaming and digital communication technology, she argues, can consolidate the argument that new technologies facilitate the mediation of dialogue and broaden the methods of accessibility and participation.

Siapera and Papadopoulou (2016) were the first to research greek media cooperatives focusing on print, radio and web initiatives. In their research they found out that these coops constitute a form of alternative media that are founded on need, social, economic and creative; that they operate as flat hierarchies; that they value and prioritize collaboration; that they consider and reframe journalism as a social process of building and sustaining relationships; that they are

organically linked with society; and that success is first of all social success, the production of social benefit and the servicing of the needs that gave rise to the cooperative.

Alternative web radio *per se* however still constitutes a relatively under researched field. Barboutis and Gazi (2007) researched community radio in Greece —referring to a non-commercial medium that is under the principle control of a specific social group, independent from state and commercial interest and encouraging the participation of non-radio professionals by engaging volunteers— but community radio essentially implies an adherence to the rules and regulations of the state, whereas alternative media by purpose are against any kind of authority.

The first web radio that we researched is *Radiozones of Subversive Expression*. As it mentions in its website, it was created with the aim of breaking the propaganda of mainstream media, defending freedom of expression and disseminating the ideas and the speech of those who resist. «Our basic values are freedom, equality and opposition to all forms of power. Our means are solidarity, self-organization, self-management, non-hierarchical structures and participation in social struggles and movements of the oppressed» they mention.

As it becomes obvious, this initiative is based on a bottom up logic that tries to support minorities and give voice to people that live at the margins of society. In their manifesto they also point out that the radio station is not a political group, in the classical sense of the term, but a collectivity with clear political characteristics where people with different approaches come together, focusing on countering power. «We operate uninterruptedly and non-commercially, without discrimination and leaders, away from parties and business interests. Racism, nationalism, sexism, and other such anchorages do not fit into this initiative. This is the context for all the radio shows broadcasted none of which has any advertisements or goals for profiting. On the contrary, through our operation and actions, we are proposing the creation of a resistance culture», they mention.

Another alternative web radio is *Radiografmata*. In their manifesto, they identify themselves as «a collective effort of individuals to set up their own roadblock against state propaganda diffused by the mainstream media and to contribute, as far as possible, to the local and global counter-information».

As it seems, the notion of counter-information is widely used by these initiatives in order to refer to the circulation of information seeking to be disintermediated by institutions and the commodified economy, and which is antagonistic to the dominant ideology. According to Siapera, Papadopoulou and Archontakis (2015), counter-information is a kind of journalism that has a dual function, to socialize the views of those in the struggle and to challenge the authoritarian monopoly on the circulation of ideas and meanings.

Radiografmata also identify themselves as anti-fascists, anti-racists, anti-sexists and anti-against all kinds of totalitarianism and doctrines. «We oppose homelands and states, borders and gender, color, and sexual orientation» they mention in their manifesto.

They have also established a Solidarity Fund for political prisoners and they organize fundraising campaigns in the context of solidarity. Apart from that they

have created a team that translates various texts in an effort to diffuse their discourse and interact in the international context.

The third web radio we examined is *Radio Revolt*. Their motto is *make your voice a weapon*. They identify themselves as a mound of resistance to modern totalitarianism, promoting their own values, insisting on the need for anti-information. «We are open to any collectivity or person who, through his speech and actions, promote anarchist, subversive ideas. With stream retransmissions, thematic broadcasts and discussions, we use the radio as a means of connecting», they mention.

All of these radios identify themselves as self-organized non-hierarchical initiatives of counter-information. Regarding organizational issues, they function under an assembly and membership is open to anyone who agrees with the logic and the values and participation in social struggles and movements of the oppressed. The novelty of these initiatives is that although their members are not professional journalists and their organization is voluntary, their practices adhere to the basic journalistic values and ethics more than those of the traditional mainstream media.

The fact that they provide information about underreported or even ignored issues and that they try to serve the needs of society by giving voice to those that are not represented in the mainstream media, brings, we suggest, these initiatives closer to the ideal of journalism than a lot of the traditional media. According to Iosifidis and Boucas (2015) self-organization (in terms of management and editorial control) is a possible way forward for independent journalism, but regular funding will be essential to its success. The issue of funding still remains unsolved for most of these initiatives.

6. Discussion

Since the late 1980's, the greek media landscape has been transformed by the entry of a few powerful businessmen who control the majority of media, the savage «deregulation» of broadcasting and —lately— by the devastating consequences of the economic crisis. In addition to that, traditional media are facing an unprecedented credibility crisis since their implication in a complex intertwining of political and economic interests have revealed their inability to act as watchdog, safeguarding democracy and promoting the needs of the society.

Radio appears to be the only greek media that people still trust, however, the inability and unwillingness of the greek governments to implement policies that would promote and nourish pluralism and transparency (Veneti & Karadimitriou, 2013) is undermining its credibility. It is in this context, that alternative web radio emerges, bringing along the promise and the realization of another kind of journalism that shies away from media barons, censorship, special interests and clientelism. As mainstream media have proven economically unsustainable and under the pressures of austerity, redundancies, and deterioration of working conditions, informal mechanisms of selforganized groups and networks of journalists

and other media personnel are exploring new models of journalistic production (Iosifidis and Boucas, 2015: 36).

These initiatives, practice a radical kind of journalism that is organized in a self-managed non-hierarchical manner and offers counter-information about issues that are distorted or ignored (sometimes intentionally) by mainstream media. According to Iosifidis and Boucas (2015: 37), as the need for the public to be informed is pressing, greater attempts at self-organization may offer an exit from the web of *diaploki*, censorship, and humiliation. These initiatives, although are not —for the time being— viable or staffed by professional journalists, pave the way for another vision of journalism that serves the needs of society by giving voice to those that are not represented in the mainstream media.

Moreover, the fact that these initiatives use radio (in its digital form) as a means for this kind of journalism constitutes another powerful example of the dynamic of this medium and of the kind of change that it can bring to the greek media ecosystem.

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Radiofragmata https://radiofragmata.squat.gr/
Radio Revolt http://www.radio-revolt.net/
Radiozones of Subversive Expression http://radio98fm.org/