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Eleftheria Lekakis

On Tuesday, the Greek government announced the immediate closure of their public broadcaster, ERT. This simple piece of news from Greece came as a shock to the world. Yet this event is symptomatic of the relationship between media and politics in today's world.



ERT's headquarters hung with protest banners. linmtheu/Flickr. Some rights reserved.

On the unquiet Wednesday of June 11, 2013, while turmoil continued in Turkey, the Greek government announced the immediate closure of the Hellenic Broadcasting Corporation (ERT) through a dubious legislative act, putting 2,780 employees out of work. These people were employed in 5 TV stations (*ET1*, *NET*, *ET3*, *ERT World* and *ERT HD*), 29 radio stations (too many to mention here), at the *ert.gr* website, the *ERT digital archive*, and the *Radiotileorasi* magazine, as well as the National Symphonic Orchestra and the Contemporary Music Orchestra.

This simple piece of news in the Greek world of news came as a shock to the global world of news. A number of protests in Greece and cities across the globe followed the closure, protestors demonstrating in solidarity with the recently redundant employers and against the government stripping the country of a public service. Upon its release, while thousands of Athenians took to ERT's headquarters, Greek, Turkish, and other European groups and individuals declare their solidarity all over the internet. Many politicians and citizens have declared their disappointment and voiced discontent for this austerity-orchestrated decision and its rapid implementation. Finally, the big trade unions called for a 48-hour general strike in Greece after the closure of ERT.

As soon as the ERT signal died out, social media, as well as supporting local channels and

transnational organizations, offered technical support for the airing of breaking news, while its former reporters keep reporting on the death of journalism in Greece. The story of the shutdown of the Greek state-run broadcaster is a historic event with unprecedented and unforeseeable consequences.

As this is a constantly unraveling and interlaced matter, I will tell this story in three parts. I will first outline the fickle nature of Public Service Broadcasting (PSB) in a liberalised global media landscape. Secondly, this piece will present the arguments advanced as based on problematic narratives of choice vis-à-vis control. Thirdly, there is the issue of the permeation of austerity and the hidden injuries of the Troika's economic adjustment programmes. Ultimately, I wish to reflect on the latest developments in Greece through the lens of the sudden shut down of ERT, and, more broadly, the relationship between media and politics.

Broadcasting is defined by the interests and values of those that govern and inhabit it. Crudely, public service broadcasting (PSB) is an independent formation protected as a democratic right and, in that sense, it differs from commercial service broadcasting (CSB) which is a formation dependent on private interests and allowed through policy based on the principles of the free market and competition. The first draws funds from the state and from citizens in order to safeguard the delivery of fundamental, objective and unbiased information, education and entertainment (a choice of words based on the ethos of the BBC, as dictated by its first leader, John Reith). At the heart of PSB is the safeguarding of the idea of the public interest. This includes the ideas of equal representation informing reportage that benefits a collective commons that forms the foundation for a nation.

The other side of the debate is the one which has been advocated by neoclassical capitalists, proponents of the idea that once you deregulate a market—removing it from the control of the government—the market will empower consumers and promote freedom as it provides the people what they want, as they will choose it. This is different to the anti-neoliberal argument that free media equal free people, as the free market proponents propose that free people equal free media, evident in Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's observation of 'institutionalized individualism'. In this manner, these two arguments are about the relationship between choice and control, and are reproduced in specific framings.

There are two major narratives to be identified in the framing of the issue. The first one is articulated by the current establishment. According to [a statement made by the Greek PM](#), who had, interestingly, previously served as Minister of Culture, ERT was a corruption-ridden organisation, which saw fat wages for some fat cats and no audience interest from the Greek population. Indeed, nepotism on behalf of the state did interfere with the hiring of ERT's core personnel since the 1980s. Until the mid-1990s, ERT did see a decline in viewer numbers, but it rose again in the beginning of 2000s. Yet, this is a problematic statement, which either accepts that television should only appeal to popular culture or negates the right to information to the people that relied on ERT's channels for their daily information. Therefore, goes the argument, major restructuring is needed. This restructuring is going to include digital media expansion, the reduction of employee numbers by half, and leave the country without PSB from June to August, when the reformed Greek PSB (NERIT) is scheduled to start its operations.

This narrative is wholeheartedly embraced by only one party of the Greek opposition: Golden Dawn. According to a statement made by the ultra right political party's leader in response to ERT's switch off, "[our government-funded revilers... owe us, as they have been insulting and slandering us through channels that do not belong to them, but to the Greek people!](#)". This idea is concurrently and curiously supported by certain liberals who assert that information is something truthful, something which needs to be cleansed to the core of its producing and distributing mechanism. It is predictable that, as such, it has been met by dissent from a variety of fronts.

The other side of the argument is that the vanishing of media serving the public interest is a blatant form of political repression, to say the least. The argument continues that access to information which is not driven, filtered, manipulated or skewed by private interests is an indispensable democratic right and that the abrupt abolition of this type of information constitutes an anti-democratic act. Most notably,

in the ERT studios, placards read "the revolution will not be televised" and "the government announced the shutting down of ERT, instead of ERT announcing the shutting down of the government".

Finally, the influence of global economic powers is an element of this story needs to be particularly underscored. The rationale, design, and execution of the decision to dismantle and make ERT temporarily disappear are the consequences of the austerity governance of Greece. Greek newspaper [To Vima](#) reports that it could have been ERT's 2012 annual cost of 300,000 euros that attracted the government's attention in their desperate search to fill a hole in the money bag designated for the Troika. A global financially driven regime permeates our global futures.

International support to the cause is reverberating across digital soundscapes. The EURO-MEI (a regional section of the global umbrella union representing workers in the media, entertainment and arts) President called on the Greek Prime Minister Samaras "[to reverse this incomprehensible and dangerous decision immediately](#)". The BBC's editorial director, who is also on the European Broadcasting Union (EBU) board demonstrated concern over the developments in Greece and declared that: "[When countries are in difficulty, there's an even bigger need for public service broadcasting and for independent, impartial news coverage. I hope that's restored in Greece as soon as possible](#)".

Greece is left with no media coverage of its public interest. While, historically, ERT has been a heavily bureaucratic institution in respects pertaining its power and budget distribution bias, it was the only media institution that reported on and broadcasted to all parts of Greece, creating a sense of social cohesion, and included content on the world, fostering a global understanding. As ERT's official statement after its closure explained: "[We believe that TV has a mission: to show the way to collective effort, to make us cry, to make us laugh, to problematise things, to make us learn about the world far from us and the world next to us](#)".

Meanwhile, ERT is still broadcasting across digital channels.

References

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