The closure of ERT: public service broadcasting and austerity politics in Greece


This version is available from Sussex Research Online: http://sro.sussex.ac.uk/id/eprint/53568/

This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies and may differ from the published version or from the version of record. If you wish to cite this item you are advised to consult the publisher’s version. Please see the URL above for details on accessing the published version.

Copyright and reuse:
Sussex Research Online is a digital repository of the research output of the University.

Copyright and all moral rights to the version of the paper presented here belong to the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. To the extent reasonable and practicable, the material made available in SRO has been checked for eligibility before being made available.

Copies of full text items generally can be reproduced, displayed or performed and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.

http://sro.sussex.ac.uk
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 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 disconcert 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.
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