

Policy and Regulation in the Media Landscape: the Greek Paradigm Concentration of Media Ownership Versus the Right to Information

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Abstract: *By outlining the long-lasting peculiarities of the Greek media landscape, this paper aims to make us reflect on how the political system affects their development and role. Particularly, through analyzing the policy and regulating frames applied to Greek communication field, we try to shed light on the degree and shapes of media concentration and control as well as on the effects of this widespread phenomenon. Special emphasis is placed on the illicit interweaving of political and media interests, giving rise to a media system which has great difficulties in following constructively the technological developments in the field and challenges the active participation of citizens in the public affairs. In the contemporary society of digital revolution market values continue to be dominant. Those who control the private media outweigh the political figures and as a result any attempts to regulate the communication field are always implemented for the benefit of the private capital. Under these circumstances the question of whether the media can act as amplifiers of the democratic practices is more crucial than ever. This is the central question posed by the paper, arguing that the evolution of the Greek media system is inundated with evidence supporting the view that the particular voice of citizen as well as his right to information is under threat.*

Keywords: *Greek media system, media ownership, diversity, pluralism, digital switchover, digital terrestrial television, media groups.*

«Communication revolutions occur during critical junctures, and the policies implemented during those critical junctures largely determine the shape of the communication system for generations. I maintained that today we are in the midst of arguably the most important communication revolution in centuries,

that we are seeking a dramatic increase in popular participation in media policymaking as a result, and that it is imperative that communication scholars embrace this historical moment in their research and teaching.» (McChesney, 2008, p.7)

Greek political history and the policies implemented in the media field have created a rather controversial media landscape. The aim of this paper is to illustrate the everlasting characteristics of the Greek media system and to assess the current situation in response to the right and need of the citizens for diversity and pluralism of information. As McChesney (2008) alleges, media policies implemented during critical junctures in a country's history, shape the communication system for years to be. Over the last 30 years, media policies in Greece have contributed to the development of a media system that is characterized by its clientelistic nature of political relations, a phenomenon that broadly prevails in southern Europe (Hallin & Papathanasopoulos, 2002, pp.176-177). This clientelism affects in different ways the development and structure of media, however it is not the only weakness of the communication systems in southern Europe. Among their common characteristics are the exploitation of private media by their owners for purposes beyond the communication field, the politicization of public service television and television landscape in general, the limited growth of journalism as an autonomous profession as well as the low levels of newspapers circulation (Papathanasopoulos, 2004, pp.35-79).

Although the deregulation of broadcasting systems in Europe was largely based - among others - on the request of pluralism, in the communication field the trends of growing concentration of ownership seem to reverse such ideals. They create a favorable environment for the monopolization of the advertising market, hinder the entry of new market players and lead to uniformity of content. Moreover, concentration of media ownership within too few hands contradicts the basic tenets of democracy, threatening diversity of expression and autonomy of the political sphere. As the German sociologist Niklas Luhman (1996) argued, it is the quintessential role of the media to offer the necessary forum for an open debate about social problems and ways to their solution.

Outlining the key positions of the theory: the political economy of media

There is a broad range of theories that fall under the category of the “political economy of communication”. Despite their disparities, they all examine

the social relations, particularly the power relations that mutually constitute the production, distribution, and consumption of communication resources. They argue that the economic institutions of a society affect the operation of other social institutions, including Media. They place great emphasis on economic institutions, prefixing the economy against the culture. The investigations of political economy rely on the idea that the media are organized and operate in such a way as to serve the interests and objectives of the financial institutions (Baran & Davis, 1995, p.324).

Early studies in mass communication strategies by prominent scholars like Harold Lasswell (1927) and Edward Bernays (1928) indicated the implications of the media and their capabilities to change the character and functioning of societies. Among the pioneers in the field, Harold Innis (1950, 1951) coined the term of 'knowledge monopolies' to demonstrate that throughout history there were certain privileged groups that have enjoyed access to particular knowledge. Contemporary scholars have focused on mass media ownership and its effects on society and democracy (Schiller, 1996; McChesney, 2000b; Bagdikian, 1997; Mosco, 1998; Herman & Chomsky, 1988; Mansell, 2004).

Media represent an important component of global capitalism. Media have an enhanced role in modern societies through their role in framing issues and promoting news stories, frequently in order to serve the needs and concerns of particular groups, as the predominant political informant to the public. As Herman and Chomsky (1988) in their seminal work explained, the mass media "serve to mobilize support for the special interests that dominate the state and private support for the special interests that dominate the state and private activity." Although propaganda is not the sole function of the media, it is "a very important aspect of their overall service" (p.xi), especially "in a world of concentrated wealth and major conflicts of class interest" (p.1). In this context, the significance of the leading corporate mass media (at both global and national level) in contemporary politics radically transcends the role of the mass media in earlier times.

We are confronted today with local and global concentration of media ownership. This alarming phenomenon is correlated with the dominance of the principles of neoliberal globalization (Graham, 2006, p.495). The reappearance and invigoration of laissez-faire commitments, has led to the pre-eminence of trade liberalization, the broadcasting deregulation, the privatization of state-run firms and services. These tendencies restructure the wider field of communications towards the imperative of privatization and profitability,

and hence, transform the majority of national broadcasting systems towards the direction of commercial media logic. Furthermore, technological developments are leading towards the technical convergence of telecommunications, broadcasting and computing, pointing to a reshuffling of currently existing (though not enduring) balances in the key social sectors, and changing ways of seeing and understanding for significant numbers of people. As Bibby (2003, p.5) annotates "existing media groups have moved rapidly to dominate the new digital arena". Neoliberalism, globalization, deregulation, new digital media are phenomena that - interlinked with each other - affect the character of the political economy of Media.

The concentration of ownership in capitalism implies the monopoly and concentration of power. Therefore, media concentration is a phenomenon that cannot fail to have detrimental effects upon democracy with ramifications in several issues: 1) issues of diversity and pluralism of ideas and opinions, 2) uneven competition for new entrants to the media market, 3) the questioning of the role of media as a democratic watchdog in securing people's right to know. In order to participate in community life and make political choices, citizens rely heavily on information. Therefore, access to information (plurality of information by diverse sources) is vitally important both for individual political decision-making and for the collective welfare. Taking the argument a step further, Amartya Sen (1999) has increased awareness of the role of human rights in promoting human development and economic security. He has argued that civil and political rights can reduce the risk of major social and economic disasters by empowering individuals to complain, ensuring that these views are disseminated, keeping government informed and precipitating a policy response. "Civil and political rights [...] give people the opportunity to draw attention forcefully to general needs and to demand appropriate public action. Whether and how a government responds to needs and sufferings may well depend on how much pressure is put on it, and the exercise of political rights (such as voting, criticizing, protesting, and so on) can make a real difference" (Sen, 1999, p.92). Sen's empirical research illustrates the ways in which the *denial* of civil and political rights can function as an *obstacle* to human development. Nonetheless, as McChesney (2000a, p.2) argues, media have become a significant anti-democratic force in the US (and beyond) by stifling civic and political involvement, and that "[t]he wealthier and more powerful the corporate media giants have become, the poorer the prospects for participatory democracy".

Concerns about the media concentration around the world have therefore motivated the discussion over the reviewing of the existing regulatory frame-

works for media and telecoms. Although principles like diversity and pluralism, as well as issues as those mentioned above (fair competition etc.) have routinely underpinned American and European policy statements on media ownership, recent policy initiatives have moved inexorably in the opposite direction. Instead of a coordinated and rigorous regulatory framework, most countries tend towards a relaxation of restrictions and hence greater consolidation. As Barnett (2010, p.3) states "these trends have been exacerbated over the last two years by a sustained economic recession, allied to structural shifts in advertising revenue, which have left hard-pressed media enterprises lobbying intensively for even greater deregulation".

A short overview of the Greek media landscape

In the case of the Greek media environment, no significant changes occurred until the mid-eighties. However, over the 1980s and 1990s a restructuring process takes place. The main characteristics of this change are 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.

Generally, the development of media sector in Greece after 1980 was marked by two major periods of restructuring. The first concerns the rearrangement of national newspapers landscape, which is dictated by the integration of new technologies in the press, the integration of press enterprises into larger business giants as well as the shift of working and production relations (Leandros, 2000, pp.192-201). In the 1980s the need for technological modernization, which requires new sizeable investments, favored the opening of the press world to young entrepreneurs from other sectors and the adoption of a decentralized, more flexible model of organization of production, in which two or more companies - under a proportional allocation of work stages - undertake the completion of the publishing project. The new entrepreneurs are adopting the "strategy of diversification", expanding their activities in the wider field of print and broadcast media as well as beyond it (Leandros, 2000, p.203). The 1980s (and particularly the second half of the decade) is a peak period of the Greek press and especially of the so-called evening newspapers. However, the

heyday of print media proved temporary, as since 1990 the circulation of national press shows significant decrease.

The second period of restructuring of Greek media landscape starts in the late 1980s and concerns the abolition of the state monopoly in the broadcasting sector, followed by an intensification of business activities on the part of the private capital. The deliberate absent of state care for regulating the field creates a picture of 'unregulated commercialization' of the broadcasting environment (Leandros, 2000, pp.192, 203-205).

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 (Heretakis, 2010, pp.67-68). This episode served as the inaugural signal for the launch of a "wild" electronic media deregulation. From then on, the course towards deregulation of (the electronic) media seemed to be inevitable. Though, as Papatanasopoulos (1997, p.351) puts it "the deregulation of the broadcasting sector (in Greece) has been closely associated with politics rather than a well-organized plan according to the needs of the industry". A strong quest for pluralism in the media had to face the existing media laws that had to be reviewed so as to accommodate to the new reality and help minimize any unnecessary social frictions. The problems of the legal frame were only partially solved after a long while; thus creating various problems, a good part of which remain until now, begging for an answer.

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: 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 (Heretakis, 2013). The Greek media scene can be viewed as the arena of a power game between different interest groups. The impetus for broadcasting change was not a strong government policy, but rather political expediency.

In order to understand the evolution of the Greek media landscape, we need to be aware of the inseparable link between the development of the media and the country's political system as well as the various social and economic

interests that are represented in it. Both radio and television were born under the dictatorships of modern Greece's troubled history, while even after the re-establishment of the parliament, the major Greek political parties have been severely interfered with the function of the media (licensing, controlling, censorship etc). From a sociological approach, Mouzelis (1980, pp.261-264) explains the paternalistic role of the Greek state as fueled by a rather atrophied civil society, where the state is called to undertake more politico-ideological functions. In addition, this context was the most prosperous ground so as to be developed an erroneous, clientist relationship between the state and the society. Ultimately, this led the state to promote the interests of particular types of capital.

The deregulation of the Greek broadcasting sector was the attendant action as Greece being a member of the European Community had to follow its policies (such as the 'Television Without Frontiers' Directive), but it was also the outcome of the lobbying by domestic neo-liberal forces and private interests who targeted to the new market (Papathanasopoulos, 1997, p.354). The persistent lobbying coinciding with an era of political instability gave the opportunity to the private interests to enter the market. The penetration of publishers and other entrepreneurs into the Greek broadcasting arena is really impressive. This is partly explained according to Papathanasopoulos (1997, p.356), given that:

"In effect, Law 1860 of 1989 implies that the most suitable candidates to operate a TV station are the newspaper publishers or those who have media experience, as well as the local municipalities. Since the local municipalities have neither the expertise nor the resources to form and operate their own TV stations, it becomes obvious that the law indirectly favours the publishers".

The first private TV channel was Mega Channel, owned by Teletypos, a group of the most powerful publishers in Greece. Mega Channel, like other private channels that were launched later, was granted a temporary license.

Deregulation of the audiovisual sector was a watershed in so far as it paved the way for a fundamental restructuring of existing ownership patterns from small and medium-sized enterprises to large conglomerates and business-like ventures, which also extended to the traditional press. Despite the existence of restrictive provisions, a high degree of concentration has prevailed, particularly with respect to the media of national range: 6 publishers own the biggest

nationally circulated newspapers, many magazines, a handful of broadcast media, as well as press distribution agencies (Anagnostou et al, 2010, p.9).

After the publishing growth of the 1980s, the broadcasting explosion of the 1990s came to complement the restructuring process of the Greek communication landscape. Through this process the publishing - printing as well as the audiovisual sector turned out to be an important part of the Greek economy. In the publishing business the gap that separated Greece from other Member States of the European Union and the U.S. was reduced, even though the levels of print media circulation per capita remained relatively low (Leandros, 2000: 188-190). As far as the broadcasting sector is concerned, its upward trends were reflected in the employees' increase within the industry (Leandros, 2000: 190-191). At that time the economic importance of media (and particularly of broadcasters) was indisputable.

The main players of the contemporary media landscape in Greece

The Greek media system is dominated by the following groups, contributing to a communication field, where supply traditionally exceeds demand.

- **Antenna Group (ANT1 Group)**

The Antenna Group is under the leadership of Minos X. Kyriakou along with two oil and one shipping company. Antenna Group began in 1988 with the radio station ANT1 FM 97,2 in Athens and since then, it has grown rapidly. It now encompasses ANT1 TV and radio in Greece and Cyprus (ANT1 TV Cyprus and ANT1 FM Cyprus), telecommunication services, printing media (publishing house Daphne Communications S.A. and the printing company Niki Publishing), media studies (Antenna School of Media and Fame Studio) and music production (record company Heaven Music).

With the creation of ANT1 Satellite, ANT1 Pacific and ANT1 Europe, the Group has expanded beyond the Greek borders to USA, Australia and Europe. It has also launched two more channels in the U.S.A: Antenna Prime, a channel that daily broadcasts all-time favourite Greek shows and series, and Blue, a music Channel dedicated to Greek music. In 2000, the Group entered the Bulgarian market with the acquisition of TV station Nova Televisia based in Sofia, a company that soon evolved into one of Southern Europe's fastest growing broadcasters and then sold to Modern Times Group. This transaction was reported as one of the highest returns on investment in the media indus-

try (628.000.000 euros in 2008). Moreover, the Antenna Group agreed with News Corporation over the transfer of a major shareholding in Fox Televizija, a leading commercial free to air broadcaster in Serbia.

The Group also established itself in the field of new technology services and content (Live Streaming, Video On Demand WebTV channel and multimedia online web gaming portal through its new media & technology division ANT1 Internet) and in the telecommunication services through its company Audiotex. Finally, Antel and Epikinonia are the Group's companies that provide wireless transmission services of digital data. *Epikinonia* is the main provider of news and other content to dozens of radio stations in the periphery.

- Lambrakis Press Group (DOL in Greek)

The Lambrakis Press Group was created in 1959 by Christos Lambrakis. Since 2009, it is under the leadership of the journalist Stauros Psiharis. The current portfolio includes: press (Ta Nea, Sunday Vima, Aggelioforos), magazines (Cosmopolitan, TV Zapping), radio (Vima FM 99,5), 11% share of Teletypos (Mega Channel, one of the most popular private TV channels), television production studios (Studio ATA), Internet services (DOL Digital and the news portal in.gr), the news agency Argos and book publishing (Papasotiriou and Northern Greece Editions).

The Group's social profile is supplemented with cultural activities such as: 'Friends of Music Society', Megaron-The Athens Concert Hall and the Lambrakis Cultural Foundation.

- Pegasus Press Group

Pegasus Press Group was founded in 1981 by Bobolas family with interests in construction. The family's company has primarily undertaken big scale public constructions. The Group possesses newspapers (Ethnos and Imerisia, Proto Thema, Goal News), magazines, TV (10% share of Teletypos of Mega Channel), radio (Sentra FM), television production studios, internet services (e-one.gr) and shares in the Northern Greece Editions.

- Skai Group

Skai Group is run by Alafouzou family with interests in shipping and construction. The Group includes the popular newspaper *Kathimerini*, three radio stations (Melodia 99,2, Skai 100,3 and Red FM 96,3), the *Skai TV Channel*, the web portal *skai.gr* and the *Skai Book Publications*. The publishing house of the

group was created in July 2008 and its publications are connected with the programs of *Skai TV* and with the parallel actions of the group.

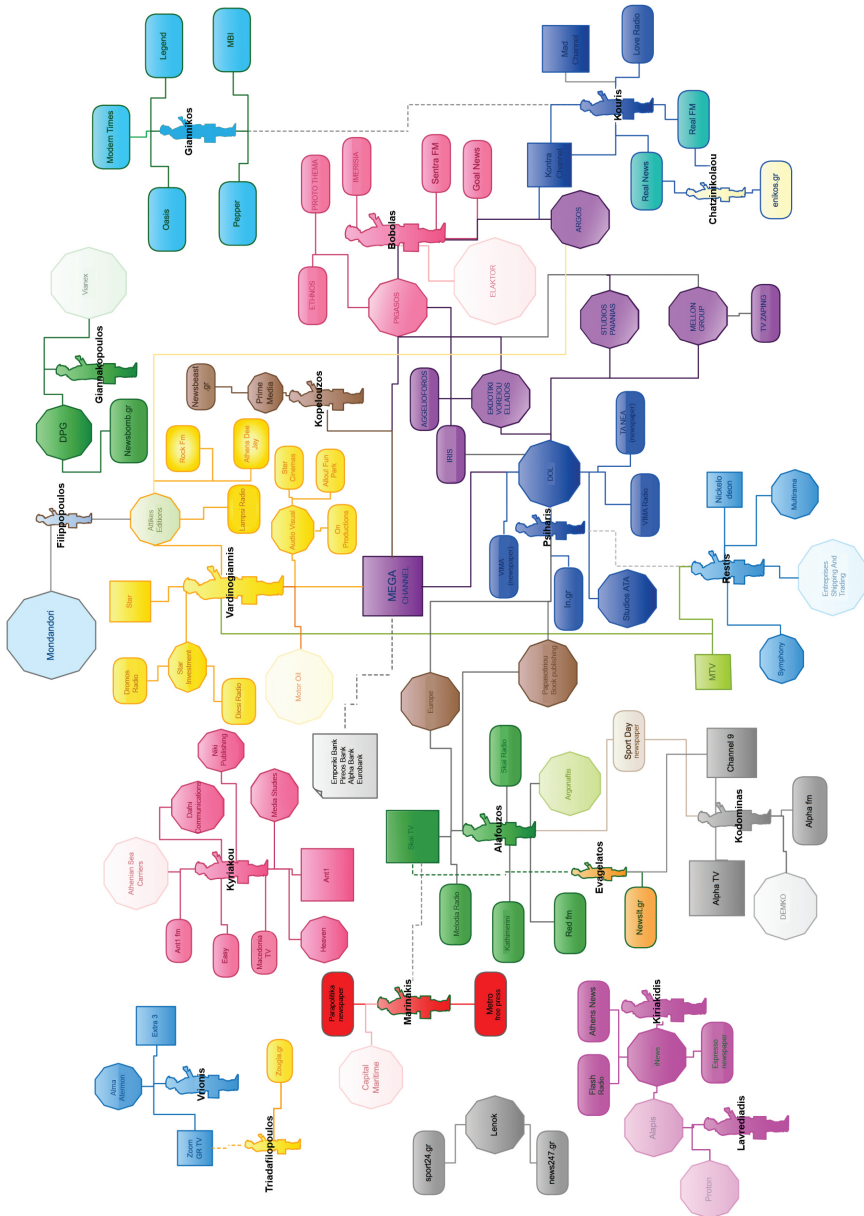
- Alpha Media Group

In December 2008, 66.6 per cent of Alpha Media Group's shares were bought off by the German Media Group RTL (for 125.7 million euros), while the rest of the shares belonged to the businessman Dimitris Kontominas. In January 2012, Kontominas announced the acquisition of the total share of the Group. The Group's portfolio includes television (Alpha TV and Channel 9), radio (Alpha 98,9 and Alpha 99,5 Thessalonica) and cinemas (Village Roadshows).

- Vardinogiannis Group

Vardinogiannis family is one of the wealthiest Greek families with interests in shipping and oil refining and with shares in many Greek media outlets. The Group owns a respectable share in Teletypos (Mega Channel). Its media portfolio includes: the television channel *Star Channel*, television production (Audiovisual), magazine editions (Attikes Ekdoseis), radio (Dromos FM, Diesi, Lampsi, Rock FM, Athens Dee Jay), cinemas (Ster Cinemas) and the entertainment park *Allou!Fun Park*.

The following map (Map 1) puts forth the state of media ownership in Greece. Apart from the above mentioned media groups; there are a few more that complete the mapping of the Greek media landscape. What is manifested here is that a dozen of Greek magnates own and control the Greek media. Acute antagonism and common interests simultaneously characterize their relations.



Map 1. Media Ownership in Greece. Source: Smyrnaiois (2013), *Ephemeron*.

Despite temporary confrontations or alliances, the basic characteristics of the communication system remain intact. Since 2008, there were some changes that were basically coupled with the existing *status quo*. First, it is the strengthening of the ship-owners lobby. This is explained by the fact that the ship owners were not inflicted by the financial crisis and therefore they were capable of investing in the media sector. Secondly, there are at least four media magnates that are either accused or outlaw (Kouris, Giannikos, Kiriakidis and Lavrediadis). Thirdly, it is the emergence of the Internet as a basic communication and economic field. This is underlined by the fact that offsprings of the wealthiest Greek families (Kopelouzos, Giannakopoulos) as well as Greek famous journalists (Chatzinikolaou, Evagelatos, Triadafilopoulos) have made investments in entertaining and news websites. Furthermore, we have witnessed massive firings, selling offs and delays in employees payments in the media sector due to the difficult economic situation. Finally, because of the financial crisis and the attendant lack in cash flow, the role of the banks is imminent in the already illicit relation between politicians and media owners. It is possible that the banks will wish to participate even more as shareholders in the media companies in response to the loans that they grant them.

In a global free market environment, media organizations promote their extensive economic interests and have more to gain from business-friendly government. In turn, governments are now more in need of government-friendly media because they have to pursue and retain mass electoral support (and control). In the case of Greece, there has been a sequel of scandals involving media magnates and political persons or parties. Scandal stories have varied from media businessmen proving to be advantageous interlocutors in undertaking grand scale public constructions to having their media served as the mouthpiece of particular political parties or even greater power scandals such as the eruption of the major scandal that involved the press and the government in the 1980s, the so-called "Koskotas" scandal. As Radu (2013, p.145) argues, "the 'invisible hand' engages businessmen in a ruthless quest for market shares, whereas ethics is usually eclipsed by the need to obtain profits in a free (i.e. deregulated) market". Despite Karamanlis government's manifesto that they would battle intermingling interests, new provisions in the Law 3414/2005 concerning the uncompromising interests between media owners and the commission of conventions of public works, have actually incapacitated it. According to Article 14 of the Law, although there is recognition of the conflicting interests when media owners undertake public works, this is forbidden only on condition that there is irrevocable juridical decision that condemns managerial executives of the company for corruptness (Heretakis, 2010, p.125).

The transition to digital terrestrial television in the context of an unregulated digital landscape

In Greece the access of television industry to the digital terrestrial era began with the public service broadcaster (ERT), who managed to pioneer in the field. First among all players in the television industry ERT created digital TV platform, consisting of three channels: Cine+, Prisma+ and Sports+. The design of the digital terrestrial television project began in early 2002. After four years of preparation (at the beginning of 2006) the first test transmissions were implemented at a pilot level, in which the digital signal of the first digital multiplex arrived in large urban centers.

Over the next years the private broadcasters accused Greek government of adopting an unfair attitude that gives public service broadcaster (ERT) a comparative advantage in the digital field at the expense of private interests. Finally as to the private television field the operation of a free digital terrestrial platform was assigned to Digea. It is a joint venture established in 2009 by the main nationwide private television stations (Alpha, Alter, ANT1, Makedonia TV, MEGA, SKAI and STAR) with equal participation of shares, undertaking to build the network and transfer the television content.

In the Greek communication field the transition to digital terrestrial television not only encountered repeated delays but it was also attempted over a period in which the conditions were not ripe for such a venture. The world of politics, as exactly in the era of broadcasting deregulation, did not ensure in time a serious and effective plan, aimed at regulating the new digital field. With a serious lack of preparation - both at legislative and political level - transition tuned out to be a "Gordian knot".

The procedure for regulating the digital field was activated for the first time in 2008 by the conservative government of Nea Dimocratia (Law 3592/2007), giving the project a "temporary" character, the character of the "transitional phase", which however lasts until today. In late 2009, the digital switchover represented the major backlog of Greek state in a communication field, where the battle for political and economic control of the digital spectrum was critical. The delays on the part of the political power were evident and included:

- The creation of a definitive digital map of frequencies.
- The issue of a Presidential Decree regarding the conditions for participation in the licensing procedure.

- The issue of a ministerial decision regarding the formal notice on the number of licenses of national or regional range.
- The issue of joint ministerial decisions regarding the technical specifications of the television equipment (digital receivers and digital TVs with integrated tuner), the definition of financial return for the right to use the license, the pricing of national and local channels by public broadcaster that will be hosted in its frequencies, the determination of antenna parks of digital TV.
- The decision of the National Telecommunications and Post Commission (EETT in Greek) regarding the invoices that should be published by network providers for signal rise of television stations.

Until today the Greek paradigm of the digital transition is characterized by delays and mechanisms that favor the private television sector. After the abrupt closure of the old public service broadcaster (ERT), a private company, Digea (a network provider), is setting the tone for the digital switchover within a communication field consisted of channels "temporarily legitimate", whose main objective is not to pay for the digital frequencies but to pay their company.

Despite the fact that both the European and the Greek legislation (Law 3592/2007) prohibits a network provider to be a content provider as well (that is to say a television channel), with the view to avoiding any kind of monopoly on television market, Digea enjoys an unproblematic operation. Its shareholders are wealthy entrepreneurs with interests in construction, shipping, real estate etc. There are several cases where some of the above-mentioned media moguls have been accused of intermingling affairs with politicians in order to profit in favor of their other business activities. Although all the recent Greek governments trumpeted their disengagement from the media owners, they ultimately failed.

The perfunctory handling of the broadcasting field by the government of the day seems to have no limits in Greece. In October 2013 an article for digital TV (article 18) was included in a bill dealing with matters of the Ministry of Health. In essence, the Greek government through this legal provision legitimized the operation of the private TV channels without any terms and conditions. According to article 18, all channels that broadcast programmes on the 31st of August 2013 have the right to migrate to digital broadcasting, signing contracts with companies that rent digital frequencies. The only obligation emerged by the article is the control of their programming completeness, carried out by the Greek National Council for Radio and Television (ESR in Greek). Through this weird regulation the channels that had a provisional

authorization from the Council were given the right of legal digital operation. On the one hand, this provision fulfills an obligation of the country in the context of the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) for the release of digital frequencies, however on the other hand it serves intermingled interests; the private television channels, that used to operate on temporary authorization for 23 years, need to pay nothing for the use of the state assets (frequencies) during those years and for the years to come.

In the race for the digital switchover Greece pioneered in that it set public service broadcaster in question during the most critical phase of the process, just before the issue of the contest regarding the digital network provider. Before the end of 2013, National Telecommunications and Post Commission (EETT in Greek) will announce the auction of the digital frequencies. The paradox that underlines the procedure is that there is only one contestant (Digea). Public service broadcaster (ERT), after its sudden death (on the 11th of June 2013), cannot have a major role in the digital developments. It is Digea which now prevails in a forthcoming context of digital monopoly of private interests. The imminent contest regarding network provider, that Greek government prepares to launch, seems to favor Digea. The private company is regarded as a network provider, although in essence is a consortium of content providers (television channels). If government's plans do not change, the transition to the digital era will be realized by a small number of private entrepreneurs.

In the field of digital transition Greece has still a long way to go, although the remaining time is minimal. The great problem is that it perpetuates the "old sins". As in 1989, analog television was given to the publishers (the owners of newspapers), now the digital television is given to the holders of analogue television stations, coalesced into a consortium (Digea). The traditional "complex" between media owners and governments is timeless, built on a foundation of mutual support. In 1989 the editors of newspapers conquered the broadcasting field without special conditions or commitments. Now the owners of private channels are given the opportunity to conquest the digital field without special obligations or fees.

Concluding remarks

Ultimately, should we care about who owns the media? Does it really matter if, on an international as well as on a national level, a handful of companies, with interests spanning film, music, television, entertainment and the printed

world have come to dominate the public sphere? The answer is emphatically Yes! In such fluid times, people need more than ever to have access to more and improved information in order to be able to take part in decision-making processes. Media magnates through their cosy relationship with successful administrations (internationally and nationally) pose a threat to public interest journalism. As Dohnanyi and Moller (2003, p.15) claim, “while small groups can afford the luxury of communicating face to face, the individual citizen of an open and democratic society depends on free and independent mass media to exercise his rights to information and freedom of expression”.

Information is a fundamental factor for the enhancement of the active participation of the citizens. As it is referred in the Ancient Greek literature, being a citizen presupposed participation in public affairs. Furthermore, according to relevant judgments of the European Court on Human Rights (ECHR), “freedom of the Media (...) implies that the public has a right to a free media system, which provides overall balanced, full and varied information. The underlying idea is that a free system of this kind is an essential prerequisite for a functioning democracy” (Bruck, 2002).

The Greek case highlights the inability and unwillingness of the Greek governments to implement policies that would promote and nourish pluralism and transparency. The everlasting problem of the Greek communication field, which has been the cause of many evils even in the landscape of digital television (Papathanasopoulos, 2007), lies in the fact that there is a great offer of content (and media outlets) in a country where the demand cannot be high due to its size. This paradox, coupled with the refusal of politicians to put substantive rules for the regulation of the communication field, lead to an image of a weak and incapacitated country that cannot benefit from new technologies nor can it upgrade its civil society.

Under the current circumstances, we can only witness the morbid functioning of the public sphere. That means that there is an actual threat in the quality of information for a large part of the population and particularly for those less familiar with the Internet such as the elderly, who represent these segments of the population relying particularly on television for their information. Therefore, the challenge is to respond to this situation with a concrete and complete regulating framework. In a period of profound reflection about the new digital environment as well as of widespread concern about the effects of economic recession on media operation, it is essential that we re-appraise the media policies in Greece.

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