

# TEXTE



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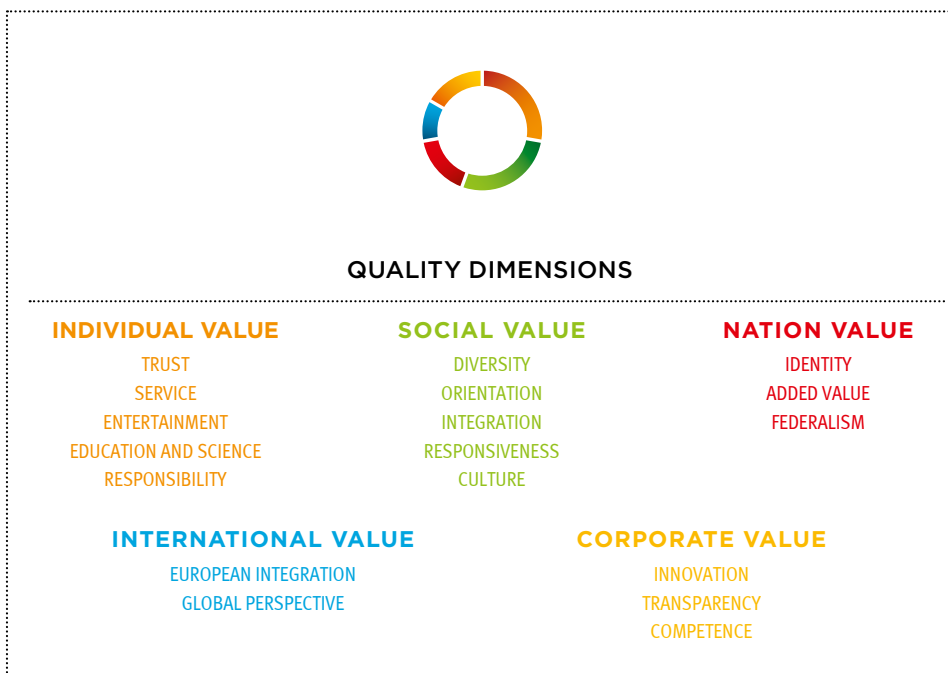
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In order to define distinctive media quality Austrian Broadcasting Corporation has created a structure of five Quality Dimensions. Comprehensive media production in TV, radio and online is described along 18 categories to prove how ORF fulfills its Public Service Mission in the context of the current media environment and its challenges.

“TEXTE” publishes contributions from international and Austrian media experts focusing on Public Service Media quality.

More information, statements and documents you may find on <http://zukunft.ORF.at>.



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# WHY GREECE MATTERS

## **“A state of emergency”, “A blow to democracy”, “Greek public media in turmoil”...**

These are just a few headlines of the articles you may find in the special edition of our series “TEXTE”. Focusing on public service media quality, we decided to look deeper into what happened several weeks ago, when the Greek government shut down ERT, the national public service broadcaster in Greece. There has been an uproar of protest by those who have been directly confronted as well of some European and international institutions. But there has also been a very diplomatic, hesitant and distant reaction at the same time, claiming that the closure of ERT might have been a necessary decision following internal corruption, austerity measures and budgetary restrictions. Was the shutdown of the Greek public broadcaster really “just business” in the context of fighting nepotism and financial waste? Was it a “plot against press freedom and liberty”? Is there a specific relation between public service media and democracy?

We asked international experts to contribute their opinion and point of view: Representatives of the European Broadcasting Union, the European Federation of Journalists, Reporters without Borders, the International Press Institute, the university of Vienna and ORF’s foreign correspondent in Greece. Finally, Greek voices share their view on the decisive moments in Athens, which affect not just Greece but all nations in Europe, who depend on independent and accountable quality journalism.

Despite all different perspectives and the uncertainty what the future might bring in Greece, there might be consensus: Independence is crucial for quality media. Public Service Broadcaster have to prove their credibility and accountability to guarantee independency from political parties, the business sector and influential lobbys. However it makes no sense to talk about european media quality, if governments are entitled to shut down media enterprises without public consensus and public debate. This is why Greece matters to all of us. •

KONRAD MITSCHKA

KLAUS UNTERBERGER

PUBLIC-VALUE-COMPETENCE CENTER

# WE ARE ALL GREEKS

UNIV.PROF.<sup>IN</sup> DR.<sup>IN</sup> KATHARINE SARIKAKIS  
UNIVERSITY OF VIENNA

June 11, 2013 will be documented as a historical day for many jurisdictions in Europe. Indeed, a day like this demonstrates how connected and interwoven our histories, lives and ultimately institutions are. For Greece's modern post-dictatorial era, the act of closure of ERT was, to many, an act of aggression against the people and against a history committed to struggles for Democracy. It brought back memories of darker times. Citizens of all walks of life, intellectuals, educationalists and artists, some politicians and organised civil society helped keep ERT Occupied by its own employees and provided the moral and physical support to keep continuous, round the clock broadcasting alive for over five weeks, as of the time of writing. The EBU is transmitting ERT and, via internet facilities from a variety of organisations, ERT is reaching within and outside the country even those who did not belong to its audience: an unintended, consequence of its official closure.

The day also signalled to the European family of PSBs that brute force against a European institution, which the public service broadcasters are, according to the PSB Protocol to the Treaty of Amsterdam, as inconceivable as it may have sounded, was ultimately silently supported and tolerated by core European circles. A political decision, which would otherwise seem a political suicide and which have brought widespread international condemnation beyond the borders of Europe, it also enjoyed the supporting phone call of the German Chancellor, arguably the de facto head of European Union in this era, and a 'Pontius Pilatus' approach of the European Commission. The abrupt closure of ERT was primarily a blow to democracy. For the history of European integration, this day was also historical: its 24 hours encompassed as in tour de force the reactions, representations and conflicts that ridden European integration especially in the past three decades. These are the conflicting visions of what Europe should be, a transnational market or a political and social union of nations; the tensions of who governs Europe and where is national sovereignty and solidarity in these times of crisis; the question of democratic deficit and the place of citizenship in Europe. It also raised to the surface in one swift axe a brewing conflict of interests and hostility against public institutions and public assets, in particular the role of public media in European societies. All these issues, the politics of integration, media privatisation and globalisation intersected on the unlikely symbol of Europe, ERT.

The chronicles of ERT are ridden with irony: a public service corporation became effectively a pirate, self-governed organisation and attracted back to politics those who became too fatigued and disconnected. As per the original governmental announcement, ERT had to be shut down because it was too sick to heal. A week after its closure, the announcement for the competition of distributing digital broadcasting signal to the country's households was made. By June 30, 2013, the competition was completed.

DIGEA, a consortium company of the six largest media companies in the country holds the monopoly of controlling –ultimately- digital broadcasting. It is currently transmitting the first broadcasts of the new public broadcaster. During the last month, it interrupted the retransmission of ERT through the communist party’s television frequency. The irony is that not much is known about the process through which Digea was established and about the conditions of its future operation. Not much is known about the future of the new public broadcaster or how transparency and independence will prevail. Finally, the economic argument for the ERT closure fades vis a vis the corporation’s healthy self-sustaining financial standing and the added cost of an estimated 300 millions Euro for redundancy reimbursement.

These are some pieces of the puzzle of ERT. The context is complex and of European, indeed international, dimensions, as much as it is national. This is an exemplary case about the politics of a ‘state of emergency’ beyond any numbers (financial, audience, un/employment) and, regrettably, beyond the rule of law, legitimacy and moral compass. The legal, procedural dimensions of this case are also complex: The Council of State ordered the government to keep ERT broadcasting until the new broadcaster takes over. The government failed to comply. The European Parliament stated that this act was against the European treaties and the spirit of European Law and international conventions. On the other hand, the European Commission has stated that it is not within its competencies to react to this development, as it is a matter of national sovereignty. However, this silent tolerance signals not only that there is lack of consensus in European political elites, but also that a specific part of political elites, both domestic and other European ones, are ready to accept this form of ‘experiment’. In this sense, it is important to note that despite international condemnation, the Greek government not only did not restore public broadcasting, but it proceeded with implementing digital media policy based on the full distribution of public wealth and property to private ownership. ERT’s digital archives for example are to be used to fill the hours of broadcasting of the new channel.

Greece may not be financially or even politically a significant player in European and international politics. It is “however” a focal point for the application of measures designed and promoted through a form of international coalition of actors, the so-called ‘troika’ and further shaped and applied, according to a ‘bilateral’ agreement, by the national political elite. Neither the latter can be reduced to a mere mouthpiece of the troika nor the former should be elevated to absolute power. The European Commission argues that it neither dictates nor condemns the Greek government’s decision to close down the public broadcaster: it is a decision expressing Greek and European politics at the times of crisis. It is the politics of ‘emergency’ that is characterised by a series of policies, which aim to manage and contain public dissent, so that unpopular and to many, questionable measures can pass. These are the increased use of decrees as policy-making process, the subsequent by-passing of Parliament in crucial matters, the weakening of social rights as is the case of characterising illegal all forms of industrial action, the reform and restructuring of public institutions, and finally, the increased use of physical force. It was riot police that switched off the transmitters of ERT.

Overall, the costs of Public Service Broadcasters to taxpayers` pockets prevail as a dominant line of argumentation, which is perfectly legitimate if one considers the silver lining in Europe’s economic disparities. Yet, how to ‘contain’ the PSBs is rather the underlying approach around Europe and it has taken several forms. The ORF has been under pressure to ‘restructure’ and cut down hundreds of employees. Some critics demanded even more:

to abandon some of its functions and cultural institutions, from its orchestra to closing down its channel ORF1. In Austria, the debate is framed around a combination of preventing a crisis, economising a blown up public sector, and consumer sovereignty. In Greece, it was presented as a matter of clearing out a ‘wasteland’ of bias and excess. In the acute crisis zones of Portugal and Spain, the privatisation of PSBs entered the public debate—although it was retracted, alone the suggestion that the final ‘bastion’ of public wealth and public good would be privatised signals a turning point in the debate of the future of PSBs in Europe. In the UK, various proposals in the recent past about the privatisation of functions of the BBC, including slicing a percentage of its income to channel into private broadcasters for the production of public service content, the exhaustive control of technologically-based programming offer and innovation, belong firmly to a tide of renewed assaults to PSBs. Although not all of them are the same, not all of them fulfil their functions to the same degree of quality and breadth, and although not all of them require the same level of public funding, PSBs, are European institutions, in that they, in their sum, contribute to the construction of public spheres of European content.

Importantly, they are also national institutions supported for decades by tax payers and other public resources, unpaid and paid labour, generous and smaller donations of important audiovisual content. They function as the historical record-keepers of European societies, as points of connection among nations, and as powerhouses of intellectual capital, precisely because of their historical, contextual and polymorphic contribution to public life: orchestras, archives, production units, technology, infrastructure, know-how, direct support for independent productions are some of the core functions part of the daily routine of these institutions. Whether ERT could perform even more profitably, since it was already a healthy institution, whether it could be more transparent, given the constant interventions by governments and nepotism of political life, whether it could be more equitable, given the privileges of selected ‘classes’ of employees are questions in a debate that have not been had, at least not in public and not with the affected stakeholders: journalists and media workers, citizens organisations, educationalists, the Parliament, the ERT, and the Arts.

There is a new Greek public service broadcaster, the Elliniki Dimosia Tileorasi or Hellenic Public Television. It broadcasts content from existing archive material of ERT, at the frequency of NET (the News channel of ERT) and from the old studios of the private broadcaster MEGA. It lives on borrowed time. At the time of writing, EDT ‘programme—or, as it later on the same day of its inaugural broadcast became DT, consists of old films, documentaries and children’s programming, none of which is its own production. It is unclear what its future will be. In the meantime, ERT has opened up its spaces to diffused interests in society and facilitates genuine debates. It has created genuine public spheres. The new public broadcaster corresponds to the worst fears and stereotypes: a self-fulfilled prophecy, of obsolete, slow, and redundant medium. It is a negligible irrelevant organisation at the margins of a fully privatised media landscape. Even if technically received in remote areas, this kind of irrelevant universality will render it ultimately illegitimate in the eyes of society.

Is this the future of public service broadcasters in Europe? •

# A BLOW TO DEMOCRACY

ANTHONY A. MILLS

DIRECTOR OF COMMUNICATIONS OF THE INTERNATIONAL PRESS INSTITUTE

There may well have been waste at Greece's public broadcaster, which was closed without warning about a month ago, and without the agreement of all government coalition parties. But the shutdown, ostensibly part of the austerity program that Greece must fulfil as part of its financial bailout terms (it must raise 1.8 billion Euros through privatisation and sack 4,000 civil servants by the end of the year), is a huge blow to Greek democracy.

This helps explain why the closure generated such concern internationally, in particular on the part of press freedom groups such as the International Press Institute (IPI) and its affiliate, the South East Europe Media Organisation (SEEMO).

Now, at this time of crisis, Greek citizens both at home and abroad, are in greater need than ever of the services of ERT, with its three TV channels and numerous local radio stations. As imperfect as it may have been, as bloated as its finances may have been, and as overloaded a vessel of nepotism as it may have been, it still provided a crucial democratic function: transmitting relatively reliable information to citizens seeking to hold their democratically elected representatives accountable, at a time of enormous challenges for Greece. Let there be no mistake: The stakes are high – Greece recently became the first developed country to be downgraded to the status of emerging market by the index provider MSCI.

The government said that the broadcaster suffered from a “unique lack of transparency and incredible waste”. While it is fair to suggest that with each new Greek government (this has been going on for decades fuelled by the two then-dominant parties New Democracy and Pasok) managers and senior journalists were indeed appointed to further political agendas, the complete shutdown of the public broadcaster is hardly a proportionate response, whatever the semantic packaging. For decades, the two parties ran the country like a private fiefdom; their cronies and clients contributed significantly to ERT's over-bloated workforce. But this problem, to a greater or lesser extent exists in other EU state public broadcasters. In other EU countries, too, public broadcaster governing boards are sliced up according to political influence, the contracts of editors-in-chief are not prolonged because they have made enemies of the ruling party, journalists are fired when they criticise the powers-that-be and, in one instance at least, the public broadcaster, because of new media legislation and regulations, more closely resembles a state broadcaster than a public one. All of these troubling facts notwithstanding, no one is seriously suggesting that there is no longer a role for public broadcasters to play in democracies. On the contrary, their role must be strengthened. Where there are weaknesses and shortcomings efforts must be made to rectify them.

Many observers see in the development with Greece's public broadcaster part of a more general erosion of Greek democracy. Government decrees are increasingly used. The closure of the public broadcaster was brought about through a presidential decree. There is a widespread sense that freedom of expression is a right only for those who express support for the government. When Britain's The Guardian newspaper reported on police torture in Greece, the government threatened to sue it. And then there is the case of Kostas Vaxevanis, the Greek online reporter who published a list of alleged

potential tax evaders: He has been prosecuted twice. Into this mix come an array of private broadcasters many of which are pro-government and are owned by powerful media moguls.

It is not just Greece that finds itself in crisis. Europe as a whole faces a combination of financial and politico-social challenges more far-reaching than at any time since the founding of the European Coal & Steel Union in the ashes of the Second World War. Youth unemployment has reached frightening levels, especially in countries that are struggling under bailouts, like Greece. Extremist parties are on the rise. A dangerous sense of political disaffection prevails. That's why it's so important not to undermine, but to bolster the role of public broadcasters, who are already struggling for market share in many countries since well before the current crisis. The Greek government has pledged to reopen a streamlined public broadcaster soon. However, every day that passes with the complete absence of the public broadcaster sends a more chilling message, in a country in which the ghosts of undemocratic military rule in the 1960s and 1970s. Greece was a military dictatorship from 1967 to 1974.

It sends the message that now, of all times, the government, or from the perspective of the people the nebulous powers-that-be, do not want transparency; they do not want people to be informed about the grave implications of the strategy being employed to satisfy the troika's bailout conditions. A worsening of social conditions? Let's keep the citizens in the dark. As the saying goes, perception is reality. Now is certainly not the time in Greece, or any other EU country, for governments to be reinforcing a deep-seated sense of disempowerment and alienation, especially among future generations. The very future of the post-second World War European idea is on the line. Streamline the public broadcaster, yes; that's happened to the BBC too. Cost-cut, yes. But don't just close the broadcaster down from one moment to the next, leaving nothing but a blank screen. That's the stuff of military coups. It sends chills down the spines not just of Greek citizens but of those Europeans old enough to remember what it means to live in societies where information is controlled, the narrative is crafted, independent facts are inexistent, and fear prevails. •



# GREEK PUBLIC MEDIA IN TURMOIL

MARC GRUBER

DIRECTOR OF THE EUROPEAN FEDERATION OF JOURNALISTS

Everybody has been talking about the decision of the Greek government, on 11 June, to close the public broadcaster ERT (Elliniki Radiophony Tileorasi) the same day. Unfortunately, journalists and media organisations were right to condemn this closure, because the announcement was made without warning, without consultation, during a press conference organised by the Prime Minister in the evening, but also simply because it is the only example in history of the total closure of a public broadcaster in Europe.

## Chronicle of a disaster

However, few journalists had looked at the details of the Official Journal of the European Union published on 8 November 2011, which concerns “adapting” decisions concerning Greece endorsing formally a previous working document of the “Troika” from October 2011. What was written there? It was a list of reforms that the Greek government must implement in order to receive the support from the European Union and the International Monetary Fund, and which were then supposed to restore a balanced budget and to establish a functional market economy. All these commitments have been included in a „Memorandum of Understanding” (MOU) voted by the Vouli (Greek unicameral parliament). One of the paragraph called “Fighting waste in public enterprises and other public entities“, stated that Greece needed „legislation to close, merge and downsize non-viable entities” [...] Among other, the legislation will relate to large entities which will be closed with functions transferred accordingly, merged or substantially downsized », [including] “ERT(downsizing)”. Obviously, by June 2013, it was clear that the Greek budget was still not balanced, that austerity measures were not efficient and that the closure of ERT was not only abusive, but also useless from a strictly budgetary point of view. The closure of ERT represents around 100 million euros saving, which is insignificant compared to the 240 billion euro international loan. Moreover, Greek politicians and foreign observers were wrong when they pretended that the Troika “obliged” them to close ERT: the Troika asked Greece to “downsize” ERT, two years earlier, which is quite a different thing. Nevertheless, the government of Mr Samaras took the decision to shut down ERT, most certainly because ERT, its journalists and its trade unions were not friendly towards him. It’s as simple as this. Let’s not make this article a full “chronicle” of what happened to ERT and to its 2700 staff, but I can’t resist quoting a spokesman of the European Commission, who said on Twitter on 12 June that “@EU\_Commission understands difficult situation for all #ERT staff and expects dismissals to be carried out in full accordance with the law” . I am not sure that Greek journalists and citizens were pleased to know that the concern of the Commission was the conditions of the lay-off, rather than the existence of public broadcasting. This declaration comes even worse when you know that labour rights have been systematically reduced and violated in Greece since the beginning of the crisis.

It was with a certain relief that we heard on 18 June that the Greek State Council ordered the restoration of a public television signal, until another model is legally established. But the restoration of the signal, after a week of urgency broadcast online thanks to the European

Broadcasting Union, should not be considered as a miracle solution to this problem. ERT, its former staff and its many local broadcasters, is dead and will not be replaced as such. On 4 July, the newly appointed minister responsible for public broadcasting appeared in front of the ERT staff with a document proposing incentives for early retirement, some redundancy payments and a vague plan of a temporary public entity. In a vote, the staff rejected this proposal because the incentives and redundancy pay breached the law (remember the naïve Tweet of the Commission's spokesman?).

The same day, a draft bill was presented in Parliament to create a new public broadcaster called NERIT (Nea Elliniki Radiophony Tileorasi), which would be owned by the Greek State and which would employ a fraction of the former staff. This draft will be discussed in Parliament, but the media workers of the ERT and its journalists have already expressed their opposition.

But let's stop here the chronicle and look a bit out of Greece.

Everybody has been talking about the decision of the Greek government, on 11 June, to close the public broadcaster ERT (Elliniki Radiophony Tileorasi) the same day. Unfortunately, journalists and media organisations were right to condemn this closure, because the announcement was made without warning, without consultation, during a press conference organised by the Prime Minister in the evening, but also simply because it is the only example in history of the total closure of a public broadcaster in Europe.

### **Public broadcasting under the hammer elsewhere**

Another Southern European country is going through its worse crisis in contemporary times: Portugal. Few people in Austria, however, would know that last year the Portuguese government also targeted public media (press agency, radio and television) under the pretext of austerity measures. Not only did they appoint a new manager who worked previously for ... the Heineken beer factory, but the government had announced its intentions to privatise part of the public broadcaster RTP. Journalists' groups and defenders of public media across Europe protested, and at the end the plan was dropped, but for the wrong reason. Indeed the current economic context in Portugal is so gloomy that few investors were interested in the deal, and the government feared that the public broadcaster would be sold to "businesspeople" from Angola, as it is the case already for the Sol, Visao and Expresso newspapers.

Also in Spain, public broadcaster RTVE is "cutting costs", meaning mainly slashing jobs. The same goes for France Télévisions in France and even for the BBC in the UK, where 2000 "redundant" jobs will not be replaced in the coming years. In Poland, the management of TV Polska announced last month that they would outsource 550 jobs, thus creating a whole category of precarious and second-rank workers and by consequence removing the essence of its mission from its internal staff. In Romania, the license-fee is the lowest in Europe: 1 euro per month and per household; how can you expect a public broadcaster to fulfill its mission in such conditions? In Germany, where public broadcasting is an opulent and professional institution, private broadcasters and publishers have been regularly attacking it in Court on the basis of "market distortion", and indeed the online activities of public broadcasters has been limited after certain Court decisions.

In Austria's neighboring country, Hungary, the public media (television, radio and press agency) have been put under the authority of joint entity, who claims to respect international standards but whose leadership is directly appointed by the Prime Minister. In 2011, the public channel MTV had gravely misbehaved at least twice: first when they

deliberately manipulated an intervention of MEP Daniel Cohn-Bendit during his stay in Budapest, and secondly when two technicians were obliged to blur the face of a former judge because he had been identified as an “enemy” of the current government. These are several breaches of professionalism which of course lead to a lack of trust in public media among the population. Unfortunately one could continue this list, but let’s get to the point: public broadcasting is under the hammer all over Europe, and the economic situation is often used by politicians and governments to downsize, reduce, pressure and interfere.

The brutal closure of ERT came therefore as a shock: while journalists and defenders of public broadcasting in Europe knew about economic difficulties and political pressure, no one could have imagined that a whole national public broadcaster could be simply closed down overnight. Our colleagues from Italy, Spain, Portugal, but also from other countries expressed their fear that the case of ERT, like other “experimental” policies in Greece, could inspire governments in other countries. Many reassuring principles have been expressed by European Union, such as the recognition of the “dual broadcasting system” in the EU Treaty, the defence of public broadcasting by the so called “High Level Group on Media Freedom and Pluralism” and by the report of the European Parliament on “EU standards on media pluralism”. But when ERT was actually closed, the European Commission could only express its incompetence by “taking note” and by referring to the “context of the major and necessary efforts that the authorities are taking to modernise the Greek economy”. This means that from now on it could happen anywhere, any time.

We should not be fooled by these developments: many economic and political forces have been opposing public broadcasting in the past decades. They reproach market distortion, lack of transparency, political bias, technological conservatism, unprofessionalism, all of which most of the times they contribute to create themselves because of the lack of funding or the wrong governance. Many of these attacks against public broadcasters aim at the removal of the mission of journalism as a public good; their fantasy is a media as a commodity that can be socially, economically and politically controlled. Opponents to public broadcasting want to ignore the public accountability, the mere possibility that public media can be used by all citizens and in the end they do not understand that media pluralism is a matter of internal pluralism rather than having “57 channels and nothing on”, as Bruce Springsteen sang in 1992.

We have to keep defending public broadcasting, despite its flaws and limitations because it is an essential component of our European political cultures, audiovisual production, political and social pluralism. It is a daily struggle and we cannot cave in, for the simple reason that the market cannot replace genuine public broadcasting. We should not end up choosing between Orban, Berlusconi or Samaras: it is a matter of democracy for us as journalists and as citizens of the European Union. •

# NO SIGNAL

HANS LAROES

CHAIR OF THE TASK FORCE THAT CREATED THE EBU CHARTA "EMPOWERING SOCIETY"

For me it was the most frightful picture of what just had happened in Athens. It was the well-known colorbar. 'No signal', it said. And someone had written 'Democracy ???' on it. In Greece, the State and the government had just intervened and killed the signal of ERT on TV and radio, and also closed the websites. It was the only way, they said, to end an over-bureaucratic institution that spent too much money and was resisting change. So, the Greek government killed ERT-programming. And more specifically: it killed journalism. It prevented ERT journalists and programme-makers to perform the most important task they have: bringing the stories home to their audiences. Telling what was happening in Greece that day, and in the rest of the world. I have been an editor-in-chief for almost 10 years, with NOS News in the Netherlands. Of course, at times, you wonder about all the different possibilities politicians have to influence our news-gathering. There are lots of ways to put the pressure on. Spindoctors are permanently trying to influence the political desk. They praise and complain, they promote some stories while hiding others. There is a permanent 'state-of-war' between spindoctors and journalists.

And of course, politicians sometimes use the money, your yearly budget, to express their lack of appreciation for the stories journalists produce. They will always deny it –in times of crisis, austerity measures also have an impact on the budgets of public broadcasters and every budget cut is being labelled as 'austerity'- but nevertheless, they do know how to use this weapon. You have to defend yourself. Or better, show the world who you are and why you matter by producing fine journalism, guided by the desire to tell the stories that are relevant. Publish and be damned –never mind who is in government.

Sometimes you have to be explicit: 'Any minister that will give me a call to complain about a story, will find him- or herself back again in the 8 O'clock-bulletin that night', I used to say. It helped. No one did use the phone. But what happened in Greece was beyond imagination. Greece is in financial trouble, sadly, of course. This brings harsh measures. But Greece is a democracy, not a state with a totalitarian government. ERT is a public broadcaster, not a state broadcaster. Not a broadcaster only there to serve the government as a puppet moving the ways its master wants –and because of that not to be trusted. ERT serves society.

But the State did not give a damn. Behind the color bar that said ‘no signal’, an invisible black hand pulled the switches. I could not have dreamt of a scenario like this. It is too crazy to be true, too ‘off limits’. But it happened. For me it is impossible to judge if ERT itself is an old fashioned bureaucracy, absorbing too much money. Perhaps it is. Perhaps not. Perhaps ERT needs to be re-invented. Any government has a lot of other possibilities to make its point. It can negotiate, put the pressure on, strike deals, change legislation. This should be subject of an open debate. In parliament, but above all in society.

For me, it is simple. It is not a government or a state which owns public service media. It is the public. They are the real owners. Public service media play an important role in society, not driven by the necessity to make a profit and satisfy some shareholders, but to produce stories that are of importance for society in the 21st century. They should embody continuity, a long-term guarantee that serious journalism, on a national level and abroad, will not cease to exist. That the money will be spent to perform slow journalism, research journalism, journalism from abroad, and journalism that confronts. That is the major task. No government should interfere with that.

ERT, like NOS (my former employer), ORF in Austria, ARD and ZDF, BBC, TVE in Spain and many other broadcasters in lots of other countries are part of the European Broadcasting Union (EBU). Broadcasting in the new digital age is different than it was, let’s say, 10 years ago. It needs other words, and even more to the point, different behaviour and actions. Last year all members of the EBU published ‘Empowering Society’, a declaration on the core values of public service media. It is not just a declaration, it means business. ‘This is our pledge’, EBU says: „We (...) belong to the citizens we serve”. Six core values are identified by EBU: universality, independence, excellence, diversity, accountability and innovation. The six values together really make the difference.

For me as a journalist ‘independence’ is the ultimate value. This is what we promise: “We want to be trusted programme-makers, trustworthy in all fictional and non-fictional programming, in all genres and formats, from news to entertainment, from science to sport, from culture to education. We make our choices only in the interest of our audiences. We strive to be completely impartial and independent from political, commercial and other influences and ideologies. Free to challenge the powerful, test prevailing assumptions, and contribute to an informed citizenship. We want to be autonomous in all aspects within our remit such as programming, editorial decision-making, staffing.” I do not know if ERT is good enough, or if it performs bright and shining journalism. That is for the ERT-journalists to discuss in all openness. It should be debated between the audience and ERT. But it is not up to the government, any government, to intervene. It is not up to the government, any government, to switch off the signal, and send in the police to prevent journalists from doing their jobs. From a journalistic point of view this is unacceptable. Every journalist, every public service media organization, should be able to challenge the powerful. Because, in the end, we belong to the citizens we serve. It’s the citizens that own the switches, not the government. The ‘no signal’ was the most stupid signal any government could give. •

# A STATE OF EMERGENCY

DR.<sup>IN</sup> RUBINA MÖHRING  
REPORTERS WITHOUT BORDERS

What went on air on June 11, 2013 was not a recording mistakenly broadcast by the Greek TV broadcaster, as can sometimes be the case. It was a unilateral decision by the democratically voted Prime Minister Antonis Samaras that amounted to a Coup d'Etat against the Greek media. At precisely 22:00 the Greek public broadcaster ERT's channel went dark. A governmental spokesman had announced the decision that ERT was to be closed down to public only a few hours earlier. Within a couple of hours 2700 employees lost their jobs and were left on the streets.

What happened on June 11, is unheard of in the history of democratic states. It is usually associated with revolutionary brigades and coups, but was initiated and executed by the democratically elected government itself. The last images broadcasted by ERT were those of helpless and baffled journalists in the newsroom. These events did not occur in what perceived ancient, dark and distant European history of the previous century but today, in the new millennium, in Greece, the cradle of democracy. Athens is the first democratic government with the intent of putting public-broadcasting, along with its public service, into question. Spain and Portugal had previously made the threat of privatising their broadcasters if the EU's demands regarding austerity went too far, but that remained nothing but threats in order to keep the EU's demands, as far as that was possible, at bay. The government in Athens on the other hand, did not hesitate to quickly and efficiently shut ERT down.

Greece could not receive public television broadcasts for a week. Eight days later the constitutional court declared it unconstitutional, and decreed that ERT had to continue, at the very least digitally, until an alternative, such as a slimmed down organisation, could be found. ERT's future therefore continued to hang in the air. Not so that of its employees, they received formal terminations of their contracts on 18. June, with the offer of short-term contracts for approximately half of them. Greece's Prime Minister Samaras blames European austerity for his decision. The European Commission refutes this, claiming that it requested a reduction of 3000 employees in the bloated public services, not in the public broadcaster.

The impression created is that the Greek government conveniently mistook the meaning of public services to equate public broadcasting in order to allow them to spare the well-connected public service employees. That the European Commission demanded

that 3000 employees would be laid-off - the amount employed by ERT - added to the convenience. A less convenient side effect is the disassembly of Greek public broadcasting's integrity.

The Greek government landed a coup that made public broadcasting cheaper in every sense and allowed them to get rid of critically minded journalists as ERT now also employs the "hire and fire" policy. This development does not only serve politicians who are currently in power however. It is equally useful for future governments of all colours. According to the most recent polls, the Greek extreme right-wing party Golden Dawn is already the third strongest party. This is likely to increase without the analysis of the increase of racisms and anti-Semitism that Greece is experiencing that ERT undertook. In Brussels leading politicians are less concerned. Johannes Hahn, the EU commissioner for regional politics, stated that the closure was unacceptable, nevertheless "the freedom of expression is not threatened by the circumstances" since ERT only had a market-share of 13% and the measures were part of structural reforms. The international NGO Reporters without Borders holds a different view: in particular public broadcasting services offer adequate plurality of information. Provided, of course, the influence of politics is kept at bay.

Public channels have the privilege of reporting about political parties and groups without the bias caused by being dependant on the advertising income that these groups partially provide to private channels. Directly receiving funds from one political faction is usually not permitted to public broadcasters, in order to maintain their independence and enable them to attempt to provide an objective alternative to the campaigning that the public is exposed to. It is exactly this independence that made it possible for them to be a central part of the fourth pillar of the state – the media. The public broadcasters originally conceived in the 20<sup>th</sup> century were meant to function as a service to the public that had the privilege of being independent of the financial pressures experienced by the private media. This was part of their design in order to allow them to inform, educate and entertain free of political-meddling. The BBC's Charta remains a template for public broadcaster's function in society:

*"The BBC's main object is the promotion of its Public Purposes...The Public Purposes of the BBC are as follows— (a) sustaining citizenship and civil society; (b) promoting education and learning; (c) stimulating creativity and cultural excellence; (d) representing the UK, its nations, regions and communities; 2(e) bringing the UK to the world and the world to the UK...The BBC shall be independent in all matters concerning the content of its output, the times and manner in which this is supplied, and in the management of its affairs."*

BBC Charta 2006

Returning to Brussels. It is astounding that politicians, who would usually denounce ratings as meaningless, use low viewer ratings to justify their actions. That leads to the question of what should be used to measure the worth of public broadcasting services? When are they worthy of preservation? What weighs more, the rating or content?

ORF programmes such as "Die Tage der deutschsprachigen Literatur" vulgo "Bachmann prize" or the "Graz music protocols", are unable to achieve the ratings of a "Dancing Stars." Programmes produced in foreign languages cannot keep up to the "Karlich-Show." If we rely on the rating as the sole measure of success, any demand for educational or cultural programmes become a contradiction in themselves. Only

using content is just as pointless since public broadcasters need to stay relevant in order to fulfil their role. This requires them to be able to rely on strong financial as well as legislative backing in order to continue to be able to provide the public with relevant, informative and high quality content, which includes entertainment. Thoughtful and high quality infotainment is hardly a new maxim. It relies on the not particularly difficult realization that both ratings and content should serve as the measures of public broadcasting's success.

Maintaining a public broadcaster's credibility is certainly important, and the lack of pressure by not entirely being exposed to the market may lead to organisations becoming top-heavy. An increasing number of influential, affluent but functionally near-useless managers at the top can lead to a decrease of motivated and inspired content-makers at the bottom. Comparable constellations in public broadcasters are hardly a rarity and eat away at their ability to create high quality television. Sadly, ERT was no exception to this development. A predictable coincidence: on the day of the Greek covert operation, an Austrian far-right politician demanded the privatisation of the ORF. Mentioning the ORF is always an attention-grabber. As is the word privatisation. However, at least making an attempt of broadening one's horizons by paying attention to what happens beyond Austria's beautiful alps and lakes may also yield benefits.

Silvio Berlusconi's Italy serves as an instructive example of what can happen when public broadcasting is marginalized through a monopoly of private channels. Berlusconi, whose original intent was simply to maximize ratings through the broadcasting of showgirls at every possible occasion, now dominates the Italian media landscape. Italy has reached a full circle: after years of focusing TV programmes on pert tits and buttocks in the name of ratings, content has made its reappearance: white-wash documentaries about Berlusconi's innocence in the constant stream of court-cases he is embroiled in. By contrast, the Turkish national broadcaster TRT suffers under excessive government control, broadcasting a moving documentary on the life and survival of penguins while protests raged across the country. Private channels informed the public of current political events instead.

Hungary's government pragmatically used austerity measures to fuse national television, radio and the national news agency into one easily controlled unit that is now staffed with loyal party members. A currently debated topic is that political parties may in future only advertise in the government controlled public channels in order to weaken private broadcasting and the plurality of, at times critical, views it represents. A democratic society therefore needs both public and private broadcasting in order to maintain a delicate balance between education, information and entertainment. Democracies follow the principle of striving towards equality by continuously pitting a large number of interest groups against each other. A democratic media landscape follows similar principles by doing the same with the underlying objectives of maximising ratings, delivering high quality content and serving the interests of the powerful.

National media markets are large enough to support both public and private media. Further, viewers in affluent societies are informed enough to make the alternatives unacceptable and unsustainable over long. Even the Chinese government, which has rather questionable democratic credentials, is carefully and against all authoritarian



instincts loosening its hold on the media because its increasingly prosperous population will not accept otherwise in the long-term. The Greek government recently decided what it wants. In July it presented the concept for the state-controlled channel Nerit – New Hellenic Radio Internet and TV – which will be under the direct control of parliament, with a board composed of ministers of finance, culture and a newly appointed minister of media. ERT is now definitely dead and with it a part of Greece's democratic tradition and identity will also be a thing of the past. The passing of ERT will lead to the slow deletion of the collective memory of the slow and painful process of democratisation that the country recently went through. ERT was a symbol of the Greek national identity – citizens went on the streets for it and cried for it when its musicians played their last concert – it is now replaced by a faceless and voiceless by-product of austerity.

What has and is happening in Greece is bitter. A traditional public television channel was shut-down against the will of the majority. Possibly by coincidence, the rights to digital broadcasting frequencies were being negotiated at the same time. ERT is dismantled and Nerit will be tightly controlled. It seems like the winner of what has happened will be a private media corporation, owned by one of the country's richest businessmen, who happens to have close ties to the premier. Public broadcaster should take note. •

# THE PRICE TO PAY

MAG. ERNST GELEGS

FOREIGN CORRESPONDENT FOR EASTERN EUROPE, ORF

The financial crisis in Greece has already had far-reaching consequences for many people and companies, but now it is claiming a new casualty – the state broadcaster ERT. In a surprise move, the conservative Prime Minister Antonis Samaras ordered the closure of ERT last month, firing all 2,700 employees and shutting off the signal. The closure caused a nationwide and international outcry as well as political turmoil in the country as the Democratic Left known as DIMAR, the junior partner in the three party coalition, pulled out of the government in protest, leaving Samaras with a three-vote majority in the 300-seat parliament. The Prime Minister could avoid a collapse of his government and early elections because Greece’s high court ruled that while the government was entitled to replace ERT with a more efficient broadcaster, it should not have shut off the public TV signal. The top administrative court appeared to vindicate Samaras’s stance that a leaner, cheaper public broadcaster must be set up but also allowed for ERT’s immediate reopening as his two coalition partners had demanded, offering all three a way out of an impasse that had raised the spectre of an early election. All parties claimed victory from the ruling which failed to specify whether ERT must restart with programming as before or only partially resume operations until its relaunch. The conservative Samaras has refused in a flurry of speeches to turn the “sinful” ERT back on, vowing to fight to modernize a country he says had become a “Jurassic Park” of inefficiency and corruption.

There is no need to talk about the necessity of a public broadcaster in a democratic country. But what to do if a public broadcaster has turned into a fat, bloated, lethargic monster over the last decades? According to a government spokesman, ERT became such a monster, unwilling or unable to reform. The Greeks spend more than 300 Million euros a year for a rather unpopular program. Just around 4 percent of the population watches the main news broadcast of ERT. The annual budget of ERT is threefold higher than that of every other TV station in Greece.

Most of the people in Greece complain about biased political news coverage and characterize ERT as a propaganda channel of each government. So far, every government placed their intimates in strategic positions at state TV or radio in order to influence the program. After every change of government, these people usually stay employed and get paid princely sums without having something to do. Nepotism seems to be quite common. Expensive TV productions have often been outsourced to companies owned by family members and friends of ERT employees. Some of these cases are currently under investigation. The department of public prosecution has already launched legal proceedings.

Fierce debates surrounded the daughter of a former minister of the ruling Nea Dimokratia Party who became a well-paid anchor of a TV magazine without having any TV experience. In recent years ERT paid millions of extra salaries and overtime to employees who were not even present. To go on strike was very popular. In 2012, ERT was on strike over half the year, yet employees’ salaries were paid in full.

Prime Minister Samaras has often urged management to reform ERT, but without any results. Any move to make the public broadcaster leaner and more efficient came to grief by mighty unions eagerly trying to maintain the status quo.

Polls suggest that an overwhelming majority of the population agree on the need for

massive layoffs in the public administration as claimed by the so called Troika (EU, IMF, European Central Bank). Until the end of the year 4.000 civil servants will have to be sacked. Another 12.500 workers have to be put into a „mobility pool” by September, giving them eight months to find work in another department or get fired. Samaras has been forced to launch the cuts in order to continue receiving rescue loans from the IMF and EU, therefore his decision to shut down ERT didn't actually come out of the blue. It was just badly prepared and communicated, but economically a necessary step to bring Greece back on track.

The necessity of reforming a public broadcaster has been seen by the Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán as well. Similar to ERT, Hungarian TV - called MTV (Magyar Televízió) - was overstaffed. 3,000 employees produced the programs of 3 TV channels (M1, M2 and Duna TV) as well as 3 nationwide radio stations. With more than 1,5 billion euros, the annual costs were enormous but the number of viewers was minimal. Just 5 percent watch the programs on MTV. But Orbán used the necessity of a reform not only to get a leaner and more efficient public broadcaster, but rather to get MTV completely under the control of his government. Under the pretext of cost-cutting measures, the Hungarian Prime Minister fired more than 1000 workers and merged the three TV channels, the three radio stations, as well as the Hungarian News Agency MTI (Magyar Távirati Iroda) under one umbrella called MTVA. Orbán annihilated all news departments and created one single editorial office. This office produces news for every TV and radio station of MTVA, the same for everyone. The costs have been more than halved. The price paid is the loss of pluralism and diversity of opinion in the news programs of the public broadcaster in Hungary. Viktor Orbán has intentionally killed the last remains of independence because critical coverage of the Orbán government's policy by a public broadcaster is undesirable in Hungary. The one who pays the piper calls the tune. The news about home affairs now reflect the opinions and attitudes of Viktor Orbán and his government.

In contrary to the Hungarians, the Greek population has a good chance at the moment to get a politically independent, efficient, and strong public TV and radio service. The parliament in Athens just passed the law for a new public broadcaster called NERIT (Nέα Ellinikí Radiofonía, Internet, Tileóراسi) meaning new Greek radio, internet and television. Still unanswered is the question of when NERIT will go on the air – hopefully soon. •

# WHEN THE SELF-EVIDENT IS ENDANGERED...

KOSTAS ARGYROS  
JOURNALIST & PRODUCER, NET TV

Is there a life without public service broadcasting? Greece's government appears to think so. Its decision to shut down ERT (Hellenic Broadcasting Corporation) within a matter of hours is a symbol of brutal, neo-liberal politics... politics which are aimed at defaming and restricting everything meant to be a public service. This deeply shocked Greek society. ERT, despite all of its problems and negative issues, was a national symbol and a Greek voice abroad. ERT mirrored Greek society, a "micrography" of the country, one could say. The state of ERT reflected the state of the Greek nation and its political evolution.

For people in border regions, or for Greeks living abroad, ERT was often the only link to Athens. The public service media (TV-radio-Internet) was often the only platform of expression for young artists, directors, musicians, dancers and members of various ethnic minorities. ERT gave a voice to people and groups otherwise ignored by bigger media outlets.

Despite its independence from the government, ERT provided fairer and more comprehensive coverage than privately-owned media. ERT was more pluralistic and varied than private media. Much of the private media broadcasts without state licenses, owes the state

millions of euros, and still manages to have financial problems. It was not by chance that Prime Minister Samaras cited as a reason to shut down ERT “a lack of providing proper coverage” of his foreign policy activities. Last year, during the period of the “national” all-party government, ERT’s credibility with viewers and listeners surged, resulting in extremely high viewer ratings on election night 2012. ERT also had much greater credibility with viewers who “knew where it was coming from”, something which could not always be said of private broadcasters. In the event of major foreign events, Greeks always tuned into ERT first because ERT had a broad network of foreign correspondents. ERT also provided other outlets with material regarding the government and president, especially when the stories had a foreign angle such as state visits, etc.

This was all ignored by the Greek government on 11 June 2013. One month later there is still no public service broadcaster, aside from a caricature of a TV station which lacks a license and personnel, and which since July 10th has broadcast mainly old documentaries or Greek comedies from the 1960s. As for radio and the Internet, the government has done nothing to end the silence.

Each day which passes proves there is no plan for the future of public broadcasting in Greece. Suspicions intensify that the neoliberal orthodoxy wants to do away with all public service broadcasting. It is not by chance that, despite government pronouncements to the contrary, the government still has no concrete plans for a new public service broadcaster. This applies to both the administrative and journalistic levels. Until now there has only been a very vague and non-transparent government proposal which experts regard as a roadmap for cementing ministers’ control over a new state broadcaster and will erect insurmountable hurdles for journalistic freedom. Samaras and the new “state secretary for television” must also accept responsibility for high costs of shutting down ERT. Estimates put the process of shutting down ERT and founding a new public broadcaster at between 150 and 300 million euros.

The Greek government is trying to create a precedent in Europe. Many fear that Greece will once again be the test case for a brutal experiment. The aim is to test the limits of public patience. This has already been seen in the case of austerity policies, now in their fourth year in Greece. The “success” of these policies have only increased the country’s debt and pushed society further into poverty and desperation. Public broadcasters in other southern European nations such as Spain and Portugal rightly fear that they could be next. This helps explain the outrage from abroad over this shocking decision by the Greek government. This authoritarian move by the Samaras government has achieved the exact opposite of what it was intended to. The reaction of the ERT staff, which has kept the broadcaster alive for the past month with the unexpected acceptance and support of the Greek public, proves that a truly public, open and independent media is possible and viable. Yes, it is urgently needed and wanted by Greeks now more than ever. The thousands who came to ERT headquarters---including labour union representatives, minorities, artist collectives, internet journalists--- and who found in ERT an open broadcaster, all of these people and groups know that nothing will be the same. Even if the government stands its ground and refuses to budge and dreams about a facility which caters only to its whims and desires, society will remain a few steps ahead in resisting and will never accept a state broadcaster which has been neutralized.

The closure of ERT is a hard and tough example of appreciating the importance of what we once regarded as self-evident. It has raised awareness of how society can protect and improve independent media. •

# VIEW FROM THE INSIDE: MAJORITIES AND MINORITIES

VASILIS VASILOPOULOS  
HEAD OF DIGITAL NEWS, ERT

There has always been the majority of people working for the broadcaster who have made a favourable impression on Greek society. The battle for information was fought on a daily basis, validity and reliability being the primary issues (Hellenic Broadcasting Corporation's designated purpose never being to aim at high viewing and listening ratings but, mainly, to be acknowledged as a public and social service that lived up to its reciprocal role). This was a battle waged under adverse circumstances due to the undermining actions of politically controlled executives holding key positions in the broadcaster. <sup>1</sup>

One of many things proving the successful endeavour of ERT employees, was that the public broadcaster held the first position in viewing ratings during the two 2012 elections, with private TV channel "MEGA" coming second, according to a web medium connected to the latter. However, those who have been trying to blend in with the purpose of getting rid of their "past sins" or to protect their interests in the capacity of trade unionists clearly stand out and any such effort on their part is practically pointless. <sup>2</sup>

Another testimony to the high quality of the journalistic material and the work produced by the broadcaster are the dozens of awards journalist Yorgos Avgeropoulos has been presented his films in "EXANDAS" Documentary Series. The most recent one under the title: "Stealing from the Poor".

The 677 journalists working for ERT, both in Greece and abroad, along with 1477 technicians and staff producing ERT programme - who had never been paid the wages of their "high profile" colleagues - worked on the journalistic material distributed by NET TV channel, "Proto Programma" radio station and ERT3, which, after having been moderated, was then broadcast by the rest of television and radio stations. NET was the main news TV channel broadcasting news from Greece and the world. News bulletins were the focal point of distributing information around which a whole structure had been formed consisting of current affairs shows, sport events broadcasts of a 2-hour duration per day, infotainment shows and both Greek and international documentary films. The news channel (NET) programme was enriched with Greek and foreign films; there were also entertainment shows addressed to a broader audience on weekends.

ET1 was ERT TV channel focused on culture. In addition to a basic news feed, its programme included Greek and foreign TV series, modern Greek films, foreign films participating in international film festivals, short films produced by ERT, award-winning international films, international co-productions, recent Greek and foreign documentary series and Greek and foreign children shows addressed both to school children and pre-schoolers. ET1 channel focused mainly on the Arts and Letters and the current

way of living, broadcasting shows on ecological, multicultural and social issues. Visual and performing arts, literature and portraits of artists and other intellectuals, new technologies, an ecological way of living and the “understanding of strangers” focusing on migration, comprised the main subjects of its shows.<sup>3</sup> Hellenic Broadcasting Corporation constituted of: 3 Pan-Hellenic range TV channels, 1 satellite TV channel, 1 HD channel, 7 Pan-Hellenic range radio stations, 3 radio stations located in Thessaloniki, 19 local radio stations, 3 musical ensembles, “Radioteleorasi” radio-television magazine, a museum-archive dating back to 1938 and 15 sites run by the Multimedia department. Journalists and technicians produced a 12-hour programme per day for each one of the TV channels, NET, ET1, ERT3 etc.

ERT3, for example, with one television and three radio stations based in Thessaloniki, had 420 employees. 240 employees - 90 journalists among them - worked in television, producing a high quality programme to be coveted by many commercial broadcasters. An 8-hour live programme was broadcast every day, composed of 11 hours of news, 2 hours of sports, 5 hours of cultural shows and 6 hours of entertainment. There were 17 journalists, 6 developers and graphic designers employed in the Multimedia department who had created and been running 15 web sites, “www.ert.gr” being the foremost one, with no additional cost for the broadcaster. There were 400 updates, 25 edited multimedia posts, 65 rewriting of news updates, social media (Facebook, Twitter etc) distribution (moderation) of the sum of ERT news feed on a daily basis.

But in order to explain what has really happened at the Greek Public Broadcaster, they should probably focus not only on the hard working majority, but on a special minority as well: the corporation’s past management. This is because key positions in the top management have often been assigned to people of the government’s and the competent minister’s absolute confidence. Although these executives held the management of a financially independent corporation - with revenue of 300 million euros per year through electricity bills where an “ERT fee” of 4.28 euros per household/ per month was included - they have paved the road to a crisis. It only took them one year to create all the necessary conditions for the corporation to shut down, mainly by undermining its goodwill. And when the critical moment came, they were the first to “abandon ship”.

### **The time before the crisis**

In the past ten years, people appointed at the corporation management had been literally handing out thousands of euros to high-profile executives and star journalists or directors. They had even been hiring people who possessed none of the essential qualifications to be employed by the corporation.

In a general atmosphere of deep corruption and arbitrariness, impunity and unaccountability, they have been hiring a significant number of highly paid employees. They wasted money on extravagances for private studio productions (there are ten such cases against the corporation’s administration during the years 2004-2009, at the courts of law at the moment; the accused have to be presumed as innocent.) They even reached the point of obtaining several million euros bank loans in the name of the corporation, while offering themselves bonuses of 100000 euros at the end of each year, for, allegedly, having reached the aims they had set themselves. This type of management caused tens of millions of euros damages to the corporation and inevitably led it to a process of painful revitalization. The number of the corporation

employees had at some time reached that of 4000 people between the years 2000 and 2010. Eventually, a process of rationalization began, leading to the final number of 2650 employees. At the same time 29 persons were scandalously hired with 3500 euros remunerations per month. During the 2010s the “chosen” ones’ remunerations whether newly hired or old executives of the corporation reached the amount of 40000 euros per month. A group of a hundred journalists and executives were paid from 25000 to 35000 euros between the years 2004 and 2009. Remember: We speak about a minority. The majority of employees were being paid 800 to 1200 euros, of course. It is typical that one of the main arguments of the Greek government for shutting down ERT was its state of deep corruption. The only thing is that this corruption was attested to by a document released by the head of ERT internal affairs department, who had been recently appointed. This document referred to several scandalous cases of the management period 2004-2009, already being under investigation by the law. The problems caused during this period, were made apparent when the past three fiscal years showed a surplus of 30 to 60 million euros, a fact that led to the Ministry of Finance to receive 75 million euros annually through ERT, coming from fees paid by Greek citizens.

#### **How we had been led to the crisis**

May 2013. According to the corporation’s Directorate General of Financial Affairs, the corporation’s budget implementation in the first quarter of 2013 shows a 40 million euros surplus that has been given to the Ministry of Finance towards the country’s debt. This fact is unprecedented and it is being investigated (and should be investigated both by a chartered accountant and the law), given that the last company’s administration had assigned key positions to people who failed to publize the corporations’s balance sheet on June 11th. The complete disintegration is confirmed by the fact that unionists had been exercising pressure towards the hiring of another two employees at the balance sheet composition department. <sup>4</sup>

On Sunday, May 26th, Greek newspaper “Real” revealed that the Greek government planned to shut down ERT and dismiss all its employees. <sup>5</sup>

It seems that a week before this piece of information was confirmed the political decision had already taken shape causing unbearable political pressure to the three parties of the coalition government. The two minor partners of the coalition asked the prime minister’s environment for clarifications, trying at the same time to dispel the impression that they had already been in agreement with the decision. However, there has never occurred a negation of the article foretelling the “black” television screens. The whole issue turned into a political thriller, leading to Radical Left – DIMAR party leaving the coalition and, eventually, to a cabinet reshuffle. During that specific week some ERT executives had disappeared and never made any effort to ask for the government’s confirmation or denial of the aforementioned article or to appease the broadcaster’s employees. It seems that they were packing up their personal belongings in order to leave the premises.

#### **Paving the road to a “sudden death”**

Some of those holding the main administration and financial executive positions had long before made themselves scarce and only a few meetings attested to their presence in the premises. On Tuesday, June 11th, for example, the international relations department had scheduled a great event at ERT headquarters to honour the signing of



an agreement with the Chinese public broadcaster. According to protocol, ERT should have been represented by its CEO, who, however, refused to attend and asked for the event to take place at the Athens Chinese embassy instead. Which it did, but there was no agreement signed with the CEO being absent. Maybe since the government had already informed him that it would be shutting down ERT in a while?

There is also the blatant case of a former yellow press journalist who became a member of ERT's top management. Even when present at his office he would not see anyone. He had long before stopped conducting and participating in meetings. He wouldn't even meet with the news director. People invited to current affair shows were his one and only concern. He would not agree to meet anyone with the constant claim of having "previous engagements". For the last month he kept asking for information (employees' names, specialties, working times etc) to be officially sent to him, a fact that had caused great concern to administration employees.

### **Members of the administration who stayed to fight against "black screens"**

Since the first moment of closure the wheat has been separated from the chaff. After the shutdown dozens of ERT employees left, as well as the high-profile journalists and a few others, along with those appointed to high administration offices by the government. The General Director of Radio was the only one from his fellow general directors who stayed at the closed ERT premises, although the same does not apply to the deputy director general, best man of the Greek prime minister, who did not show up... Directors of every directorate were present as well as all editors and editors-in-chief. All technicians have been present and all administration employees, even heads of departments, who even have been taking turns in guarding ERT premises.

They couldn't have done otherwise. The employees' general assembly had decided not to comply with the closure of ERT. They couldn't have abandoned their subordinates. This is how a separating line has been drawn between the mismanagement of the appointees and the employees' management. It goes without saying that the first group consists of people who are to be employed in the new broadcaster by the title of "NERIT" or "EDT" or however it might be called. The second group is made out of people who struggle to negotiate with the new government representative although he shows no intention to hold an effective dialogue conducive to a solution. In case one wonders, there certainly are certain "gray areas" in the second group: However, those who have been trying to blend in with the purpose of getting rid of their "past sins" or to protect their interests in the capacity of trade unionists clearly stand out and any such effort on their part is practically pointless. It's again a story about majorities and minorities....

### **What the majority does at the moment**

In the current state of self-management, ERT broadcasts an alternative programme focused on the country's political and financial current events as well as news concerning major social issues, such as education, health, labour relations and racism. The broadcasting takes place via the WEB with NET television channel being the spearhead of the effort. Employees of an average 1000 Euros monthly salary, the ones who have remained and kept working at Aghia Paraskevi ERT headquarters, are those who had suffered a 36% pay cut from 2010 on, in order for the corporation to become profitable in a short time and to escape the stranglehold applied by the Troika (IMF-EU-ECB) and the memorandum in the context of drastic solutions concerning public sector utilities (DEKO) deep in debt. Many ERT employees have lost their jobs in the last 3 years due

to their employment contracts not having been renewed, not because they were no longer needed but because of the “labour cost”. However, it is apparent that their sacrifice has been pointless, since a profit of more than 100 million Euros in the last three years has not been enough to prevent political resolutions. For the time being, they hope to be vindicated, after their having found a reliable partner to converse with towards finding a solution to the current impasse, on the one hand, and avoiding potential pitfalls of any politician or unionist taking advantage of their sincere fight, on the other. A task that has not proved to be an easy one...

And never forget: The “biggest majority” in Greece, the people, have the right to have a trustful, accountable and independent media voice. We have to focus on that. The majority of people holding administration positions in the currently self-managed ERT are very competent, and certainly necessary to the public broadcaster in order for the new entity to acquire the quality mark it really needs! •

1 [HTTP://WWW.TOVIMA.GR/MEDIA/ARTICLE/?AID=462934](http://www.tovima.gr/media/article/?aid=462934)

2 [HTTP://WWW.FESTIVALDELLETERRE.IT/EN/SCHEDA/STEALING-FROM-THE-POOR](http://www.festivaldelleterre.it/en/schede/stealing-from-the-poor)

3 “THE LOST SIGNAL OF DEMOCRACY”: [HTTP://VIMEO.COM/68532357](http://vimeo.com/68532357)

4 [HTTP://WWW.ERTOPEN.COM/EIDISEIS/ITEM/57-EGGRAFO-STH-GALLIKH-HUMANITE-APOKALYPTEI-TA-KERDHTHS-ERT-TO-A-TRIMHNO-TOY-2013#.UEOj19jFCSP](http://www.ertopen.com/eidiseis/item/57-eggrafo-sth-gallikh-humanite-apokalyptei-ta-kerdh-ths-ert-to-a-trimhno-toy-2013#.UEOj19jFCSP);

[HTTP://WWW.HUMANITE.FR/MONDE/REVELATIONS-LE-GROUPE-AUDIOVISUEL-GREC-ERT-ETAIT-R-543838](http://www.humanite.fr/monde/revelations-le-groupe-audiovisuel-grec-ert-etait-r-543838)

5 [HTTP://WWW.REAL.GR/FILES/CALENDAR/2013/MAY/235786/REALNEWS.PDF](http://www.real.gr/filescalendar/2013/MAY/235786/REALNEWS.PDF)

# VIEW FROM THE INSIDE: THE «SUCCERT» STORY

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DIGITAL NEWS, ERT

It could be characterized as a tragic irony. The ERT website ([www.ert.gr](http://www.ert.gr)), the digital arm of the Public Broadcasting Corporation, the third and inherently dynamic medium that was spreading a powerful brand name since April 2000, was the last created and the last that fell dead following the Greek government's controversial decision to shut down the Greek public broadcaster. This has been achieved, thanks to the democratic nature of its medium, thanks to the internet.

The notice “under construction” on ERT's website came some hours later. Additionally, the Greek government was too slow to register the new domain name („nerit.gr“); the news blog which claimed it first streamed a live feed of the “ERT occupied program”. “Nerit.gr” became a big story in major media all over the world, internationally embarrassing the Greek government. The patenting of the domain name by a private citizen crushed the government's arguments for an organized plan to replace ERT and proved that no preparation had taken place. A few days later, the government again provoked dismay by shutting down [www.nerit.gr](http://www.nerit.gr) without explanation and even though the news blog that claimed it first had followed all necessary legal procedures. Today, a month after the controversial decision to shut down ERT, the domain name “ert.gr” appears to be in use on the official records, but it is unknown by whom. But how did the story begin?

The days after the night of crisis (code name “11/6”), ERT's staff, journalists and technicians were ready to stand and fight under tough conditions, such as uncertainty and intense emotional ups and downs. Crying for the lost signal of democracy quickly changed into inspiration. The self management of the Public Broadcasting Corporation was a great challenge to all of us who had the unique opportunity to operate without political intervention for the benefit of Greek society.

At the beginning, journalists and technicians of ERT had to deal with a lot of problems. Then came the solutions: The prestigious National Technical University restored the internet connection and in consultation with PCC, the biggest power producer in the country, the provision of electricity was set. Journalists and technicians were using their mobile phones (paid on their own, not by the company, as wrongly claimed by politicians) to restore communication. The most extraordinary move of solidarity came from the European Broadcasting Union (EBU) who decided to put ERT's news coverage back

on air, allowing Greek satellite subscribers to watch NET, the station's news channel, on television. In its announcement, the EBU underlined that it will maintain ERT's TV and radio frequencies via live stream on the EBU website until a public national broadcaster is able to resume full service to domestic audiences. In the meantime, hundreds of Greek sites and blogs defying the Ministry of Finance on penalties created an Intranet for ERT and were transmitting its program. And while the whole world watched the self-governed Public Broadcasting, there circulated a counterfeit issue of the (in Greece well known) ERT's print magazine "Radioteleorasi". It was a bad imitation, a haphazard and a low quality copy of the original "Radioteleorasi" layout – some said, done with the only purpose to get the Greek public's money.

#### **From [www.ert.gr](http://www.ert.gr) to [www.ertopen.com](http://www.ertopen.com)**

The gap in news coverage until the transition to "[www.ertopen.com](http://www.ertopen.com)" was filled instantaneously, since the internet connection was restored, thanks to social media. Self-managed journalists at "[www.ert.gr](http://www.ert.gr)" became highly qualified social media editors, who provided ERT's accounts on Facebook, twitter and YouTube to publish all of the news & audio content via social media. From the very first moments of crisis till now, the audience strongly approved the self-governed ERT project. Encouraging – and referred to the fact, that the blackout on ERT's frequencies was a distinct cut of the umbilical cord with governmental and political interventions. We put an end to the skillful embellishment of reality, and for the first time, we were functioning in coordination with public sentiment. Over the Internet, the self-governed ERT gained extraordinary ground. This was not only a matter of likes and followers on ERT's social accounts on Facebook or twitter. It is interactivity that matters most. On Facebook, ERT's account today is swarmed by posts, messages and comments, while the content is read and shared by thousands of users in a few minutes. On twitter, #ERT and #mysocialert were -- along with #occupygezi (Turkey) -- the most popular issues during the first weeks of crisis. When "[ertopen.com](http://ertopen.com)" came back on the air, users were already aware that this was the voice of the self-managed ERT over the Internet. A story of success which shows people know that independent journalism, produced by an accountable public broadcaster is inevitable. •

# VALUES DEBATE IN SHARP FOCUS

INGRID DELTENRE

DIRECTOR GENERAL OF THE EUROPEAN BROADCASTING UNION

On 11 June 2013, the Greek government unceremoniously announced it would pull the plug on its public service broadcaster, triggering an international outcry that reverberated round the planet. Emergency powers granted to the Greek Finance Minister and the competent minister were used to abruptly stop ERT's transmissions that same day at 2300hrs. At a stroke, 2,700 staff were laid off, and Greek citizens were left in front of black screens and silent radios

## **Our actions**

Since then the European Broadcasting Union (EBU), has been at the forefront of an international push to have public service media returned to air in Greece. Within hours of the announcement, the EBU denounced the step by writing to the Greek Prime Minister, Mr Antonis Samaras, urging him to use his powers to immediately reverse the decision. Quickly, more than 50 Directors General of our members had roundly condemned the Greek government's undemocratic and unprofessional course of action. The EBU General Assembly – the EBU's highest governing body – unanimously called for urgent action to set up interim services and re-establish public service programming in Greece, making use of existing facilities and staff.

But we went further than mere words. Resolute ERT staff dug in their heels and continued producing news programmes for news channel, NET, which we streamed on the EBU website. We also implemented a workaround to allow satellite subscribers worldwide to access NET on television. This action brought a wave of support from Greeks around the world. Disappointingly, public service media remained off air in Greece for several weeks, despite a court ruling ordering the Government to restore a public broadcast service as soon as possible. Eventually, on 10 July, an unsatisfactory interim service was launched, transmitting old films and documentaries from private studios.

Then on 24 July the Greek Parliament adopted a new media law, a step the EBU welcomes since the law appears to set the stage for building a new and independent public service broadcasting organisation. The EBU understands that it has always been the Greek Government's intention to form the new broadcasting organisation, NERIT, while operating an interim service with the resources at its disposal. For the EBU, this means that as soon as there is an interim service providing a news bulletin as part of the schedule, the EBU streaming and signal relay of NET will stop.

The EBU has repeatedly offered its assistance and expertise to the Greek Government to help build ERT's successor, and to make sure that public service media in Greece has a secure and sustainable future. This offer still stands.

### **Our messages**

Rather than a defence of ERT per se, what motivates the EBU in this case is the principle that a functioning public service broadcaster is a non-negotiable prerequisite in modern, democratic, European countries. The EBU will not deny that change was needed at ERT. Rationalization is necessary if it engenders a more secure future for public service media. The EBU's objection is to the undemocratic and unprofessional way this disproportionate measure was decided upon and executed. It was unnecessarily drastic to take ERT off air completely at the flick of a switch. And it was an unbridled assault on media freedom and pluralism that leaves the Greek landscape distinctly worse off, since it is now entirely dominated by privately-owned media whose first consideration is to their shareholders, not the public interest.

In 2011, 91% of ERT's 328m euro budget came from the license fee; 6% from advertising and 2% from the state budget through some specific agreements. ERT's abolition meant that the licence fee was also eradicated, but the truth is that this change will bring no extra money to government coffers, since the burden was borne directly by Greek citizens. Moreover, the Greek government will have to meet all costs deriving from legal actions, redundancy payoffs and unmet contractual obligations to service providers and sports rights holders. The cost of this backlash will likely be very high – hundreds of millions of euros. Another crucial point that has been consistently omitted from the ERT debate is that ERT was a profit-making organization with no accrued debts of note. ERT closed out 2012 with a 50m euro surplus to its name. What this means is that, paradoxically, the shelving of ERT flies in the face of the troika's key objectives of reducing state spending and increasing efficiency.

### **Our values**

It is likely the architects of ERT's demise expected the move to go relatively unnoticed by an outside world absorbed in its own problems. Similarly, the depth of Greece's financial woes is so well-known that perhaps they had hoped a measure this extreme would be dismissed as a necessary sacrifice. At any rate, they could not have envisaged the ensuing groundswell of support for the broadcaster, portrayed by its detractors as a mismanaged den of decadence reporting catastrophic audience figures. For those of us already persuaded of the benefits to democracy of public service media, the snap closure of ERT was profoundly alarming and unsettling. That this could happen at all is a troubling indicator of the extent to which severe and unrelenting financial pressure has warped European political thinking. We are witnessing values that remain a precondition for European Union membership being trampled underfoot. Values such as media freedom, pluralism and the unhindered access to information. In the context of the ongoing EBU-led conversation about values in public service media, ERT's shutdown set a precedent that has turned lofty notions into tangible reality. We have been handed an indelible example of worst practice that will forever be remembered as such.

This was a failed experiment that proved the validity of the EBU's position: that public service media is an indispensable component of free-thinking societies. But it also served as a warning to would-be copycat governments that free-thinking people do not take kindly to having their right to public service media bulldozed. This destructive misstep drew millions of people worldwide to ERT's defence. Why? Because for all its practical shortcomings, ERT was an institutional symbol of the public's right to a media company functioning on their behalf. Closing it down simply gave substance to the symbolism.

When in June 2012 the EBU membership, meeting in Strasbourg, unanimously agreed on a declaration on the Core Values of Public Service Media, they pledged to weave universality, independence, excellence, diversity, accountability, and innovation into the professional fabric of their organizations. But the Declaration was far more than mere words. In publicly committing to these professional virtues, PSM strive to set themselves apart and legitimize their position – which they recognize as privileged – especially when money is tight. But perhaps the most telling aspect of this story is that the dialogue in Greece that has emerged around ERT is not chiefly about the way the employees have been treated, nor is it even about the wisdom of shutting down the broadcaster at all, but it was mainly about values. Values such as freedom of speech and of the media, of having a voice in the democratic process and the inalienable right to choose which media we consume.

Values are the cement that holds societies PSM together; they are a practical construct with a strongly emotional quality. It is because fundamental values were at stake in Greece that there was such a powerful international mobilization in defence of ERT. The Greek example drives home how serious we should be about the importance of our role, and the kind of mass public support we can receive if we allow values to guide our choices. •

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**Zum Wert des öffentlich-rechtlichen Rundfunks im digitalen Zeitalter**

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