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# The Politics and the Effects of the Deregulation of Greek Television

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## ABSTRACT

■ Broadcasting has been a source of controversy in Greece since its beginning. It is not surprising that the deregulation of the broadcasting sector has been closely associated with politics rather than a well-organized plan according to the needs of the industry. The speed with which private broadcasters have moved into the broadcasting arena has been impressive, while politicians seem unwilling (or unable) to bring order to the sector. This article attempts to review and analyse the politics of deregulation of Greek broadcasting and the side-effects of an undisciplined television environment. ■

**Key Words** broadcasting, deregulation, Greece, politics

Greek broadcasting underwent spectacular change in the late 1980s. From a broadcasting environment with two state television channels and four state radio stations, it now comprises some 124 private television channels and 1200 private radio stations, most of them with no official licence to broadcast. The result is an overcrowded broadcasting landscape.

Across Europe, broadcasting has been in ferment, as governments of every political persuasion try to cope with the stress and upheavals caused by deregulation. However, Greek politicians seem unwilling (or unable) to bring order to the sector. In Greece, as in other Mediterranean countries, broadcasting and politics seem to form an inextricable

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relationship. As with most European countries, the imminent deregulation of Greek broadcasting has been associated with partisan goals and has eventually led to a haphazard reaction oriented around current politics, rather than a coherent plan. Broadcasting in Greece has been a source of political controversy since its beginning. Thus, it is not surprising that the new broadcasting environment has made its debut amid heated argument. The impetus for broadcasting change has been neither strong government policy nor masses of public investment, but political expediency.

The result is that Greece has undergone a broadcasting commercialization, adopting a market solution with more channels, more advertising, more programme imports and more politics. This article attempts to offer an account of the politics surrounding the deregulation of Greek broadcasting and to assess some 'side-effects' of the audiovisual landscape's new order.

### **The media and the state in Greece**

Most politicians admit that control over the media equals political power. Everyone wants a piece of the cake, and nobody wants to give it away. To understand the effects of the haphazard deregulation of Greek broadcasting, one must examine the relationship between the state and the media in Greece. Broadcasting has a symbiotic relationship with the political controversies of the country – both radio and television were born and established under the dictatorships of modern Greece's troubled history. Radio was formed in the late 1930s under the Metaxas dictatorship and television in the mid-1960s under the Colonels (1967–74). Consequently, both radio and television were regarded as 'arms of the state'. Moreover, the whole debate about the electronic state media in Greece focused on governmental control and interference in television programmes (Papathanassopoulos, 1989: 29–35). This condition became part of post-dictatorship ritualized politics. Since parliament was re-established, the Conservatives and Socialists have dominated the political scene, both accusing one another of too much governmental control over state broadcasting media.

This situation has largely arisen from the tensions in Greek society since the Second World War. These tensions, combined with the absence of a strong civil society, have made the state an autonomous and dominant factor in Greek society. Mouzelis points out that this situation has been associated with a weak atrophied civil society where the state has to take on additional politico-ideological functions (Mouzelis, 1980:

261–4). This makes the system less self-regulatory than in cases of developed capitalism, for example in Britain or the US. The lack of self-regulation is also noticeable at the level of politico-ideological superstructure, because in a weak civil society even the economically dominant classes do not manage to form well-organized and cohesive pressure groups. Mouzelis notes that because of the persistence of patronage politics, even bourgeois parties and interest groups are articulated within the state machinery in a clientist/personalistic manner (Mouzelis, 1980: 263). This led the state to promote the interests of particular types of capital rather than the interests of capital as a whole. Therefore, the lack of self-regulation makes the state intervene in the politico-ideological sphere and, thus, diffuse its repressive mechanisms. The fact that the state plays a decisive role in the formation of the Greek economy and policy illustrates the state's relative autonomy from its society (Mouzelis, 1987; Tsoukalas, 1981). It is not accidental, therefore, that there has been such strict control over the broadcasting media in Greece (Papathanassopoulos, 1990: 338–9).

Looking at the mass communication sector, the strong state, in its role as a rule-maker, defines the extent of the relative autonomy it is willing to grant to the media. Even in the case of the press, which enjoys a liberal regime, the state defines press autonomy. This can also be observed in the press laws or in the cases of national emergency where the state reserves the right to reduce press autonomy. In a more indirect, but efficient way the state acts to enforce these formal rules, as well as to enforce the unwritten rules of power politics by using a wide range of means of intervention at its disposal (courts, censorship, suspension of publication or even indirect financial aid). In broadcasting, as noted, the state used not only to intervene, but also to be the active agent.

Greek broadcasting was established, as in most European countries, as a state monopoly. This was inevitable since both radio and television were established during dictatorial periods of modern Greek history. However, the state monopoly remained after the restoration of parliament in 1974. According to the Constitution of 1975, 'radio and television will be under the direct control of the state', although direct control need not necessarily mean state monopoly (Alivizatos, 1986; Dagtoglou, 1989; Venizelos, 1989). State monopoly was justified on the grounds of the limited frequencies available as well as by the need to provide full coverage in such a mountainous country with its many islands. Therefore, the state became the sole agent of the broadcast media. The government manipulation of the state broadcaster's news output was a suitable

example of the dirigist role of the state, since it traditionally reflected and reinforced government views and policies.

As a result, ministerial censorship was common practice and state control greater than was usual elsewhere. The general pattern of the Greek state broadcasting media was (and still is) that a transfer of political power would be followed by an equivalent changeover in the state media institutions' executives. In other words, all key radio and television appointees were politically sympathetic or affiliated to the government of the day. The outcome was that news and editorial decisions had to follow the government line on a whole range of policies and decisions. Since the restoration of parliament, the average 'life' of a director-general of the state broadcaster (ERT) has been just 12 months. This tight state control has dominated Greek broadcasting and doomed even the most capable and well-intentioned executives to failure. Thus, it is not surprising there has been a high turnover in high level posts in state broadcasting.

This paternalism of the Greek state, in particular, has remained one of the most important features of the state electronic media. It is not surprising, therefore, that any proposals with regard to reorganization of the state broadcaster have never really been adopted by the government of the time. Both the Conservatives (1974–81) and the Socialists (1981–89) when they were in power never gave the state broadcaster any autonomy. The few changes introduced by the Socialists in the broadcasting media were either superficial or short-lived (Katsoudas, 1986, 1987; Papathanassopoulos, 1990).

The strict and monolithic position of the government in relation to broadcasting could not be maintained. This, however, was not due to any specific policy. Instead, it was the outcome of the government's weakness and failure to invent tactics to overcome the reactions and pressures led by external constraints and internal forces.

### **Deregulating Greek broadcasting**

The deregulation of Greek broadcasting, as in other European countries, was the outcome of the internationalization of broadcasting in relation to the pressure from domestic forces. As an EC member, Greece was also subject to the Community's policies (such as the 'Television Without Frontiers' Directive) and the wider European political environment. This helped domestic neo-liberal forces and private interests to lobby for the advent of market forces in the sector. However, the break-up of the state broadcasting monopoly came only after *direct* action. In effect, it was due

to the weakness of the government to respond with any coherent policy to the forces favouring the demonopolization of the sector (Papathanassopoulos, 1990: 391–4).

In the aftermath of the 1986 municipal elections, the mayors of Athens, Thessaloniki and Piraeus, all leading members of the Conservative opposition, went ahead and launched radio stations in their respective cities. Their example was followed swiftly in other cities and municipalities. Because of this unexpected action, the government could not devise any tactics to secure its vulnerable position. On the contrary, the government of Andreas Papandreou tried to defuse the situation by announcing that his government intended to liberalize radio frequencies and to restructure the state broadcaster. The outcome was a proliferation, if not explosion, of radio stations, mainly in the big cities, and, of course, the entry of purely commercial stations. This appeared to be the model for breaking up the state's television monopoly. In January 1988, the mayor of Thessaloniki commenced retransmitting programmes received from the satellite channels by distributing them to the UHF frequencies in the city. The government took the mayor to court for his apparent violation of ERT's monopoly. Later, when the mayors of Athens and Piraeus announced their intention to launch television channels, the government again tried to respond rapidly. ERT started retransmitting satellite channels through the UHF frequencies to Greece's largest cities.

The government, on the other hand, realized that the satellite *trial* would not last for ever. Before the 1989 general elections, it announced its intention to deregulate the television sector. In doing so, the government wanted to obtain a tactical advantage over the developments in television and to reverse the defensive and weak position into which the recent initiatives had placed it. This defensive position was also related to the government's lack of popularity, especially with regard to allegations of financial corruption (Pretenderis, 1989: 8). The government appeared to believe that by deregulating television it could strengthen its position. It would be able to argue that it was the first Greek government to lead the country into the new era of 'free' broadcasting. A short while before the June 1989 elections, the government set up an inter-parliamentary committee to assess the feasibility of private television stations in Greece.

At the same time, a number of private interests (mainly publishers and business people) were 'snapping at the heels' of the government to be granted a licence. The government played a 'hot and cold' game, especially with the publishers. Its tactic was to postpone any decision by

arguing that 'legal problems' linked to the new regime should be resolved first, and then it would license the private channels. As in Italy in the mid-1970s, when the political authorities have become too weak to implement or form any policy, it is much easier for private interests to achieve their own goals.

The successor to the Socialist government, an unprecedented coalition between the Conservatives and the Left, announced that it would restructure the broadcasting sector. Indeed, the coalition government permitted the operation of 'non-state' television channels and created a regulatory body, the National Broadcast Council (NBC), to oversee the industry. At the beginning, it seemed that the state had recovered its position. In reality, the political scene was unstable and Greece was going from one election to another. This lack of political stability gave private interests the opportunity to launch their own television stations. First was Mega Channel, owned by Teletypos, a group of the most powerful publishers in Greece. Although Mega Channel was granted a temporary licence to broadcast from the Greek government, others 'did not bother' to get a provisional television licence. They could do exactly what the Conservative mayors did when their party was in opposition. In effect, transmitters sprung up all over Greece. According to some observers, the market became a 'television jungle', since no one knew the exact number of stations which were in operation — most of them on a *de facto* illegal basis.

### **The licensing game**

When the Conservatives came to office after the April 1990 elections, it was hoped that they would manage to sort out the broadcasting situation. Unfortunately, this was never realized, since the Conservative government remained indecisive in its first years in office. This indecisiveness could also be due to the fact that after a while the press and some radio and television channels became highly critical of the Conservative government's policies and actions. Relations between the government of the New Democracy, headed by Prime Minister Constantine Mitsotakis, and the media were in a bad state. The Conservative government consistently attempted to shift the blame for its policy blunders on to the media. One of these attempts was the introduction of a law (December 1990) banning the publication of terrorist proclamations in the press.<sup>1</sup> As Greek journalists observed, the Conservative government had an aggressive attitude towards the media — a result of the media's criticisms of inconsistencies. As others noted, the government's tendency was to

attempt to control the media, not just the state media but the private stations too.

The Conservative government frequently introduced laws that provoked strong reactions among the media. The government, in most cases, later attempted a compromise. As one leading journalist said, this was the Conservative government's political style, to react spasmodically.<sup>2</sup> To be fair, it seems that each government in Greece has its own different perceptions concerning the role of the media. Every party, when in opposition, champions the cause of press freedom and attacks the government that, traditionally, does whatever it can to tame the media. When the opposition party comes into power, it reverses its stance. For example, as noted above, when the Conservatives were in opposition they challenged state monopoly. When they were in power, they tried to prevent Sky 100.4 FM radio station launching its television channel. The main reason was that Sky was (and is) the top rated radio station in Athens and, at that time, was extremely critical of the Conservative government. When the station tried to install its television antenna on Hymettous in January 1992, the government sent the police to prevent this. The incident became a major issue in domestic politics, with each party trying to benefit. Needless to say, none of the channels held a licence to broadcast at that time. This incident simply demonstrates that such direct action with regard to the broadcasting industry is still efficient. The government sought to establish an effective tactical advantage. However, it found it extremely difficult to correspond to the pace of events. This was due to the fact that, on the one hand, the Conservatives were struggling to maintain their majority in parliament and, on the other, they were facing serious internal problems.

Therefore, as in Italy in the mid-1970s, when governments or politicians are too weak to form a policy or devise tactical advantages, when there is such political instability, the pressures of private interests and forces appear to be successful. As noted above, the Socialist government was too weak in the late 1980s to react to the political environment. Its successors, the coalition government formed by the Conservatives and the Left, was short-lived (only three months). The same applies to its successor, an all-party government which was too involved in preparing for the next elections to come into conflict with the media. The Conservative government was also weak since it was always in danger of losing its small majority in parliament. It was no coincidence that within a short time Greek private television came to dominate the sector (see Table 1).

**Table 1** TV viewership in Greece in the deregulation years (market share in percent)

<i>Channel</i>	1989 <sup>a</sup>	1989 <sup>b</sup>	1990	1993	1995
ET1	37.3	21.1	19.7	7.9	4.6
ET2	24.3	12.6	8.7	5.3	3.3
Mega	—	35.3	30.6	33.2	25.8
Antenna	—	—	18.5	30.5	25.7
Sky	—	—	—	—	14.7
Star	—	—	—	—	12.5
Satellite	14.2	10.7	5.3	1.5	0.8
Video	10.3	5.8	4.7	2.8	1.8
Others	13.5	8.5	12.5	18.4	14.3

<sup>a</sup>Before the entry of private channels.

<sup>b</sup>A month after the entry of Mega channel.

*Source:* AGB Hellas.

During its term in office the Conservative government often announced its intention to grant broadcasting licences; however, the licences were not granted. It became obvious that the awarding of licences was a part of the domestic 'political game'. The Conservatives tended to announce that they would award the licences after a political dispute with the radio stations.<sup>3</sup> Hopes of bringing order to the 'free-for-all' broadcasting environment were raised in January 1993, when the NBC announced its licence recommendations. However, once again, the whole procedure of granting licences was coloured by 'hot' politics.<sup>4</sup> It seems that the Conservative government was attempting to use the licences as a way of gaining a tactical advantage in the face of the 1993 general elections.

When the Socialist Party of Andreas Papandreou came to power after the 1994 elections, it announced that it would re-examine the whole regulatory environment as well as licences. One of its first actions was, however, to grant licences to Sky TV and 902 TV. Both channels had been banned by the Conservatives, and Sky in particular was very supportive of the Socialists during the elections. However, up to the time of writing, only non-official licences have been granted to the stations.

The reason for the 'non-action' policy by the governments during these years seems to be simple. Due to the fact that government and politicians have lost control of television — which is now the dominant medium of information (see Table 2) and television channels frequently follow a critical stance to government policies and to politicians — they

**Table 2** From which mass medium do you get your daily information?

<i>Medium</i>	<i>Total</i> (%)	<i>Men</i> (%)	<i>Women</i> (%)
Television	69	61	76
Evening press	15	21	17
Radio	11	12	10
Morning press	2	4	1

*N* = 2000: 986 men, 1014 women.

*Source: Trends* (MRB Hellas, 1992)

continue to play this 'hot and cold' game with the broadcasters. In effect, what they are saying is 'you be nice to me and you might get an official licence'. It is no coincidence, as noted above, that the Conservative government started the licensing procedure a few months before the elections. It is no coincidence that the present Socialist government have made statements about the allocation of the radio and TV frequencies (the map of the frequencies, as it is called) for more than a year, without announcing its final decision. It is no coincidence that the present Socialist government created a new broadcasting law (Law 2328 in 1995) which has not been implemented yet, as most other broadcasting laws. The fact that Law 2328 only needs the publication of 35 presidential decrees in order to be implemented illustrates this. Additionally, even the regulatory body which was formed to oversee the sector has been largely inactive, regardless of its recent fining of some stations. Even the fines have to be approved by the Minister of the Press and the Media.

In short, the deregulation of Greek television had led to an unregulated environment. Ever since, the governments have sought ways to control it, or gain some political advantage from the situation. The dominance of private television as well as the downgrading of political parties have made it increasingly important that politicians have good relations with media owners. And it is no coincidence that some politicians have started accusing the media, mainly referring to television channels, of doing 'whatever they want'. It is no coincidence that the ex-prime minister Constantine Mitsotakis, when in power, cited the 'web of interests of media publishers' as the main reason for his losing power. It is no coincidence either that the present chair of the parliament has attacked the media many times, especially their owners, on the grounds that they use their channels in order to promote their business interests. Similar statements have been made by politicians too without any results. Recently, the government announced a regulation to oversee the

'transparency of media ownership'. Few, however, believe that this will be implemented. This is reminiscent of the various attempts made by Italian politicians to control the issue of media cross-ownership. On the other hand, the media, television channels in particular, argue that they perform a watchdog function, acting on behalf of the public as an independent check on politicians' and other elite's behaviour. By doing this, they claim to make politicians, state bureaucrats and commercial interests accountable to the Greek people.

The fact is, similar to Italy, Greek broadcasting is an unregulated environment, with no rules. Within eight years or so of TV deregulation, it has become clear that when the politics of the day become the determining factor in shaping the reorganization of broadcasting, it is bound to produce less than ideal results and many side-effects. In the following section, I attempt to describe some of them.

### **The side-effects of a haphazard deregulation**

The main side-effects of the deregulation are the dominance of private interests, a sharp decline of the state broadcaster, a lack of supervision and the total dominance of market forces.

#### *Media cross-ownership*

What is interesting from the history of broadcasting deregulation in Greece is the entry of publishers and other entrepreneurs into the broadcasting arena (this is similar in most cases in Europe). 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. Thus, it is not surprising that the publishers have moved into the broadcasting landscape with an impressive speed. For example, Mega Channel is owned by Teletypos, a conglomerate of publishing magnates whose combined assets cover half of the country's written media; Antenna TV is owned by the owner of a radio station, and so on. The same applies to Sky TV.

Greek newspapers are widely recognized as being political rather than business ventures, which raises questions about the new TV magnates' motives. Some politicians and analysts are concerned about how easily and quickly the media sector has come to be concentrated in

the hands of a few influential media magnates. To a certain extent, the new television environment seems to have largely copied the situation in the press. There are clearly too many stations for such a small market. In effect, all TV stations face severe financial problems. This has made politicians wonder about the real intentions of their owners. But neither the previous nor the new law, regardless of their specific provisions — such as single investors and shareholders of private channels being limited to no more than a 25 percent share, or owners who have business interests in the state sector having to name their shares — have not been implemented, at least up to the time of writing this article.

*More productions, more talk, more information, more sensationalism*

In spite of uncertain political conditions, private channels have started producing and commissioning domestic programmes — since the latter attract more viewers in their battle for ratings. It is not a coincidence that domestic productions dominate prime-time hours. Overall, however, imported programming has been the mainstay in the channels' schedules. As regards the overall quality of television output, the picture is not very clear. First of all, one must acknowledge that there has been a democratization of television output from political interference as well as the fact that information is now supplied in a much better fashion. Governments nowadays influence the state broadcaster less, mainly due to the fact that viewers prefer the information and current affairs programmes supplied by private broadcasters. The fact is that on the TV news of private channels, news reporting on policy or economic issues comes second to social (mainly crime and disaster-related) issues. Although when there is some conflict within a party it also becomes a headline. In stark contrast to the TV news bulletins when television was under state monopoly, those produced by the present private channels are dominated by domestic news, all stories need to be accompanied by visual material, a new category of crime-related news has been inserted and cultural news is negligible. But one has to admit that the contemporary TV news is faster, less boring and, at least, the newscasters are what they are *supposed* to be — not readers of government's announcements as they were in the past.

Meanwhile, programme schedules have also lengthened considerably and entertainment programming has considerably increased. Regarding concerns over the standards of programming quality, this is something that depends on how one describes and understands the term 'television quality'. The fact is, however, that there has been a tremendous increase

**Table 3** A typical weekday (Tuesday) prime-time programming schedule on the top four TV channels in Greece (prime-time: 19.00–23.00)

<i>Time</i>	<i>ET1</i>	<i>Mega Channel</i>	<i>Antenna TV</i>	<i>Sky TV</i>
19.00	Greek series	Game show	Game show	Greek movie
19.25			Greek series	
19.30	Greek series			
19.50	Documentary	Game show		Talk show
20.00				
20.15	News			News
20.30		News	News	
21.00		Greek sitcom	Greek sitcom	
21.30	Sports	Greek sitcom	Greek series	
22.00	Movie (EEC)	Greek series		Movie (US)
22.30			Talk show	
22.40		Talk show		
23.00		Greek series	Movie (EEC)	Talk show

in entertainment and information programmes and a parallel decrease of educational programmes and documentaries. Greek television output is dominated by sitcoms, satire shows, TV game-shows, soap operas, movies and TV movies as well as informational programmes (see Table 3). For some TV critics, the private channels seem to be glorified versions of tabloid newspapers. Since 1993, there has been an increase in 'human interest' talk shows (mainly copy cats of the US television formats) but a decline of the talk shows which would invite politicians to participate. The reason for the rise of talk shows in general is, as elsewhere, that they are cheap to produce. One of the reasons for the decline in political talk shows is the lack of appeal of politicians, since they only used to invite a certain number of the 'telegenic' politicians, which eventually bored the viewers, as the ratings demonstrated.

One of the side-effects of TV deregulation has been the increase in the prices paid not only for popular domestic productions but also for imported programmes, especially from the US. An example of this was the soap opera *The Bold and the Beautiful*. The series was broadcast by ERT and was one of its highest ranked series. ERT, as the press reported, decided not to bid for the new episodes of the series because the distribution company asked too much per episode. The private television station, Antenna TV, got the new series, by paying \$8200 to the US distributor (New World) for each half-hour episode. It should be noted that the amount paid by Antenna TV was a record for such a programme

in 1992. ERT used to pay \$2400 per episode. *Santa Barbara*, another US programme distributed by New World, was considered equally as expensive, and cost Mega Channel \$2100 per half-hour episode in 1992. When a new channel, Sky, wanting to increase its profile in the ratings, bought these programmes, it paid, for example, \$20,000 per episode for *The Bold and the Beautiful*.

The result is that the Greek television market has been highly competitive. Fierce rivalry for viewers and advertising revenue takes place in stark contrast to the highly monolithic environment of the past. The growth of the television sector has opened up the economy for new actors, in contrast to the comparatively closed system of the past. Regardless of its excessive commercialization, if not dramatization, the television system of the 1990s appears more open and pluralistic than its predecessor of a decade ago.

#### *The sharp decline of the state broadcaster*

From the very first year of their existence, two private general entertainment channels, Mega Channel and Antenna TV, have dominated the TV sector in terms of audience and advertising expenditure. Together they account for 60 percent of TV audiences and 75 percent of TV advertising expenditure, forming a duopoly. However, Mega and Antenna have faced competition from newcomers — Sky TV and Star Channel. Mega's audience share dipped below 30 percent for the first time in 1994 (see Table 1). It seems unlikely, however, that any newcomer will be able to mount an aggressive enough challenge to dislodge either Mega or Antenna.<sup>5</sup> While the political parties were climbing on and off the commercial bandwagon, they gave no real thought as to how to renovate the public sector and redefine the concept and mission of public service broadcaster. The emergence of private stations has been disastrous for the public broadcaster. Audiences of the ERT channels have declined (ET1 9.08% and ET2 5.6% in 1992, down to 4.6% and 3.3% respectively in 1995), which has resulted in large advertising losses. In effect, ERT's three channels have witnessed a steady erosion of the market share since the launch of private TV in late 1989 — in effect, the sharpest decline among Western European state broadcasters. ERT's current cumulative debt is 45 billion drachmas.

The paradox is that few disagree that the state broadcaster is too bureaucratic and overstaffed. Whenever a report or a proposal for changes is published, it provokes controversy. The outcome, up to now, is non-action and the decline continues. For example, a consultant's report in

1991 recommended sweeping changes be made at ERT, if it is to wipe out its debt and be a competitive force in the future. Some of the report's recommendations aroused political controversy and even strikes among the staff of ERT. A recent proposal, in 1996, by ERT's director-general, aiming to reorganize the state channels — making ET1 an entertainment channel and ET2 an information channel — again provoked a furore among the personnel.

The outcome, in general terms, has been a pattern of changing ERT's director-generals. They change on average every 12 months. This is disastrous for the long-term planning of ERT. The main problem of the state broadcaster is that it still remains, although not overtly, under government control. An example was the sacking of ET1's director-general at the instigation of Prime Minister Andreas Papandreu (May 1994). Mr Papandreu, on an official visit to the US, was said to be furious over the station's failure to carry the funeral of the country's economy minister George Yennimatas as lead item on the main evening news bulletin (the funeral was, however, the first news item on all the private TV channels). In short, within six years, the state broadcaster has become a minority service, in terms of TV ratings and advertising revenue. This makes it difficult to justify even its licence fee (collected via people's electricity bills). Moreover, ERT faces an uncertain future. This is because if it offers the same populist programming as its commercial rivals, viewers may resent ERT channels, since they will get the same programming offered by the private channels. If it adopts a more quality programme 'diet', it may lose more viewers.

### *A powerless regulatory body*

To complete the picture of the unregulated environment of Greek broadcasting, one has to refer to the lack of any supervision. The NBC was formed in 1989 to oversee the audiovisual sector and to act as a 'buffer' between the government and the broadcasters. In effect, the NBC has remained passive, if not virtually absent from the broadcasting affairs of the country. The Socialist government increased NBC's powers, but its role still remains an advisory one to the government, who makes the final decisions. On the other hand, during its lifetime the NBC has produced three codes on radio and television stations operating conditions: one on advertising, the second on journalistic ethics and the third on programming. In 1995 and 1996, NBC imposed fines on some stations, but the fines have to be approved by the media minister. The fact that the NBC has remained passive in its first years, has no real powers and is

understaffed, simply shows how politics dominate the broadcasting sector in Greece. Since the 1993 amendment, the NBC's nine members are now nominated on the basis of their political affiliation. This makes the nomination procedure a contentious issue. In effect, four of its members are nominated by the party in power, four by the opposition parties and the chair by the president of the National Assembly, giving the government the controlling vote. Clearly, the revamped NBC has no more power than before.

### **Towards the end of television chaos**

The deregulation of Greek television, as for radio, was the result of a short-sighted policy followed by the politicians — a knee-jerk reaction to the politics of the time and to electoral speculation rather than a response to the needs of the industry. The situation illustrates that broadcasting has more to do with partisan ends rather than well-organized policy. It is also apparent that general rhetoric as well as speculation, confusion and misunderstanding have replaced any serious thinking about how to build up a new broadcasting structure. Several years on, in a situation of complete television deregulation, politicians want to act to change this chaotic environment. This chaos is not only attributable to broadcasters, but to politicians as well. An example of this is that after three-quarters of a decade, no one seems to know the exact number of the available frequencies that the radio spectrum can accommodate or the exact number of TV stations that currently operate.

Undoubtedly, other aspects of the state's relationship with television have decreased in importance. The government no longer directly controls and censors television news output in the way it used to do under the state broadcasting monopoly. Meanwhile, the role of the state to control the media is ever present. The issue is that it does not seem capable or willing to implement it, although there has been an upsurge of legislative activity.

On the other hand, one has to admit that the Greek broadcasting system has been surprisingly adaptable and flexible in the face of new developments. To understand this, one must remember that this system has worked under Western democratic rule for two decades, and suddenly has had to face all the upheavals that other Western broadcasting systems have taken years to deal with. In other words, Greek broadcasting reflects, to an extent, the political situation in Greece. As Greece adopted parliamentarism before being industrialized, Greek media passed from

handicraft status to an industrial one without having completed the process (Heretakis, 1993).

It seems that the only solution is the formation of a national media policy that will be the result of a consensus across all interested parties and encompass the whole Greek media environment. This is extremely difficult, since the stakes are high and the political situation none too stable. On the one hand, one could argue that the state still remains a powerful regulator and primary definer. On the other hand, the 'strong' state is by no means powerful. Centres of power compete within the vast bureaucracy, which results in the application of tactics, manoeuvres, conflict of interests and so on. The media come in turn to exhibit these contradictions, since conflict and insecurity increase ratings and, in the final analysis, promote their vested interests. In the era of media explosion, political, social and economic inefficiencies, crisis and the related insecurity provide the media with what they need. If politicians do not make firm decisions, regardless of the political cost, the situation will largely remain the same.

## Notes

1. In September 1991, seven newspaper editors who defied the new anti-terrorist laws prohibiting the publication of proclamations issued by terrorists groups after attacks, were sentenced and imprisoned. They remained there for 10 days, after which the Athens Union of Publishers and the Union of Journalists jointly relaxed the remaining sentences, thus leading to their release. In the meantime, the issue caused a strong reaction in Greece and abroad. According to press reports the Union of Journalists was asked to compromise because the government did not want to admit that its law was a complete failure as a means to fight terrorism.
2. Personal communication with the editor of a Greek daily newspaper, which is not affiliated to the opposition.
3. By the end of 1992, the Conservative government had announced three times that it was on the verge of awarding the private channels licences.
4. On Friday 23 July 1993, when most of Greece was on holiday, the Conservatives (following a meeting of all ministers concerned) announced that they would grant TV licences to a number of private national and local channels. This announcement took almost everyone by surprise. The licence awards were not without controversy. It excluded two TV stations, apparently for political reasons. The two stations (Sky TV and 902 TV) and the opposition political party claimed that they were excluded because the radio stations they ran were highly critical of the Conservative government and its policies.

5. The battle for viewers, and thus advertising revenue, has also been apparent in a series of confrontations about the ratings research system. Television personnel have questioned the validity of AGB Hellas ratings, the research company which provides the Greek market with TV ratings, on the grounds that 'AGB does not function, purposefully or not, on the basis of professional objectivity, and does not apply the suitable scientific methods'. AGB replied that 'here are names of attributes but lack of arguments'. A committee, which comprised advertisers and TV channels, after monitoring the AGB system concluded that it was working objectively. However, a new confrontation about the ratings research system happened in early 1997 and a new committee was asked to monitor the AGB system.

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