

Media freedom in Greece: State of play and the need for change

Katharine Sarikakis explains why the need for media freedom and independent journalism is as urgent as ever in crisis-stricken Greece



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Press freedom is also not one that stands alone, independently of what happens in society, irrespectively of how citizens experience their fundamental freedoms.

Press freedom is an indispensable and inseparable value that, to be honoured and realized, requires that the human right of freedom of expression is guaranteed, protected, safeguarded and activated.

Press freedom exists only where citizens are free to express and share their views. Freedom of expression and any human and civil right depends on the how fully it can be exercised. The existence of laws alone does not guarantee rights and freedoms.

If we want to interrogate further what this means in detail, it means the freedom to assembly and protest; the freedom to move freely and express contention to political decisions; the freedom to expect diversity of opinion and representation of diffuse interests, that is the interests of the various groups of society and not those of certain few, in the media. Freedom of expression is also about the freedom to hold and represent opinions that might be antithetical to the government, the system of government or even the very model of democracy applied. Freedom of expression means being able to propose and advocate different ways of doing things, even governing.

Freedom of expression depends on other freedoms: that of the right to life, to dignity, education, privacy, a fair trial, the right to live free from fear and intimidation, and of citizenship.

In Greece, press freedom and freedom of expression are guaranteed by the Constitution. Greece is a member of the European Union and signatory to all grip on journalism and the citizens' rights to freedom of expression.

The need for the ruling elites to control public opinion has become so urgent that the political climate is now characterized by a culture that is not only tolerant to violence, physical and other, against anyone with opposing or critical views, but rather supports and encourages it.

Journalists in Greece face a multiple system of repression: They face long-term unemployment, otherwise precarity of jobs and an average salary of 400-600 euros per month. There are at least 2500 unemployed journalists in Greece, taking into account only those registered in one of its unions.

The government, having violently closed the Hellenic Broadcasting Corporation ERT overnight, axed 2500 highly skilled professionals with a single strike and banished them to the streets, among them many journalists.

Reports say that those former ERT employees who seek employment in the private media face humiliating comments by potential employers. Everyone is now pushed to work on a self-employment basis, which makes registration with a union difficult. When freelancing as a journalist, registration and accreditation are more difficult. The outcome is that doing journalism becomes more unprotected, especially in situations of covering social unrest. The Index on Censorship and Reporters Without borders have characterized the situation in Greece as volatile: They have likened covering protests to covering war zones: this is because of the sheer violence and abuse of power by the police, which not only indiscriminately but also strategically has targeted journalists and physically attacked them. Amnesty international has issued a report about the Greek police clearly stating that it operates in a culture of impunity and violence. Of course, this is not the whole story. To suggest that these factors have managed to silence journalism in the country would not do justice to those who see the need to defend democracy and human rights through their profession. There can be no 'equal distance' journalism in times of crisis and in times where all those institutions and norms that are in place to protect democracy are undermined and disempowered. Under these conditions, journalism takes a clear stand: to hold any power accountable means to always operate with the pen closer to the interests of the citizens, the public interest, the public good. Between democracy and autocracy, journalism can only take the side of democracy. Otherwise it becomes something else.

The rich forms of journalism that find expression in Greece are noteworthy. In digital or print forms, though cooperatives, crowd funding and crowdsourcing, through the revision of practices and priorities, journalism has found its true calling again in Greece. The gap between proper journalism and manipulation has never been wider.

Today we are celebrating, recognising and offer thanks for the courage and commitment of journalists to speak inconvenient truths to the power. The award recognises the multifaceted agenda of genuine journalism which is at the service of the public interest, by showcasing two pieces whose subjects are at the opposite poles of the power spectrum: the documentary film by Giorgos Moutafis turns its focus on the plight and flight of the most marginalised social groups, the so called undocumented migrants. Greece is the entry point and as their point of departure for thousands of migrants, running away from political persecution, poverty and violence.

It is filmed from the perspective of those who flee from one life-threatening space good. Again, reporting positively proves how the fates of nations and the broader European politics, especially in the process of managing the financial crisis are connected.

These two pieces represent the kinds of themes that ERT, Info War, the Press Project, magazines such as Unfollow or Hot Doc, or the Editors press, the many documentarists, strive to cover. As the ERT employees say, "hand the microphone to the people"; Or the camera; The pen; The Dictaphone; The platform.

It is necessary. It is urgent.

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