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### Grassroots media practices in Greece: a sociological approach

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The study addresses its central research interest – the ‘what’ and ‘why’ of the implementation of grassroots media projects in Greece – within a broader theoretical context. This context concerns the evaluation of such projects in macro perspective, in terms of the interplay between public sphere and civil society, as well as in micro perspective, in terms of the ‘lived experience’ of their practice.

Different theoretical approaches have called forth a vital “public-mediated-space” at the very heart of the democratic process by drawing on the interplay between public sphere and civil society. [1] The reconstitution of the category of ‘public sphere’ in normative terms on the grounds of ‘difference’ has evaluated its multiple dimensions along the lines of diverse and different ‘publics’, within the “nooks and crannies” of civil society (Keane). Within this framework, Dahlgren points out the expression/representation of diverse special interests and alternative/oppositional ‘discourses’ within public sphere via their own communication practices as a way of maintaining pluralism in the public sphere, constituting an “advocacy domain”. [2] Dahlgren’s approach elaborates on the practices (civic media) of strong, institutionalised forms of civil society (social movements); and also provides the groundwork (the principle of pluralism in the realm of public sphere) for the evaluation of the communication practices of fragmented inputs from civil society (grassroots groups).

In the context of different models of non-mainstream media (alternative, radical, participatory, community), diverse aspects of the communication process have been highlighted. The study of these projects has been outlined in macro terms by their ‘emancipatory potential’ – as a locus of oppositional power to the agency of domination, “radical media” (Downing *Political Experience, Rebellious Communication*), and as conveyors of the democratisation of communication, “participatory media” (Servaes). Moreover, in micro terms, the research on these projects has evaluated issues related to the characteristics of their production and organisation process – non-hierarchical, non-professional, “alternative media” (Atton); as well as to the ‘community’ that these projects serve and the way they do it, “community media” (Lewis; Jankowski and Prehn *People’s Voice, Community Media*). [3] However, there is little concern for the implications of the practice of these media for the people who are engaged in them. Atton (6):

...these media are central to experience because they are media that inform, reflect, express experience, our experience, on a daily basis – if not more than the mass media, then at least in a significant different manner, in that for those involved in their practice, the very process of such projects becomes part of daily life, of quotidian experience.

From this perspective, Rodriguez (2001) evaluates people’s engagement in the practice of these projects, “citizens’ media”, as an aspect of the active nature of citizenship, meaning “the

enactment of citizenship on a day-to-day basis" (ibid: 19). In this context, Rodriguez approaches diverse, heterogeneous alternative media practices in terms of the way their agents, citizen groups and grassroots organisations, engage in/ with them, registering their 'difference'.

Both Dahlgren and Rodriguez draw on Mouffe's (*Dimensions, Return*) perspective of radical democracy that justifies the principle of diversity within society in the place of different subject positions of social agents, evaluating the expression and enactment of citizenship in actual terms. The subject positions and their interrelations reflect different identities of citizens; citizenship is not constituted here as a legal status, but as a form of identification that is constructed within the realm of agency. The negotiation of grassroots media projects by these theoretical approaches is reflected in this paper in terms of their contribution to the public sphere and their intervention in the sphere of politics. In this context, the prospects of democratic communication go further than the realm of mass media and mass communication, taking into account fragmented, heterogeneous and flexible media forms and evaluating the social subjects that are engaged in them, their experience.

In conclusion, the present study, drawing on these theoretical lines, researches grassroots media practices in Greece and evaluates, in both macro and micro terms, their implications for the public and political sphere.

### **Research subject**

Within this theoretical framework the interest of research shifts from the institutional setting of grassroots media practices to the agents themselves, the collectivities, social groups, who run these projects. [4] From this perspective, the study aims to contribute to the identification of what is going on through the projects, and evaluate their practice in terms of their implications for civic life. Moreover, such a dynamic and non-essentialist theoretical context addresses the implications of the practice of these projects for civic life in terms of peoples' expression and enactment of their citizenship.

Thus, by privileging people's 'lived world' and their stories about the practice of such projects – how it is experienced by the people who are engaged in them -- citizens' media come to be better understood in actual terms. Such an approach on grassroots media projects suggests that people's motivations, ideas, views and experiences concerning the experiments, as well as their engagement in the practice, are meaningful properties in evaluating the role of these projects. [5] Hence, it is people's accounts of their experience with, and within, these initiatives and their meanings, that generate knowledge and explanations about the role of grassroots media practices.

### **Context**

What makes the study of grassroots media practices in Greece important is not only the absence of any research on such practices, but also the fact that it addresses the research from a new theoretical perspective. This perspective goes beyond the general discussion concerning political culture and its hegemonic nature within which most of the communication studies have been articulated in Greek bibliography. Thus, the concepts of 'public sphere', 'civil society', and 'citizenship' – which have been mainly addressed in terms of their ideal characteristics (normative and structural ones, as they have been developed in liberal-democratic societies) and the extent to what such characteristics are implemented to the reality of Greek society – can provide the conceptual tools for transcending the boundaries of the conventional public and political sphere in the Greek research field.

So far, the realm of public sphere in Greek bibliography has been evaluated in terms of domains and practices that are dominant, and as such, representative enough for an evaluation of the overall Greek political culture. [6] Correspondingly, it is the universes of political discourse and action that apply to the official political sphere that have been mainly researched. As a result,

forms of political discourse and action, their practices, and the social domains in which they are enacted, beyond the conventional public and political sphere (which means 'on the margins'), have not been addressed by research literature but indirectly, in terms of their exclusion from the conventional public and political sphere. The focus of this paper – grassroots media practices – introduces another aspect for the research field, the neglected area of fragmented, heterogeneous grassroots media practices. What makes the study of these practices challenging in the Greek context is the absence of a strong civil society in institutional terms and the heavily centralised character of the Greek mediascape.

## Overview

The return of Greece to constitutional rule in 1974 (after the fall of dictatorship 1967-1974) has been characterised by the idiosyncratic osmosis between political parties and the state, and the prevalence of clientelistic, statist and populist practices that had further implications on the social structures. The political parties became the intermediaries between state and society, the main mechanism of social integration and organisation, which resulted in the guardianship of every social domain by the party system and the absence of well-organised and cohesive pressure groups (Mouzelis). Moreover, a particular relationship between the press and the major political parties (Tsagarousianou 222), as well as the direct control of radio and television broadcasting by the state (Papathanassopoulos 387) sustained and reinforced the centrality of political parties over social and political life in Greece. The deregulation of state monopoly in Greek broadcasting (1989) was the result of a combination of internal and external pressures – the setting up of illegal municipal radio and television stations by the conservative mayors of the three biggest cities opposing the socialist government's control over broadcasting media. This kind of "direct action" was also in accordance with the liberal policy towards broadcasting ("television without borders") of the European Community, of which Greece was a member (Papathanassopoulos 392). In a climate of partisan confrontation, both before and after the elections of 1989 which saw an extraordinary coalition between conservatives and the Left, the government arbitrarily allocated frequencies to its favoured private interests. Publishers began entering the broadcasting arena, taking advantage of the partisan confrontation and the lack of any anti-trust legislation by establishing private FM stations while participating in private television interests which became extremely competitive to their state and municipal counterparts (Tsagarousianou 216-217). Although this process facilitated, in the long-term, the 'weaning' of mass media from political parties and the state, the non-organised and non-coherent character of this transformation resulted in the colonisation of communication space by mass media. In the field of broadcasting, public radio and television broadcasting have experienced a dramatically fast decline. [7] Moreover, the political exploitation of municipal stations and the remarkable increase of commercial ad hoc ventures during the early 1990s has produced a "numerous but weak" sector of local/regional stations. [8] In addition, the privileged expansion of mass media, both of press and broadcasting industry, in province, has made the position and the economic viability of local media even more fragile. To finish, the use of Internet technology is limited though this is relative since it is recently developed in Greece (Tsaliki).

## Exploring 'the margin'...

The present study draws on diverse experiments of grassroots media practices that are implemented along the lines of press, radio and Internet. Press and radio grassroots practices, in contrast to the internet ones that have recently developed, have a long tradition but are relatively neglected by the research field. They were boosted at the end of the dictatorship and onwards – alternative papers (anarchist, leftist, ecological, and cultural ones), as well as radio political pirates (that challenged the state control over broadcasting matters at first place). By exploring recent grassroots projects across different media this study probes the social meaning of the implementation of these practices that diverse social groups run. Three cases-studies are employed here: the magazine "Smoke Signs", the radio station "Student's FM", and the Internet site Indymedia Athens. [9]

### *'Spatial aspect'*

The implications of the implementation of these projects in spatial terms concern their ability to enable collectivities, citizens who are excluded from the conventional public sphere to open a space for themselves, for ordinary people.

The very quality of it is that we, some of us participating for the first time, opened and manage this forum. And it is not only for us; everyone who wants to intervene in the things and had not a way to do it before has the chance now, either as user, giving the information, or, by taking part in the process of running it as well (interview with I. Z., February 2003).

Although the starting point of the different social groups can be varied the need is the same. People who are involved in these experiments evaluate their engagement in terms of their participation in civic life.

[The project] is a means to express and make known my concerns and views ... publicly; there is also a feedback that opens a space between people who had not have the chance to be participants in a social medium. The process itself is part of my overall social and political life, participating in the expression of my interests in equal terms, and intervening in things in common in a different way that matters (interview with A. X., March 2003).

Moreover, the overwhelmingly 'hydrocephalous' nature of the Greek media system, commercially, socially and geographically has been the main challenge of most of the experiments that are implemented at the margins of Greek public space. Thus, the practice of grassroots media experiments has been reflected in terms of the demystification of mass media, as well as the provision of alternative information.

The dynamics of our attempt is the production and distribution of information that contests the distorted one of the mass media, which does not touch the actual everyday life ... [The project] is a way to propagandize alternative information, and an alternative culture that opposes to the commercial one (interview with A. M., March 2003).

The absence of strong institutional inputs from Greek civil society, which would offer a space of representation for diverse issues, is reflected in the attempt of grassroots media projects to cover various aspects of social reality that are excluded from (or misrepresented in) the official public sphere. Such an attempt has been expressed in terms of focused as well as all-encompassing-issues projects, highlighting diverse aspects of the alternative milieu. [10]

What we try to do is to open a space where various marginalized issues find a place ... for all the tendencies, and all the aspects of the alternative milieu, including practices of resistance, local movements, ecologic, feminist issues etc., namely, a space where every discourse has a place, where various interests are met visually, a space of mutual influence between different trends (interview with M. M., February 2003).

Thus, in the context of grassroots media projects diverse forms of interests and discourses previously excluded from the conventional public sphere find a place. But to what extent do these practices constitute a domain, advocacy or opponent to the dominant one? As one of the participants points out:

Basically, such practices constitute communicative poles that enrich public communication, which till now has a centralized core in which we do not participate. They create a wave towards more public communication; what we largely want to show by this attempt is that our voice, and not only ours, is not heard. Let us make a

space to be heard (interview with I. Z., February 2003).

Here the limits of Greek grassroots media practices in spatial terms are placed. It is not actually the fragmented nature of these practices itself that sets their limits but the exclusive way that the experience of these projects is communicated, meaning that the 'discourses' that these practices produce are not addressed in the wider realm, in what has been called the alternative milieu, seeing how they do, in relation to other 'discourses'. The partisan politics of the factions of the milieu, which to one extent reflect the ones of the conventional political sphere, is a barrier itself for the creation of a public arena for the different 'discourses'.

The project has not run widely yet, we are in the process of making calls to other collectivities and related projects of the 'sphere', coming in contact with them. ... The attempt has firstly to strengthen itself, that's why it is rigid at first place, in order to avoid the conspicuous critique that is unavoidable in terms of the politics of the alternative milieu (interview with A. C., March 2003).

Yet, in this context, grassroots media projects create a space for diverse discourses although in fragmented terms.

I think that the establishment of a communication network in the alternative sphere is necessary in Greece. Yet, at this moment, taking into account the political narrow-mindedness of the 'alternative milieu' in general terms, any attempt of establishing an all encompassing network would be a failure, and possibly prohibitive for the survival of the already existed fragmented projects (interview with C. D., February 2003).

### *'Agency'*

In terms of 'agency', these grassroots media practices constitute conveyors of both individual and collective intervention. Participants point out the learning value of their engagement in the product, both empirically:

I have learnt many things concerning the whole production process; from the first stage till the last one ... got information on various issues as well. It is not a personal charge, a responsibility that I have to bring to an end, but it is a concern that I share with the others, and for which we try to do our best and take from it as much we can (interview with E. M., March 2003);

...and generally, concerning their overall participation in public affairs:

It is the most important thing I am doing the last years ... It opened up new horizons for me, I have revised many things I did in the past, ideas I had, as well as I have re-evaluated my overall participation in things in common. (interview with A. X., March 2003).

In addition, grassroots media practices facilitate the historicisation of marginalised social domains, their collectivities and their discourses.

I think such projects are very important, whatever are the groups that implement them and whatever is the medium they use. Though some of them stop or, other, different ones, enter the field, they create what we call social climate, consciousness; people have heard about the experiment, they remember it, or they give a detailed account of it years later... So, I think the most important is that they create what we call social climate (interview with C. D., February 2003).

Thus:

[t]he implementation of such an experiment is by itself privileged ... it sets a historical precedent, a tradition, a political statement; it is a large heritage, where you can trace back (interview with E. M., March 2003).

At the same time these practices reaffirm the 'difference' (discourse, lifestyle) of these collectivities, social groups:

It is a social means, through which you can express yourself more dynamically than outside where your difference is suppressed and you are forced to make concessions ... It is a protest march that expresses a profound need of us, that of promoting our interests, in our own way ... the project communes this need (interview with V. K., March 2003).

...as well as contest established social relations:

What is challenging in the project is the logic of direct participation and action, and the horizontal way of interfering in things ... without someone within the collectivity who is above all, who actually runs the project, leaving to the rest the execution of orders. It is people themselves who compose, discuss ... the aspect of everyone is respected ... this gives you the sense of being participant in equal terms, and this process frees a lot of energy ... (interview with I. Z., February 2003);

...and roles.

The main objective is the direct co-operation between transmitter and receiver, to cancel actually the distinguishing roles between them. You must join forces with receiver, to form the program together ... By this way you can make known attempts, activities that find no place in the conventional mass media ... and moreover the medium gives us the chance to do it live in some cases, when the receiver is there, taking part in the march and he can report things from the real place of action ... we experiment with these things ... (interview with A. C., March 2003).

However, these aspects are not consistent enough in the context of Greek grassroots media projects. The conception of the 'political' in traditional fractional terms, along with practices implemented in the alternative milieu as well, is a barrier for these projects and the challenges they encompass in political terms:

The problem with all these projects, old and new ones, is that at the same time they try to be open and independent, including more people and perspectives in them, they seek ways to constitute a political purity ... meaning a clear political identity of the project; this is their controversial nature ... at they same time they try to be more open and wide they meet their limits and they cancel their potential (interview with I. T., March 2003).

## Conclusions

By drawing on diverse, heterogeneous media experiments that are originated from 'below' the paper has highlighted both the challenges and limits for the public and political spheres. On one hand, practices constitute social arenas for the representation of diverse 'marginalised' collectivities, social groups, and their intervention in civic life. On the other hand, these aspects are mostly addressed by the participants in relation to the challenging of mass media, and less in terms of the broader, everyday social environment these practices apply to. Moreover, these practices are entrapped in traditional political/partisan tactics that deter their expansion and politicisation.

Finally, such a sociological approach of grassroots media practices raises questions for activists

and their perspective:

I think that the only way for us to overpass the barriers, which we ourselves set in the expansion of an alternative sphere, is to be trained through the practice of such projects that force us to co-exist through our differences (interview with C. D., February 2003);

It also raises questions for Greek scholarship, concerning the need to create new conceptual ways to capture and understand the democratisation of communication, beyond the realm of the conventional public sphere (which in the Greek case is static and exclusive) – in terms of the ‘lived experience’; and to develop a more flexible definition of the ‘political’.

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## Endnotes

[1] See Cohen and Arato for an overall discussion on the interplay of public sphere-civil society. [\[return\]](#)

[2] By drawing a model of democratic media system "broadly representative of the society it serves" from 'above', J. Curran takes also into consideration the collective, self-organised tradition of civil society in terms of pluralistic constitution of public sphere. [\[return\]](#)

[3] From another perspective, by prioritizing "mediation" process rather than the media, N. Couldry evaluates also alternative media practices in a wider context that of contesting the dominant conditions of media power, its symbolic boundaries and hierarchies. Moreover, Downing's (*Rebellious Communication*) and Atton's (*Alternative Media*) approaches widen the spectrum of alternative media as practices of empowerment in reflexive terms as well. [\[return\]](#)

[4] Besides the widening of the spectrum of alternative media as practices of empowerment in symbolic and reflexive terms has highlighted the "blurring of producers and audiences" in alternative media practices (Atton and Couldry; Downing *Audiences and Readers*). Moreover, N. Jankowski (*Epilogue* 369), highlighting various areas of research on community media, evaluates the aspect of 'users' in terms of the "engaged audience". [\[return\]](#)

[5] See Mason 109; Kvale 190; Miller and Glassner 109; Silverman 38, for an evaluation of drawing on interviewee's/ subject's interpretations, understandings, and their versions and accounts of how they make sense of their social world. [\[return\]](#)

[6] For an analysis of Greek political culture in English see Diamandouros, and Tsagarousianou. [\[return\]](#)

[7] Characteristic is the case of Television Broadcasting: the market share of the State Broadcaster (ERT) declined to 16% three years after the deregulation. In 2000, the market share of ERT was 10%, while the market share of the four private channels was 73% (AGB Hellas Yearbook, 2000). [\[return\]](#)

[8] See Barboutis, and Panagiotopoulou for the cases of radio and television stations correspondingly. [\[return\]](#)

[9] Part of the nine case studies examined in my original PhD Thesis on 'Grassroots Media Practices in Greece'. "Smoke Signs": A bi-monthly periodical edition, first published in 2000, initiated by the "group of anti-information for Latin America". "Student's FM": A pirate radio station, first broadcasted in 2002 by university students as "the libertarian radio of the city". Indymedia Athens: Athens' Indymedia Media Center first launched in 2001; it is "an open collective of people offering grassroots, non-corporate, non-commercial coverage: To take information into our hands". [\[return\]](#)

[10] The term 'alternative milieu', although controversial one, is the term that social actors from different backgrounds in Greece (autonomist, extra-parliamentary left-wing, radical, conscientious objectors', anarchist, feminist, ecologist, and activist groups) employ in order to set their context. [\[return\]](#)

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AGB Hellas TV Yearbook 99/00. Athens 2000.  
(AGB Hellas has been producing television audience data in Greece since 1988).

#### Interviews:

- Interviews with I. Z (February 13, 2003), M. M. (February 14, 2003), and C. D. (February 18, 2003), participants in "Indymedia Athens".
- Interviews with A. X. (March 04, 2003), E. M. (March 10, 2003), and I. T. (March 13, 2003), participants in "Smoke Signs".
- Interviews with V. K. (March 16, 2003), A. C. (March 17, 2003) and A. M. (March 19 2003), participants in "Student's FM".

