

ALTERNATIVE DIGITAL JOURNALISM IN GREECE UNDER CONDITIONS OF AUSTERITY

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ABSTRACT:

This chapter investigates how alternative digital journalism operates in the broader context of the austerity economy in Greece. Using as a background the historical interweaving of interests between economic power, political power and media, the chapter explores the current state of digital journalism in Greece and whether it can flourish and serve the ideals of independence, objectivity and pluralism. The internet provides new possibilities for pluralism in journalism and gives rise to alternative media outlets that purport objectivity and independence from vested economic interests (e.g. advertising) and political pressures. However, the financial sustainability of such ventures is questionable and the regulatory framework in a heavily concentrated Greek media ecology weak or non-existing. In this chapter we examine the origins and mission statements of selected cases of alternative digital media outlets/projects, as well as their financing sources and business models. We then discuss sustainability issues and the limits to alternative digital journalism. Our empirical data derive from desktop research, short structured interviews with academics and longer semi-structured interviews with key actors of alternative digital media.

KEYWORDS:

(Please supply up to 6 keywords for your Chapter)

1. digital journalism
2. alternative media
3. sustainability
4. Greece
5. clientelism
6. austerity

Introduction

Journalism in Greece has suffered from the chronic problems of the media landscape: association with political and economic interests has often resulted in editorial control and reduced objectivity and journalistic independence. The pressures generated on the media sector by the financial crisis and the resulting austerity measures have exacerbated the pressures exerted on journalists and the precarity of their employment. The popularity of the internet in Greece since the 2010s has created a parallel media ecology largely dominated by the online versions of traditional printed press, together with the proliferation of low-quality sites reproducing uncritically gossip news, sensationalism or politically-motivated reportage.

Gradually and under austerity conditions, alternative digital outlets have emerged and have become an interesting area of academic study. In essence, these outlets, were an attempt both to increase the opportunities for independent journalism and to generate income for precarious, mainly freelance journalists.

By drawing on earlier empirical research carried out by the authors on journalism in Greece (Iosifidis and Boucas, 2015), the chapter seeks to address contemporary aspects of alternative digital media and alternative digital journalism in Greece and evaluates their prospects and limitations. It covers the period of austerity, which has augmented the pressures on journalists and media outlets. It addresses the research questions: a) what has been the place and purpose of alternative digital media in austerity Greece? b) what are the funding mechanisms of alternative digital outlets and how sustainable are they?

To answer the research questions a variety of research methods were deployed: literature review to demonstrate the background of media, politics and journalism in Greece; an analysis of the mission statements of selected well-known alternative media outlets to provide some understanding of their purpose and the philosophy behind their foundation; and a set of in-depth interviews with their media owners/founders, primarily journalists, to provide more nuance on the functions of these media, their funding models and sustainability.

Media, Politics and the State in Greece

Media systems in most southern European countries represent what Hallin and Mancini (2004) have described as the 'polarised pluralistic' model, which distinguishes it from the rest of Western and Northern Europe. This model consists of a media system characterised by low levels of newspaper sales, a tradition of advocacy reporting and limited development of journalism as an autonomous profession, instrumentalisation of privately-owned media, tight governmental control of the public broadcaster, and a savage deregulation of the broadcasting sector. In Greece, there has been a strong tradition of using media outlets as a means of ideological expression and political mobilisation. In effect, media and politics continuously interact and influence each other in various ways (Iosifidis and Papathanassopoulos, 2019).

In the middle of the nineteenth century, Greece had just emerged from over four centuries of Ottoman rule. Thus, Greece was for many decades confronted with the tasks of nation building, which has had a consequence for the formation of the over-extended character of the state, while other European territories were entering the process of constructive policy dialogue aimed at enhancing democratic institutional building. Arguably, these structural preconditions and a late development of the domestic capital stock, have been conducive to a model of an interventionist

state and a weak civil society. Because of the persistence of patronage politics, even political parties and interest groups had to be articulated within the state apparatus. (Mouzelis, 1980)

The media landscape has been deeply affected by these developments. Firstly, the state has played an interventionist role in the sector through censorship, ownership of media or subsidisation. Secondly, clientelism gave rise to 'diaploki', i.e. the intertwining of interests between media organisations and political power, which operated to mutual benefit through lax regulations (e.g. non-permanent television licenses), or the allocation of public projects to the private enterprises of media owners, in exchange of favourable political image in the corresponding media outlets. This has had significant impact on the independence of journalism, the political process and public life.

The deregulation, commercialisation and privatisation of the media through a series of regulatory moves in the 1980s/90s generated a landscape of oligopoly in the media sector (Iosifidis, 2012). As a result, the market has been dominated by a handful of powerful newspaper interests which have expanded into audiovisual and online media. With media market deregulation, clientelism has gradually become more invasive and more intricate, linking large media organizations, their owners (who are also active in key sectors of the economy, including public projects), and the political elite. Media regulation has been ineffective, while independent regulatory authorities function superficially and ambivalently.

Clientelism, the financial crisis and the role of Journalism

The impact of the 10-year severe fiscal crisis on the media landscape has not yet been systematically assessed. Yet, under conditions of austerity, reduced readership, media dependence on state subsidies and unsustainable bank loans, as well as reduced sources of advertising revenue, the triangle of diaploki has grown tighter (Iosifidis and Boucas, 2015). The ongoing financial crisis has rendered the media even more dependent on considerable yearly subsidies, bank loans, or on the wealth of their owners.

The 2015 elected SYRIZA-led coalition government, pledged to end the clientelistic relationship between businessmen, the media and politicians. The allocation of formal licenses of TV channels was a step towards this direction; however, there were setbacks, such as corrupt practices within the public broadcaster ERT and a broadcasting landscape with new oligarchs. In July 2019 a new conservative government was elected and at the time of writing it is not clear whether diaploki will be overcome to some extent, or it would take new shapes, forms or actors.

The intertwining of the political elite and the media has generated a journalistic culture cautious of reporting news that would challenge state officials. These arrangements have damaged journalism, as state and private interests have steered editorial choices. The financial crisis and the austerity measures imposed since 2010 have reinforced these relationships. The major mainstream media organizations have largely presented government austerity policies favourably, at the expense of pluralism and independent journalism. Major commercial media companies have even kept silent about a number of sensitive developments, including the imposition of legislation to cut employee rights and pensions.

Further, the financial crisis together with the tough fiscal measures, including heavy reductions in salaries and pensions and numerous layoffs in the public sector, have accelerated the downward trend in newspaper circulation and led to the closure of several outlets. Reduced income from advertising and other sources of funding has had an impact on employment, especially in the print sector: redundancies and the abandonment of collective agreements have forced many journalists

to accept vulnerable low-status work conditions with very low salaries. Under strict editorial control of critical views of government policies and the intricate system of political/economic/media dependencies, the practice of journalists' self-censorship to safeguard their jobs is on the rise.

Alternative media and digital journalism

In a compelling speech on the crisis faced by current journalism, Todd Gitlin (2009) offered a clear and succinct understanding of its main components and implications. In his speech, he identified five components of the crisis faced by (American) journalism: two are economic factors and include the decline in circulation and advertising revenues; a third reflects shifts in the mediascape which have diverted attention from journalism; a fourth concerns a broader crisis in authority; - the fifth, is the perennial, as Gitlin puts it, inability or unwillingness of journalism to effectively deal with those in power. Similarly, McChesney (2003) holds that journalism's crisis is precisely its inability to act as a watchdog, to determine truth from lies and to present a range of informed opinions on important events.

Yet, a crisis, even a protracted one, may open new windows of opportunity. In media terms, these relate to the emergence of different types of alternative media contesting media power, highlighting imbalances and inequalities, and expressing an alternative vision. Alternative media may be diverse, pluralistic and heterogeneous, acknowledging the conflictual (rather than consensual) locus of everyday politics and echoing the recurrent and dynamic interface between multiple social actors and different alternative media practices. Reflecting on the principles of heterogeneity and pluralism, non-mainstream media can even be referred to as nomadic and anarchic, articulating different struggles and various socio-political constraints that underlie specific ideological assumptions. They have the capacity to challenge the dominant capitalist, consumerist order and create new liberal, antagonistic mediated spaces that exist alongside the market and the state (Mouffe, 2018). Fraser (1993: 123) contends that the establishment of these "parallel, discursive arenas" provide the space "where members of subordinated groups invent and circulate counter-discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs".

Under austerity conditions in Greece, self-organized groups and networks of journalists and other media personnel have started exploring new models of journalism using the potential of the Internet for greater pluralism and independence. Most analysis has however focused on the structural crisis of journalism, and overlooked the ways in which new possibilities may emerge organically from within journalism and journalistic practice. While there has been some recent work on the alternative mediascape in Greece (Vatikiotis and Milioni, 2019), to our knowledge there has not been work exclusively examining alternative digital journalism. This chapter seeks to redress this gap, by examining the circumstances under which (selected) alternative digital media outlets have emerged, their purpose and philosophy, business models and overall sustainability.

Alternative digital media in Greece

Alternative digital media in Greece have to be placed in a digital landscape dominated by mainstream, systemic media outlets, such as SKAI (25% weekly access) and Proto Thema (18% weekly access), which largely reproduce the same content that non-digital systemic media offer (Reuters, 2019: 89). Sensationalist sites, such as Newsbomb.gr (34% weekly access) are prominent, while news and information portals, such as newsit.gr and news247.gr offer real-time information but often verbatim and without checking the accuracy of the source. Other visible sites are based on

solicited content, which is advertising from big firms. A case in point is the MonoNews site, which is considered quite successful. Original reportage is rare and (anecdotal) evidence suggests that about 80% of online content comes from the Athens-Macedonian News Agency, which is controlled by the government.

Within this landscape, the presence of alternative digital media in Greece is rather limited; however, a study of the entirety of them would still be impossible in the scope of a chapter. Consequently, we have selected a small number of cases following the definition of alternative media by Atton (2004): “media projects, interventions and networks that work against, or seek to develop different forms of, the dominant, expected (and broadly accepted) ways of ‘doing’ media.” (ix).

Transposing this definition to the Greek digital media landscape, we have applied a purposive sampling process and limited ourselves to media projects that at the time of our research

- a) operated through a digital presence
- b) were not an online branch and version of any mainstream outlet or a news aggregator site
- c) were not dependent on state institutions, large corporate interests, or any large private foundation, either commercial or non-commercial
- d) did not receive advertisements from any of the above entities
- e) were not supportive of any particular political party.

The above criteria delimited our selection and alternative in the digital news landscape in Greece. They more or less ensured that our selection of digital media outlets/projects at least adopted a critical approach to information/news provision and position themselves at the antipodes of the mainstream media, digital or non-digital. This, however, did not preclude the possibility that journalists working in these alternative media outlets/projects were also employed in mainstream, systemic media. Many journalists indeed were employed in more than one digital (and non-digital) media, some of which systemic, for purposes of subsistence, while also providing freelance, free or paid work in alternative digital media.

Applying the above criteria, we came up with the following non-exhaustive list: The Press Project, Inside Story, Macropolis, Athens Live, Omnia TV and Reporters United. It is worth noting that we excluded outlets that started as alternative but developed relationships of dependence in the process (such as Presspublica and Radiobubble), as well as others that were not based in Athens (such as Alterthess). Still, our list could not possibly include all alternative media. Our purpose, however, was not generalisation, but rather analysis of comparable cases along certain dimensions.

With this aim in mind, in what follows we first examine the origins and mission statements of these outlets/projects; their financing sources and business models. We then discuss sustainability issues and the limits to alternative digital journalism in Greece. Our discussion is underpinned by semi-structured tele-conferencing interviews with one representative from each of the above outlets, lasting between 45 and 90 minutes and carried out in January and February 2020. All interviewees had been central figures in the respective alternative media from the beginning. All interviews were conducted with the consent of the interviewee who knew that they could withdraw at any time and that the content of the interview would be reported anonymously. All interviewees were anonymised and assigned the initials of the outlet they represented (see Appendix).

Origins and mission

Most of these outlets were generated under conditions of austerity (i.e. after 2010). Many of these alternative outlets were founded by professional journalists who faced lay-offs from mainstream media and had to resort to alternative employment arrangements for sustainability. These outlets presented at the time of writing a variety of legal entities: some were for profit, others non-profit and resembling an NGO, yet others operated as a co-operative, or did not have a legal entity whatsoever.

The **Press Project** (thepressproject.gr) is one of the oldest and more established. It was founded by Kostas Efimeros, an IT professional, who provided both the funding from his own business and was a monumental force behind it, extending the outlet in new activities and multi-media content. Efimeros died in 2017 and the Press Project is currently run by Konstantinos Poulis.

Inside Story (insidestory.gr) was founded in the crisis years (2016) and was made up primarily of journalists who had worked in the systemic media for a number of years.

MacroPolis (macropolis.gr), an outlet with English content, was founded by Nick Malkoutzis, a journalist who covered Greek issues for local and international media for a decade, and Yiannis Mouzakis, who was employed at Reuters for a number of years and had extensive experience of Greek topics.

Athens Live (athenslive.gr) started in 2016 from a team of journalists who wanted to communicate Greek affairs and worked in the beginning for foreign media. They subsequently started a Facebook page covering many topical issues before organising the most successful international crowdfunding campaign in Greece and establishing itself as a digital journalism outlet for an international audience.

Omnia TV started in 2011, but had its origins in 2008. It is made up of a group of competent Internet users who came together and organised a purely digital news platform. Its philosophy has been grassroots and bottom-up and they have chosen not to make it a professional outlet but rather non-profit, based on voluntary work. It is currently not a legal entity.

Reporters United is the first non-profit centre for investigative journalism in Greece and follows best practices in similar initiatives internationally. It is an NGO comprising 35 investigative journalists, but is also open to the broader journalist community. Its aim is to promote investigative journalism through steps such as the creation of a platform for whistleblowers, offer services and tools to help Greek journalists and facilitate collaborations between journalists in Greece and abroad.

All the above emerged under conditions of very low trust towards journalism and media on the part of the population. Out of 38 countries included in the 2019 Reuters report on digital news, Greece is in the 36th position with only 27% of citizens enquired showing trust in the media they choose. These percentages were even lower earlier, 26% in 2018 and 23% in 2017 (Reuters, 2019: 89).

Alternative media had identified a need for better news information in an environment of continuing intertwining of interests and the complex of relationships of dependence in which mainstream journalism was implicated. These were also conditions where there was a keen interest on news on Greece for an international audience, particularly around 2012-2014, the period prior to the SYRIZA party coming to power.

Alternative digital media come with a “mission statement”, which is about providing independent journalism, critical analysis and coverage of important topics in a professional manner. The Press

Project, for instance, abides by the philosophy to provide original content available to all. They are also determined to let their journalists publish freely, without censorship. (PP)

Inside Story seeks to provide a new approach to news, evidence-based analysis and reportage, in interaction with their readers. They claim that they “invest their time in better research”, “carry out investigative journalism following international methods and codes of conduct”, “show the story behind the news piece so as to unravel links and enhance understanding of what is happening”, “express, but not impose views”. (insidestory.gr/about).

Macropolis’s mission is to filter out the noise that accompanies developments and provide our readership with impartial and pertinent analysis ... a well-balanced mix of political insight and fact-driven analysis that provides an all-round picture of what is happening in Greece, as well as a snapshot of key events.” (<http://www.macropolis.gr/?i=portal.en.about>).

Athens Live, organised as a non-profit news organisation, responds to “the need for independent and dynamic journalism in an unstable media landscape, and the representation of a Greek narrative in the international debate.” (<https://athenslive.gr>).

Omnia TV draws on sensitive social topics, often related to minorities. Their view is that of an “honest subjectivity”: “We address topics that are primarily under-reported or not covered in adequately or in a correct and honest way. But we do not pretend to be “objective”. We want thus to challenge the purported objective horizontal presentation of facts that happens on the Internet”. (OT).

Reporters United aspire to providing investigative journalism covering affairs that are often under-reported or not presented critically. At the same time, they aim to sensitise citizens as to their rights vis-à-vis the state, e.g. using freedom of information rights. (RU)

These mission statements indicate a commitment to provide a counterpoint to the dominant digital and non-digital landscape. They are about reportage based on facts, coverage of missing topics and analysis that goes beyond sensationalism. These elements do not make them necessarily objective; rather they should be seen as operating beyond traditional dependencies and, as such, being in a position to freely express their views and approach their topics critically.

Business model, financing issues and relationship with the audience

Alternative digital media offer original content and critical analysis but rely on funding sources and models. This is common for alternative digital media internationally but has also its unique Greek characteristics.

While 92% of the Greeks who are online get their news via online sources, a very high percentage of 67% gets it from social media, primarily Facebook (58%) and Twitter (36%), but also messaging applications (25% Messenger, and 17% Viber, the highest percentage compared to the 38 countries of the Reuters study (Reuters, 2019: 89). This means that digital media cannot expect some income from a shrunk advertising total, most of which is directed to social media.

In addition, funding in Greece has been historically problematic and adversarial to digital media: “Digital media are not funded and funding is horizontal and given to all printed media including the low-quality ones. This is a historical situation and has to do with the ways in which state funding has been directed by relationships with publishers and now oligarchs.” (IS). Austerity circumstances created extreme financial pressures making survival of such media a daily struggle.

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The mission statements are “translated” into a kind of “business model” that would make the outlet viable. These models present variations with regard to whether the content of the site is open or behind a paywall (or a combination of the two); whether they rely on subscriptions, member donations, donations from private donors (e.g. foundations), or advertisements of some kind; whether they generate some income by selling their content to other outlets; whether they expect journalists or those otherwise involved to be unpaid or receive some remuneration for their work. An extra dimension of considerable interest is the way in which each of them depend on, handle and cultivate their relationships with their audience, something that is beyond the issue of remuneration.

The first phase of the Press Project, during which it acquired a considerable degree of prestige as an independent medium without advertisements or other dependencies, was based on considerable financial contribution, personal effort and a lot of risk-taking on the part of his founder, Kostas Efimeros. Its philosophy has been that the content of its site should be open for all. This generated difficulties in finding a viable model to cover the expenses of running the site and paying the journalists working there -mostly as freelancers. Around 2015-2016, in particular, the Press Project faced insurmountable financial difficulties which led to a number of its important contributors to protest and leave on the basis of not getting properly remunerated or insured.

After Efimeros’s death in 2017 a new phase began. By that time the outlet had been established in the consciousness of its audience who realised that they needed to support for the content to remain open. ““The persistence in providing independent journalism had generated a degree of attachment to the medium... The motto was that you have to pay for your news, otherwise somebody else will.” (PP)

The Press Project currently looks more viable, though perhaps less glamorous. There are 6 paid permanent staff and 4 regular paid collaborators. The income comes from about 1000-1200 voluntary subscribers, with average subscription being 9 euros monthly.

Inside Story employs about 5-6 full-time journalists, the rest being freelancers. It has three types of income sources.

- a) As a rule, a minimum of 50% of income comes from the readers; there are about 2000-2500 subscriptions (of 60 euros per year, or 6 euros per month)
- b) Subscriptions from a limited number of enterprises (currently about 12), the subscription being about 5000 euros per year
- c) Provision of journalistic services to third parties -this creates a protective (cushion) income which helps crucially the sustainability of the outlet.

Macropolis is self-financed and is not affiliated to any political party or corporate institution. It addresses a more specialised, niche audience, mainly non-Greeks, as its content is in English. They are ad-free and had a specific business model based on subscription from the beginning. They targeted mainly institutional subscribers (individuals that were members or representatives of embassies, foundations and the like) who would be interested in English content but also would be likely to afford subscription over time and thus guarantee continuity and regularity.

Omnia TV has kept the philosophy of content that is free and open for all. Some of the journalists contributing to the content are professionals, however, most of them are not. All of the people employed work voluntarily, receiving no pay for their work. They operate on a membership model and have about 150 regular members and some ad hoc ones. (OT).

Athens Live generated a pool of subscribers as a result of its crowdfunding platform in 2016. It became an NGO in 2017. “We decided to become an NGO as we did not want to make a profit organisation. We do not have a commercial part and we do not get income from advertisements -we get money from crowdfunding, membership and foundations. These foundations do not have vested interests but obviously they will fund projects that fall within their remit or their current financing priorities.” (AL)

A common principle underlying these models is the need to build trust and cultivate a relationship with the audience.

The philosophy of Inside Story is that you need to be close to the audience, communicate something that has meaning for them, “touch them”, to gain their trust. For example, the “Yourstory” part of the site, is about a co-creation of investigative reportage between journalists and their audience. These techniques, deriving from the business world and engagement with the consumer, expose socially important issues, while generating a certain income.

Macropolis also built trust by making their site open in the beginning from October 2013 to October 2014. Trust in their content ensured that they maintained their audience base even when the site started operating as a paywall. Macropolis invests in a close relationship with its audience: They often request feedback about the site and our service and try also once a year to physically meet subscribers abroad, e.g. in Germany. Their audience are engaged in suggesting the themes to be covered, though this does not compromise the independence of the medium: “We have often adjusted the themes or make special features according to interests communicated to us.” (MP) In addition, they offer an opinion blog, Agora, which gives the opportunity to their subscribers to express their views.

Some of the outlets rely on this relationship of trust to ensure adequate, though voluntary support while making their content open. This is the philosophy behind the Press Project, which also often organises reporting missions abroad, financed through calls to their subscribers-members.

In the same vein, Omnia TV argue: “Our audience expects that they will read something that is objective and they are ready to support us. Journalism should not be built on a marketing relationship.” (OT)

The Athens Live model is likewise based on open content and voluntary subscriptions which are the result of a relationship of trust that the outlet practises independent and objective journalism: “Members see stories that you do not find in other outlets-stories with impact abroad, stories that are data-based, analysis in depth, and transparency in terms of our financing and funding. We want somebody to say: I read it on Athens Live, this is why it is accurate”. (AL). Membership functions in a two-way manner, as members can both fund and contribute to the discussion about the topics to be discovered, thus promoting community.

Reporters United also try to create the circumstances that will make a membership model (based on free and open content for everybody who becomes a member) viable: “My argument is that if I can make something that convinces people that is independent then people will support it for it to exist. This has happened abroad, e.g. New York Times soft paywall -you can access it easily, however people become subscribers as they feel that they support an initiative.” (RU)

Sustainability and limits to alternative journalism

The issue of sustainability comes into the discussion for all the outlets we examined. The problem with alternative journalism is whether one can sustain a membership based on trust and rely on membership payments, introduce subscriptions, or eventually open up their business model to other directions. At the extreme, there is also a risk of entering the very relations of dependence, which alternative digital journalism would set to avoid. We have come across a variety of practices that can enhance sustainability.

Sustainability, is to some extent related to the culture of the Greek audience. "The Greek audience is not educated to pay for their news. There is only a niche that will accept that, though Greeks do want to read news and they do not trust the mainstream outlets." (IS)

The regulatory framework is relevant in a discussion of sustainability: "One way the circumstances are negative is that there is no favourable tax system for freelancers. If you want to be by the book and provide receipts for employees to declare income as journalists you get heavily taxed and pay high employee contributions. The same applies to the digital enterprises, which gets taxed at 24%, as opposed to printed material, which is only at 6%. Or, you do not declare your work and evade taxation, which is what most outlets do." (IS)

The Press Project seems to be quite optimistic about the sustainability of its model. All working there have a salary and they provide regular daily news. The expenses are high (of the order of 10k euros per month, not counting additional purchases) but manageable. The current success results from a steady pool of subscribers, with an increasing trend, which pay for the outlet to exist. All content is open and the visits are 30% more than last year. "We are in a position to provide high quality reportage -this attracts more people and creates a virtuous circle. Daily flow and salaried workers mean an impressive sustainable business model." (PP)

Macropolis finds that "The difficulty of sustainability is to keep your subscribers and augment them. We were confident that if we provided consistently good content that would keep our subscribers." Despite it being a paid model, there are financial limitations. For example, there are not adequate funds for publicity and they rely on word of mouth based on the trust that the subscribers show. They seek also complementary revenue by selling reports to other outlets or by collaborating in collective work. They also try to strike a balance between open and closed content. For instance, their opinion blog Agora has been part of their strategy to keep some content open. Additionally, they offer two articles per month for free. On other occasions, they provide articles of general interest to subscribers for a week or so, before making them freely available. And, significantly, they put all their articles on twitter: "It is important for us to keep a section open which can travel in social media and make you well-known." (MP)

Increasing needs have posed a sustainability issue for Omnia TV. "We never attempted daily news production. So far, we target in-depth coverage rather than spreading in breadth. As the quality of our work evolves, we are thinking of a model that can serve more topics, more frequency etc." (OT) A legal model which would enable them to have a subscription model and could provide some income. However, the framework is not very clear when it comes to cooperatives or NGOs. For the time being they generate some income from donations or specific activities and events to expose a topic; these cover basic expenses, such as data servers or rent.

To what extent do sustainability issues, related to inadequate income and funds in alternative digital media, impinge upon the quality of journalism provided?

“Our quality is not significantly affected - statistics show that our audience is very satisfied. But still we could have more room to do journalism in our own way if we had more money. For example, I cannot tell a journalist: you need more time as this is a difficult topic. I have to have the piece delivered soon as I am also under pressure to publish a certain number of articles on a regular basis.” (IS)

Compromises have always to be made: “Alternative media are not supported by the political framework in Greece. We cannot employ more people because of limited financial means. We have relative freedom -however, we need to adopt strict programming.” (AL)

The legal framework plays a part in this in terms of how it deals with slander or whistleblowing. “It does not help you do your job as journalist, as the law exposes you to charges pressed on you and you have to spend money to defend yourself.” (IS) “We serve our mission but can make compromises. For example, we can put pressure and reveal up to a point. Under circumstances of court cases for defamation and slander our audience can support us; financially but also through social media and other alternative media or even mainstream.” (OT)

For some, a subscription model comes against the philosophy of alternative media. “There is a contradiction with the initial goal of an alternative outlet, which is to produce good journalism and make it available to the public -and not the selected few. It is also financially problematic as it binds the outlet to a (limited) number of subscribers. Additionally, it can create dependencies on the kind of subscribers. For example, having companies as subscribers might mean that you cannot write about them in a critical way.” (RU)

On the other hand, the free availability of good, researched and independent reportage has to be placed in the pathogenic environment of digital journalism in Greece. Sites, even serious ones, need to reproduce everything that has been written. Journalists of the so-called “flow” jobs are instructed to publish news articles in the hundreds just by reproducing content. As a result, independent work contributes to the readership and popularity of often “predatory” systemic sites, such as Newsbomb.gr, or newsbeast.gr, which operate as free riders, reproducing the content of others, with attribution or not. This reproduction often uses only parts of the original content or changes the title of the article. The regulatory gap facilitates such predatory reproduction. The relevant bodies for the journalists’ codes of conduct (Journalists’ Union of Athens Daily Newspapers and Panhellenic Federation of Journalists Unions), as well as the independent broadcasting regulatory authority (National Council for Radio and TV) do not cover digital media and digital journalism adequately.

Some sites, such as the Press Project, set terms and conditions, e.g. that full material cannot be reproduced during the first three days. Others simply rely on the fair use of their content by others. “We want people to know our reporting, but it has to be done in a decent way... I do not mind reproduction of a good piece with proper acknowledgement. The opposite is often the case, they often bury the piece.” (AL).

Conclusions

Alternative digital media in Greece cover a significant gap in critical journalism. They are based on original research and reportage and operate largely independent of their funding sources and associated interests. Their originality often lies in promoting a different altogether model and practice of journalism.

Their mission statements are served through a variety of funding sources, ranging from subscriptions, member donations, institutional donors, or crowdfunding. Their financing models are related to the availability of their content for free or not, the ways in which they share it with other outlets, the relationship with the journalists working there (who are often freelancers), the remuneration of their regular staff, as well as the relationship with their audience.

These media generally face sustainability issues and adopt different practices around their business models to address these issues. Such practices are largely related to the terms of provision of their content, their publicity activities or other complementary activities or events. The basic contradiction lies in the fact that closed content generates income but limits exposure to a certain pool of members, while the availability of open content jeopardises continuation of subscription by removing the incentive to pay for access. Still, the wide use of the Internet and social media ensures that even closed content will be propagated to wider circles of readers and often to the general public through channels of communication often linked to systemic predatory and reproduction-hungry media sites. Indeed, most alternative outlets have realised the contradiction and the paradoxes of the mechanisms of content access and diffusion and have built practices around this while making their content largely available.

It remains an open question whether a model of digital independent journalism in Greece can be sustained in the long term, taking into account the overall limited presence of alternative media in this landscape. For some analysts, most of the Greek alternative digital media are non-sustainable in the long term. The issue of collaboration can be a way forward: Omnia TV, for instance, collaborates with the Press Project for exposure to a wider audience or for cross fertilisation of information on a topic and this practice is followed by other outlets.

“One problem of journalism in Greece is that the environment is very competitive. There are not as many collaborations as there should be. We try to break this. For example, we function as last resort, in the sense that we can host journalistic pieces that cannot find an outlet.” (IS)

“We need to promote a culture that the more alternative outlets exist the better -all need to be supported. This should not be seen as a zero-sum game, but as a win-win situation for all alternative media.” (PP)

While a change of the established state of journalism in Greece is something more far reaching, these alternative outlets do make a difference at least in segments of readership. And optimism is not lacking: “I am sure that media outlets funded by the public will be in existence. There is a need for this, as there are whole areas of activity that have not been covered by reportage. I also believe that it is wrong to say that the Greek public simply is not interested, does not understand or does not pay for journalism. I would say: the Greek public is not interested does not understand and does not pay because there have hitherto not been the right people to approach this public.” (RU)

While studying exclusively the Greek context, the chapter can inform broader debates about objectivity and pluralism in digital journalism. It is clear that the search for sustainable business models will continue. It is our view that those building on trust and cultivating a new audience culture will benefit for a more fertile Internet landscape that is less dominated by the mainstream reproduction of news, aggregators and social media. We have previously suggested that such structural changes, though not immediate or obvious, should not be disregarded as a possibility (Boucas, 2020). They will, however, necessitate agency on the part of the audience, who can make conscious and informed choices towards content that is more objective, less commercial and ad-driven and respecting user privacy.

Appendix

List of alternative digital outlets and interviewee initials

The Press Project (thepressproject.gr)	PP
Inside Story (insidestory.gr)	IS
Athens Live (athenslive.gr)	AL
Omnia TV (omniatv.gr)	OT
Reporters United	RU
Macropolis (macropolis.gr)	MP

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