

“Grassroots media practices in Greece: a sociological approach”

Abstract

The paper probes into grassroots media projects within a broad theoretical framework that addresses them along the interplay between ‘civil society’ and ‘public sphere’ as well as across their ‘lived experience’. By evaluating these projects in a resonant context the study prioritizes the ‘agents’ (citizens, social groups) who are engaged in their practice.

From this perspective, the paper explores grassroots media projects that are implemented ‘on the margins’ of the conventional public domain in Greece, drawing both on their contribution to, and intervention in, public and political sphere. Particularly, the paper points out the challenges and the limits of such initiatives in their own terms; while such projects constitute a realm for the expression of diverse collectives, social groups and their discourses, and their intervention in civic life, at the same time they are entrapped in traditional fractional politics that deter their expansion and politicization.

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Theoretical considerations

The paper addresses its research interest on grassroots media projects in Greece within a broader theoretical context. This theoretical 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, 1998). Within this framework, P. Dahlgren (1995) points out the expression/representation of diverse special interests and alternative/oppositional ‘discourses’ within public sphere² via their own

¹ See Cohen and Arato (1992) for an overall discussion on the interplay of public sphere-civil society.

² By drawing a model of democratic media system “broadly representative of the society it serves” from ‘above’, J. Curran (2000) takes also into consideration the collective, self-organized tradition of civil society in terms of pluralistic constitution of public sphere.

communication practices as a way of expressing their citizenship, maintaining in this way pluralism in the public sphere (constituting an “advocacy” to the “common” domain). Dahlgren’s approach which elaborates on the practices (*civic media*) of strong, institutionalized forms of civil society (social movements) provides also the ground – 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 addition, diverse decentralised aspects of the communication process have been highlighted in terms of different models of non-mainstream media (radical, participatory, alternative, community media). The study of these projects has been outlined in theoretical terms by their ‘emancipatory potential’ – as a locus of oppositional power to the agency of domination, “radical media” (Downing, 1984/2001), and as conveyors of the democratization of communication, “participatory media” (Servaes, 1999). Moreover, in empirical terms, the research on these projects has evaluated issues related to the characteristics of their production and organization process – non-hierarchical, non-professional, “alternative media”³ (Atton, 2002); as well as to the ‘community’ that these projects serve and the way they do it, “community media” (Lewis, 1984; Jankowski, et. al., 1992). However, there is little concern for the implications of the practice of these media for the people who are engaged in them. Rephrasing C. Atton (2002: 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’. In this context, C. 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”. From this point of view, Rodriguez approaches diverse, heterogeneous alternative media practices in terms of the way their agents, citizen groups and grassroots organizations, engage in/with them, registering their ‘difference’.

Both of the approaches sketched above in macro (Dahlgren, 1995) as well as in micro level (Rodriguez, 2001) draw on the lines of ‘radical democracy’ perspective (Mouffe, 1992, McClure, 1992) 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

³ From another perspective, by prioritizing “mediation” process rather than the media, N. Couldry (2001) 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 (2001) and Atton’s (2002) approaches widen the spectrum of alternative media as practices of empowerment in reflexive terms as well.

agency. From this perspective, grassroots media practices constitute potential conveyors of the expression and enactment of citizenship. The negotiation of grassroots⁴ media projects by these theoretical approaches is reflected in this paper in relation to their contribution to, and intervention in, the public and political sphere. Through this prism, the study addresses the challenges and limits of grassroots media practices in Greece.

Research subject

Within this theoretical framework the interest of research shifts from the institutional setting of grassroots media practices, to the agents themselves, the collectives, social groups who run these projects.⁵ From this perspective, the study aims to contribute to the identification of what is going on through the projects, and evaluate their practice in their own terms. Moreover, within such a dynamic and non-essentialist theoretical context the study points out the implications of the practice of these projects for civic life in terms of social actors' 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 – grassroots media come to be better understood in actual terms. Regarding the empirical field, such an approach on grassroots media projects, suggests that people's motivations/ideas/views/experiences concerning the experiments as well as their engagement in the practice of them, are meaningful properties⁶ in order to value the role of these projects. Hence, it is people's accounts of their experience with, and within, these initiatives and the meanings they describe when relate the projects that generate knowledge and explanations here about grassroots media practices.

Context

Not only is the study of grassroots media practices in Greece new in itself, but it also addresses the research interest in a new theoretical context, beyond the general discussion concerning political culture and its hegemonic nature within which most of the communication studies have been articulated in Greek bibliography. So far, the

⁴ Though the definition of the very term of such practices is not of primary concern here the study employs the term 'grassroots practices' in the sense that Traber (1985) has sketched it: "[t]hey are produced by the same people whose concerns they represent, from a position of engagement and direct participation" (Atton, 2002: 16).

⁵ In addition, 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, 2003; Downing, 2003). Moreover, N. Jankowski (2002: 369), highlighting various areas of research on community media, evaluates the aspect of 'users' in terms of the "engaged audience".

⁶ See Mason, 1996: 109; Kvale, 1996: 190; Miller and Glassner, 1997: 109; Silverman, 2001: 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.

public and political sphere in Greek bibliography have been evaluated in terms of realms and practices that are dominant, and as such, representative enough for an evaluation of the overall Greek political culture.⁷ Correspondingly, it is the universes of political discourse and action that apply to the dominant public and political sphere that have been mainly researched. On the other hand, forms of political discourse and action, their practices, and the social domains they are enacted into, which take place ‘on the margins’ of the public and political sphere, have not been addressed by research literature but indirectly, in terms of their exclusion.

The focus of this paper introduces a neglected area in the Greek research field, that of diverse grassroots media practices. Moreover, the study does not begin from a common conception of what is ‘wrong’ in the projects (fragmented, ‘on the margins’), but has as an aim to contribute to the identification of what is going on through the projects, and evaluate their practice within the specific context of their implementation.

Mediascape

What makes the study of such practices decisive in the particular context (Greece) is the absence of a strong civil society in institutional terms and the heavily centralized character of Greek mediascape.

The return of Greece to constitutional rule in 1974 (after the fall of dictatorship 1967-1974) has been characterized by the distinct osmosis between political parties and the state, and the prevalence of clientelistic, statist and populist practices which had further implications on the social structures. The political parties became the intermediaries between state and society, the main mechanism of social integration and organization, which resulted in the guardianship of every social domain by the party system and the absence of well-organized and cohesive pressure groups (Mouzelis, 1986). In addition, the idiosyncratic relationship between the press and the major political parties (Tsagarousianou, 1993: 222) as well as the direct control of radio and television broadcasting by the state (Papathanassopoulos, 1990: 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 to the socialist government’s control over broadcasting media; moreover, this kind of “direct action” was also in accordance with the liberal policy towards broadcasting (“Television without borders”) of European Community, of which Greece was a member (Papathanassopoulos, 1990: 392). In a climate of partisan confrontation, both before and after the elections of 1989 an arbitrary taking

⁷ For an analysis of Greek political culture in English literature see Diamandouros (1983), and Tsagarousianou (1993).

of the frequencies took place by private interests that the government of the day favoured. There occurred an entry of publishers into the broadcasting arena, taking advantage of the partisan confrontation and the lack of any anti-trust legislation, by establishing private FM stations along with participating, and cooperating in private television ones, which became extremely competitive to their state and municipal counterparts (Tsagarousianou, 1993: 216-217). Although this process facilitated in the long-term the ‘weaning’ of mass media from political parties and the state, the non-organized and non-coherent character of this transformation had as a result the colonization of communication space by mass media. Both fields of press and broadcasting consist of a large number of titles and stations (public radio and television broadcasting have experienced a dramatically fast decline instead correspondingly, which would not literally survive in such a small market in a ‘healthy’ media system. These trends have taken place in local/regional level as well, revealing the “numerous but weak” sectors of local/regional press and broadcasting.⁸ To finish with the sketching of Greek communicative space, the use of Internet technology is limited though this is relative since it has been recently developed in Greece (Tsaliki, 2003).

Exploring ‘on the margins’...

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 have a long tradition, though neglected by the research field. They were boosted at the end of dictatorship and onwards; numerous alternative papers (anarchist, leftist, ecologist, and cultural ones), as well as, radio political pirates (that challenged the state control over broadcasting matters at first place) took place that period. Moreover, taking into account the low, though increasing, penetration rate of Internet in Greece, significant is the use of it by various social organizations and groups; some of the Web sites are advanced and few of them have also a relatively high number of visitors.

By exploring recent grassroots projects across different media this study probes into the social meaning of the implementation of these practices that diverse social actors run – how the people that participate in these projects address their experience in relation to the public and political sphere in Greece. From this perspective, the analysis takes place along two frameworks: a more general one, what I call the ‘spatial aspect’, which concerns the way participants situate these projects in the public domain; and the more specific one, what I call the aspect of ‘agency’, which concerns the way participants evaluate their own engagement in them.

⁸ See Demertzis (1996) for local press; Barboutis (1994) for local radio, and Panagiotopoulou (1999) for local television.

Data⁹ from four cases-studies¹⁰ are employed here: the periodical “Smoke Signs”,¹¹ the pirate radio station “98.00 FM”,¹² the newspaper “Green Politics”,¹³ and the Internet site “Indymedia Athens”.¹⁴

- *Spatial aspect*

One important aspect of these projects run by diverse social actors and groups is, to a great extent, the building of their own information systems,

I believe that the handling of information is vital for people’s engagement in things in common. In our times information is power and whoever has and handles it has the situation well under control ... if you want to intervene, in the long run, in the things you are interested in you must be part of this process, to provide your own information sources; otherwise you cannot make any sense for the small or the big issues that matter for you (interview with C. D., February, 2003);

along the lines of the demystification of mass media,

The dynamics of our attempt is the production and distribution of information that contest the distorted one of the mass media, which does not touch the actual everyday life (...) It is interested in what is happening there, such working accidents, sacks, overexploitation of immigrants, which the dominant media do not touch since they do not bring money ... it is a way to propagandize alternative information, an alternative culture in general which opposes to the commercial one (interview with A. M., March 2003).

At the same time, these media practices provide an arena for the articulation of various discourses that are excluded from, or misrepresented in, the official public sphere in Greece. These attempts have been expressed either in a form of a specialized project,

⁹ Conventions used in the transcription of interview quotes:

pause in interview	...
omission	(...)
interviewer’s comments only omitted	[...]

¹⁰ Part of the nine case studies examined in my original PhD Thesis on ‘Grassroots Media Practices in Greece’.

¹¹ A bimonthly periodical edition, first published in 2000, initiated by the “group of anti-information for Latin America”.

¹² A pirate radio station, first broadcasted in 2002 by university students as “the libertarian radio of the city”.

¹³ An ecologist bimonthly newspaper, first published in 1997, initiated by the ‘Green political movement’.

¹⁴ 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”.

It is a committed paper that fills the gap of critical ecology and political ecology, which is absent from mainstream media (...) It is a specialized paper that covers social issues and events from the perspective of citizens, promoting a political discourse among them, highlighting new aspects of the reality (interview with A. G., March 2003);

or, in a more inclusive and all-encompassing scheme, aiming at representing different 'actors' in the margins in Greece, highlighting various aspects of the alternative milieu¹⁵ in general,

Although our project has its origins in the anti-globalization movement, being interested in social movements and their activity around the world, it covers a variety of issues in our territory, giving place to aspects that are neglected from public discourse and which are included in what has been generally called alternative milieu (...) 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).

Foremost, 'ordinary' people run these projects, some of which had never participated in something similar before,

The most interesting aspect of the experiment 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 in common and had not a way to do it before has the chance now; either as a user providing information or as a participant in the process of running it as well (interview with I. Z., February 2003).

Moreover, the participation in the production and distribution of such a project is addressed generally as an important dimension of people's engagement in public affairs.

It is a means to express and make known my concerns and views ... publicly; there is also a feedback that opens up 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, facilitating the expression of my interests in equal terms, and intervening in things in

¹⁵ 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 describe their area of activity.

common in a different way that matters (interview with A. X., March 2003).

Hence, in the context of grassroots media projects diverse forms of interests, discourses and actors previously excluded from the conventional public sphere find a place. But to what extent do these practices constitute a public domain for these discourses and actors? 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 project has not run widely yet, we are in the process of calling to other collectives and related projects of the milieu, 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 [...] There is always a conspiracy theory about everything that comes up in the milieu, 'who does it; how do they do it?'; but when the time to sit in the same table comes they can never agree on how to set it off (interview with A. C., March 2003).

The 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'. Thus, while such practices try to be more open and wide they meet their limits and they cancel their potential,

The problem with all these projects, old and new ones, is that while 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 (interview with I. T., March 2003).

...

An interesting parameter of the implementation of grassroots media projects, which bridges also the preceding discussion on the 'spatial aspect' of these projects and the one that follows on their 'agency', is the evaluation of these practices by participants in terms of creating 'social climate',

I think such projects are very important whatever the groups that implement them are and whatever the medium they use is. Though some of them stop running 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 (...) It questions also the one-sided view on things, challenging new

ones to come by setting a precedent (interview with C. D., February 2003).

In this context, participants of all these projects point out the role of these practices in the direction of constituting a further call,

At least we, people who have been long engaged in such projects, believe that these practices make a chink in the 'wall', for more people to join in, declaring their position, and struggling for it [...] It is not an easy task, but the fact that you highlight the prospect is something. Young people are enthusiastic and positive to these practices; it is encouraging. Old experiments have showed us the way along their own struggles and the problems they encountered; we keep these in mind and go further (interview with E. M., March 2003).

Thus, grassroots media projects set a historical precedent, encompassing the historization of marginalized social domains, their actors, activities and discourses, as well as, challenging new relative practices to come up.

- *'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,

Everyone expresses himself spontaneously; I am engaged creatively in the process, experimenting with the technical part as well as within the program itself [...] The common denominator is that all of us learn at the same time different aspects of the process itself, and through this experience we learn how to ask from ourselves to do more both within and beyond the project itself (interview with A. C., March 2003);

and generally, where people contribute and exchange what they know,

People who had the technical knowledge, people who are interested in making translations, people who participate in various activist groups, have come together; through our co-operation we have learnt much more things [...] The abilities and information used on several occasions and just for personal interest, are now brought together, shared, and we try to produce something beyond us (interview with M. M., February 2003).

Besides, these practices constitute places for social actors and groups to re-affirm their 'differences' along civic life, generally,

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

and specifically,

It is not simply an evaluation on social topics from an ecological perspective, but at the same time you reveal the political implications of them; new issues are coming up, promoting new ways to conceive them ... the need to articulate a new ecological-political discourse, where you have to be very precise without exaggerating wildly; this is the problem of ecologists, making wild exaggerations, and this is what we try to avoid here (interview with A. G., March 2003).

Moreover they contest established social relations,

What is challenging in the project is the logic of direct participation and action, and the horizontal way of interfering into things ... without having someone 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 releases a lot of energy (interview with I. Z., February 2003),

and roles, favouring the experience instead of the professional standards,

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 receivers, to make the program together ... in this way you can make known activities that find no place in the conventional mass media. Moreover, the medium gives us the chance to do it live in some cases, when people are out there, taking part in the march, and they can report things from the real place of action ... we experiment with these things (...) The standards are not the same with a professional station since in our case everyone participates voluntarily. However, it is a radio for everyone and this is the most important (interview with A. C., April 2003).

However, the fact that these practices are implemented ‘on the margins’ of the public and political sphere in Greece itself evaluates various controversial aspects regarding the role of these projects. The way participants evaluate these practices and their engagement in them situates these projects within the “nooks and crannies” of civic life in Greece, echoing the established negotiations of traditional ‘politics’, indirectly,

The fierce competition and fights between different groups makes any attempt of opening a forum of ecological political discourse problematic enough, even for local issues where the chances to make sense raising your voice through such a means are much greater than in the city ... there is so much dispute; the newspaper must keep away from it (interview with I. G., March 2003);

and/or directly,

I see the whole project as an anti-regime pole. This must be its overall orientation; our decisions and participation have to be compatible with this, otherwise it will become a conventional one (...) It is a matter of expressing our political position, we must do it in a certain way, promoting these special concerns which are at the same time social ones (interview with A. M., March 2003).

As a matter of fact, the co-existence of diverse actors and discourses cannot but face the ‘politics’ of the milieu,

There are many people from different backgrounds in our project, and as such there is not a political position that is promoted through the site; there is not a solid political group that will use the site in order to propagandize their positions. It is a source of distributing alternative information across different fields. On the other hand, when a project is so open it can be easily undermined, by attributing to it different political labels. The milieu is so rigid and prejudiced; it can not accept that an initiative is not politically subjected to somewhere (interview with A. P., February 2003).

In this context, a prominent challenge is the of overcoming the barriers of ‘politics’ in the practice of such a project,

It is a challenge for us to issue this periodical in terms of co-operating without imposing in front the views of the political stand we hold, thus forming a place together (...) It is not a political duty, an ordered service (...) It creates a space that is not exclusive, which does not set any limits to you (interview with E. M., March 2003).

Conclusions

By drawing on diverse, heterogeneous media experiments that are originated from 'below' the paper has highlighted both their challenges and limits for public and political sphere. On the one hand, diverse grassroots media practices promote the inclusion of marginalized social domains, heterogeneous discourses, and diverse social actors in public and political life, acquiring a legitimate place and space in it. On the other hand, the way these practices, their experience and grievances are communicated is, more or less, exclusive. It is not actually the fragmented nature of these projects itself that sets their limits, but the exclusive way they address their claims "to each other, and to 'each' other". Moreover, in actual terms, though these practices provide a significant source of struggles in the realm of the symbolic, envisaging new forms of political action that are produced in the quotidian field, their dependence upon established political, ideological predispositions is yet a barrier for the realization of the challenges these projects constitute in political terms. In addition, the vulnerability of these projects to the 'politics' that mediate their practice, either in a specific or in a general context, is reflected to an extent variably. Accordingly, the projects that have not exclusively 'local' origins, 'Indymedia Athens' and 'Smoke Signs' – 'Indynedia Athens' is part of the well-known network of Indymedia Media Centers (IMCs) and, 'Smoke Signs' has a strong interest in Latin America – are less self-limited than the other cases in the way they communicate their practice both 'to the public sphere' and in actual terms. In any case, the possibilities grassroots media projects encompass for the politicization of social domains, actors, their discourses and activities on the margins of the public and political sphere in Greece as well as of their very practice itself, have to be grasped in the expense of their hetero-determination by 'politics'.

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