Mediterranean Media Systems in the Age of Unrest

Journalism Under Attack?

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Chapter 1

Journalism in between

The digital divide between South and North in Europe

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1 Journalism in between

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Introduction

In 1995, Bill Gates, the world-famous technology mogul, claimed that technological developments in the information society can reduce inequalities between rich and poor states (Gates, 1995). Thirty years later, this claim remains contentious as, on the one hand, the internet and its associated technological trends are advertised as the means to make the world more accessible to all citizens equally, but, on the other hand, even in the third decade of the 21st century, not all citizens have equal access to information technologies and both the level and type of access in different states significantly affects social and economic status.

Thirty years ago, this debate was at the center of the discussion regarding the information society. Norris (2000) argued that the "differential diffusion of new technologies in different regions may mean that the world is experiencing a new 'North-South' divide" (p.1). What comes as a surprise is the fact that this situation seems largely unaltered today, although the disputed argument revolves more around skills, usage (Van Deursen and Van Dijk, 2015), and the type of access citizens in different regions/states enjoy, and less around the level of access that is offered to them.

In Europe, social and political differences between North and South have been evident throughout the continent's long and tumultuous history. Quinones (2015) argued that the "division of European society and culture along the North/South axis is the most decisive and far-reaching event of the second half of the second millennium" (p.vii). A number of factors have contributed to this outcome, from geography and religion to politics and economics, and from historical evolutions to the ways industrial societies were organized around Europe.

The factors that led to this outcome are not the principle focus of this book. What is of interest here is that this division remains evident in media industries around Europe today. To assess the current situation, this chapter needs to go back several years and consider the multidimensional digital divide in Europe and its effects on media markets, as this divide has been one of Europe's greater challenges in recent years and continues to prompt wider

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public debate around issues of development and progress. It then moves on to assess the role of journalism in the "underprivileged" areas of the European South. Overall, this chapter focuses on the ways in which these issues are depicted in the media ecosystems of the European South and their significant effects on the industry, which in turn have contributed to the formation of different professional cultures to those of the European North.

Divided we stand? Facets of the digital divide between South and North Europe

According to the OECD (2001), the term "digital divide" refers to "the gap between individuals, households, businesses and geographic areas at different socio-economic levels with regard to their opportunities to access information and communication technologies and to their use for a wide variety of activities" (pp. 8–9). Regarding the internet specifically, this divide seems to have gone through three different stages: the first focused on connectivity, the second on developing skills and abilities needed to use ICT, and the third measured the visible results of the use of the internet in different regions (Scheerder et al., 2017; Hidalgoa et al., 2020).

Demoussis and Giannakopoulos (2006) suggest that this digital divide is multidimensional, runs across EU member states, regions and socio-demographic groups, and has the potential to exacerbate existing social and economic inequalities (p.235). Their study concludes that the geographical digital divide in Europe is a structural problem caused by factors that relate to cultural and attitudinal differences towards new technologies (p.244). Indeed, in the early 2000s, internet penetration rates in Greece (6 per 1,000 inhabitants), Portugal (9 per 1,000 inhabitants), Spain (13 per 1,000 inhabitants), and Italy (11.5 per 1,000 inhabitants) were the lowest in the EU (Tonchev, 2000; Vatikiotis, 2004).

Thereafter, a series of studies confirmed that this digital divide still exists and is far from closing. For example, Vicente and Lopez (2011) found in their empirical study that Dutch regions were in the top ten in information and communication technology (ICT), while Greece and Bulgaria occupied the bottom ten. Robinson et al. (2015) argue that this digital divide has resulted in the digital inequality of the population based on socio-demographic criteria (e.g., gender, race, ethnicity), which in turn brings serious negative effects to industries, i.e., digitally disadvantaged workers and/or entrepreneurs face severe challenges to full participation in the economy, which their more digitally advantaged peers do not have to cope with (p.574). Fondren (2021), in a more optimistic approach, acknowledged that this digital divide is slowly reducing, however, it is still evident that Northern European countries tend to present better infrastructure and digital skills than countries of the European South (p.140). For all these reasons, Martin et al. (2016) use the term "digital exclusion" to describe a situation of deprivation of digital resources among some societal groups. The EU itself identified these issues and admitted that, when considering broadband take-up progress by country, “wide disparities remain in the EU mainly along a North-South divide: the Netherlands, Luxembourg, Finland, the United Kingdom, Sweden and Germany registered the highest broadband penetration figures in 2014, while Bulgaria, Romania, Portugal and Greece have the lowest take-up rates in both rural and urban areas” (European Parliament, 2015, p.3). Several years later, in 2022, the situation in the EU remained largely unaltered as Portugal, Italy, Greece, and Bulgaria were positioned in the last six places of the same list (Statista, 2025).

The pandemic crisis of 2020 exacerbated what was already evident: the need to address this digital inequality among EU Member States. Official EU reports underlined the challenge and a series of initiatives aimed at addressing it. For example, the European Parliament issued a resolution on December 13, 2022 on the digital divide, acknowledging that it can generate socio-economic differences between people and between countries because it requires investment and infrastructure that are very costly for less-developed regions and rural areas (Official Journal of the EU, 2023). The European South is among those areas considered less privileged in the EU. Figure 1.1 depicts the overall situation before the onset of the pandemic crisis in 2020.

As technology progresses and new forms of digital ICTs are integrated into everyday life, the digital divide becomes more evident between North and South Europe. Artificial Intelligence (AI) offers a typical example to support this argument: while AI ICTs are progressing and the EU allocates increasing funds for its integration in all European regions, countries of the European South seem to be left far behind their North European colleagues (Caradaica, 2020b).

Digital divide, media ecosystems, and professional journalistic culture in the European South

In communication sciences, the term “digital divide” primarily focuses “on access to and usage of digital media” (Van Deursen and Van Dijk, 2015,

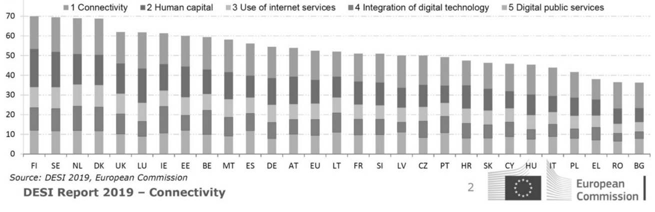

Figure 1.1 Digital Economy and Society Index 2019.

Source: Caradaica, 2020a, p.101.

p.787). This digital divide between South and North Europe is historically evident in media ecosystems as, throughout the 20th century, the evolution of national media industries in Europe has followed very different paths. The emergence of television and, later, digital television around Europe offers a typical example. In 1935, *Fernsehsender Paul Nipkow* in Berlin became the first channel to systematically air television programs. The global community became familiar with the new medium when, in August 1936, more than 150,000 viewers around the world watched the Olympic Games that took place in Berlin. At the same time, in November 1936, the BBC officially commenced broadcasting regular programs (Maniou and Papadopoulou, 2019). Thereafter, each of the remaining European countries started working towards introducing their own public service television channels, although at a different pace (e.g., the BBC in the UK was introduced in the early 1930s whereas EIRT did so in Greece in 1966). It soon became clear that the development of television in Europe followed each country's history and was closely related to the structures of the society within which it operated (Maniou, 2017). With a few exceptions (e.g., the case of Luxembourg, where a commercial system was developed), the typical television landscape in Europe was mainly characterized by public service broadcasting (PSB) in the West and state broadcasting in the East (Michalis, 2013). Among the main criteria for this segregation around Europe was the extent to which direct or indirect governmental control was exercised on a country's national audiovisual organization (see analysis in Chapter 2).

On the eve of the 21st century, a major hindrance to the swift movement towards digital television (DTV) across Europe was discrepancies between the jurisdiction of the European Commission and that of national regulatory authorities, which led to a lack of uniform standards across DTV platforms for transmission and reception equipment. As a result, the national dates for the analog switch-off across Europe varied considerably depending, among other factors, on penetration of digital services, technological infrastructure, and public awareness of the overall process (Iosifidis, 2011, p.8). Most of these problems were detected in the countries of the European South (Greece, Cyprus) as well as in East Europe (see also analysis in Maniou and Seitanidis, 2018).

The emergence of online media around Europe after 1990 offers an additional example of the digital gap between South and North. Initially, print media entities started experimenting with their online presence before digital media appeared. In that first stage, the presence of online newspaper editions expanded faster in the northwestern and Nordic regions. For example, there was a remarkable increase in Germany (from 259 newspaper websites in 2002 to 661 in 2010), in the UK (from 10 in 2000 to 1,410 in 2010), in Finland (from 49 in 2002 to 170 in 2010), and in Sweden (from 77 in 2002 to 229 in 2010) (Papathanassopoulos et al., 2023, p.41).

Gradually, it became evident that media ecosystems in the European South possessed neither the infrastructure nor the economic efficiency to reach the high levels of digitalization set by their North European counterparts. Around 2010, whereas in the UK media entities like *The Guardian* were introducing new journalistic practices for producing digital content, in the European South, small and medium-sized news entities were still experimenting with their online presence, through which they were striving to increase advertising revenue. For example, by the mid-2000s, around 80 percent of legacy media in Greece had developed websites, but at the time these were merely replicas of their print editions, with minor additional functionality (Spyridou and Veglis, 2006). The structural transformation of the websites of *Ta Nea*, *Eleftherotypia*, and *To Ethnos* (three of the most influential national newspapers in Greece) around 2006 marked a turning point for the country's digital media ecosystem. These websites started providing rich, web-only content, a portal-like interface, regular content updates, and advanced search functions distinguishing them from their print versions. However, they still operated as mere supplements to their print counterparts, with limited interaction with users (Angelou and Veglis, 2024). A similar situation was observed in Cyprus, where the first legacy medium to introduce a relatively autonomous digital presence was the newspaper *Simerini*. Its online portal *Sigmalive* was fully operational around 2010, but it did not offer features like those presented by *The Guardian* or other digital media in Northern Europe.

These developments also had a series of effects on the professional culture in the media market. While online portals of legacy media in Northern Europe were already investing in specialized personnel, in Greece and Cyprus it was competition rather than professional culture that drove the newly introduced digital media, resulting in homogeneity in content and reluctance to invest in better products (Angelou and Veglis, 2024; Nicoli et al., 2024). In practice, for several years after establishing their online presence, legacy newspapers in both countries relied on journalists working for the print editions to provide content for the website while limited additions were made to the journalistic team of professionals specialized in online news. Gradually, a new professional culture was formed in which journalists were required to work both for the print and the web editions with significant effects on content quality: established professionals with long experience in print media were prioritizing print to web editions while younger professionals were expected to initially work for the web before moving to the print entity. Studies in the early 2010s in Greece reported that journalists themselves admitted that they were late to adapt to the changes that the internet requires, that fear of interacting with users led them to disable comments under website articles (Siapera et al., 2014), and that they remained focused on their traditional role of transmitting information through traditional procedures (Doudaki and Spyridou, 2014). In addition, the persistence of a well-established professional newsroom culture, in which editors-in-chief assess information, journalists write news stories, and graphic designers operate independently of editors and reporters further delayed the development of online journalism in the country and led to a backlog of workload with mediocre outcomes (Veglis, 2012; Angelou and Veglis, 2024, p.234).

Similar patterns of professional culture can be observed in Cyprus. Reliance on online media for obtaining news and information in the country rose from 40.5 percent in 2008 (Stylianou and Milioni, 2015) to just 42 percent in 2023 (Union of Cypriot Journalists, 2023), although online news consumption did indeed increase after the onset of the pandemic crisis in 2020. However, investing in online/digital expertise does not seem to have been the first priority of the Cypriot news media, although in 2023 the number of news websites significantly increased, including several key players in the digital ecosystem. The vast majority of journalists in Cyprus today face constant editorial pressure to meet competition standards and are expected to deliver their reports faster and for diverse platforms, to produce a higher number of stories and, in several cases, achieve high quotas, i.e., the number of stories each journalist needs to produce on a daily basis (Şahin, 2022, p.163). This type of professional culture imposed on Cypriot journalists in recent years seems to encourage them to use material from other types of media (i.e., news agencies and social media). In turn, online news stories have gradually gotten shorter and fail to provide any thorough editorial analysis. In combination with web analytics, these practices can have an impact on content selection and often lead to churnalism (Saridou et al., 2017; see also analysis in Şahin, 2022).

Malta, on the other hand, presents a quite differentiated example in comparison to other South European media markets as regards the rise and development of online and digital media. Historically, the Maltese media ecosystem has been characterized by high levels of political parallelism: the state, the political parties, and the Church have been strongly affiliated with traditional media since their early days of existence (Sammut, 2019) (see analysis in Chapter 2). In the early years of the 21st century, the government realized that ICTs and new media could help the country overcome its small size and insularity and implemented an aggressive communication strategy aimed at bridging the digital divide with other European countries (Borg et al., 2009). By 2007, most legacy media were running their own websites while purely web-based media, like *MaltaMedia* in 1999 and *Dive* in the early 2000s, had already been set up (Media Warehouse, 2008). However, its professional journalistic culture was not dissimilar to that implemented in Greece and Cyprus: initially, the websites of legacy media posted the same news story as in their print edition, indicating that the Maltese media system differed substantially from the liberal UK paradigm (Sammut, 2007). This practice continued until 2008, which was considered a "watershed year for online engagement in Malta" (Grech, 2012, p.148) for different reasons, including the take-up of Facebook and *The Times of Malta* news website starting real-time reporting and inviting user comments online (Debattista, 2014). The public's interest in online news consumption started to rise and today online news readership in Malta surpasses the EU average, with 65 percent of its citizens accessing online news compared to the average of 43 percent across the EU (Vella, 2022). Initially, this new era of online and new media in the country appeared to offer significant opportunities for individual players to engage in public affairs and to bypass editorial gatekeeping by re-configuring professional practices (Sammut, 2019). However, it soon became clear that these changes would not actually reform features of political parallelism. On the contrary, the formation of a "hybrid" media system did not come hand-in-hand with different professional practices rather it entailed different types of media operating under common professional vulnerabilities, the political orientations of several media owners and journalists being one of the most notable.

Conclusions

The multidimensional digital divide remains one of Europe's greater challenges and continues to prompt wider public debate around issues of development and progress especially in the European South. Media ecosystems of the region are acutely affected by this digital divide: while media entities of the North were rapidly marching to take advantage of the challenges of the digital era, their counterparts in the European South were striving to adapt to newly introduced journalistic practices with neither the means nor the infrastructure to compete. These developments resulted in the formation of an uneven European media ecosystem characterized by significant dissimilarities between North and South. Whereas the media conglomerates of the North entered the 21st century with a strong digital presence and renewed professional cultures, news entities in the European South were left far behind in attempting to adapt to new trends by implementing old practices.

By the early days of the 21st century, it was already clear in the Western world that journalism in digital newsrooms requires different journalistic skills and practices, emphasizing dissemination via social media, continuous news updates, and increased interactivity (Şahin, 2022, p.162). However, in Greece, Cyprus, and Malta, the early years of the digital media era found media professionals unprepared to meet new challenges. As a result, the newly introduced online and digital media appeared as mere replicas of traditional media. Furthermore, the already problematic professional culture, characterized by political and socio-economic dynamics historically observed in the Mediterranean media ecosystems (to be discussed in later chapters), continued to hinder the advancement of the media sectors in Greece, Cyprus, and Malta. Journalism in the European South on the eve of the new media age appeared trapped between technological advancements and historical vulnerabilities that left very narrow margins for progress and essential development. It was obvious at that point that the digital divide with Northern Europe was already wide and possibly already difficult to close.

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