Mediterranean Media Systems in the Age of Unrest

Journalism Under Attack?

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Chapter 3

Journalism and the economic crisis

Towards new models of labor in the European South

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Introduction

Structural changes in journalistic labor have been at the center of academic and industrial discussions in recent decades as implications of constantly changing technologies that affect media markets and the influence of the economic crisis after 2008. Nielsen (2016) argues that the crisis in journalism during the 21st century can be categorized into three distinct types: (a) a crisis of confidence between journalism and its public, (b) a professional crisis, and (c) an economic crisis that affects the profession itself (p.77; see also analysis in Gitlin, 2011). The Great Recession of 2008 deepened economic uncertainty arising from a period of unprecedented change with significant and wide-ranging consequences for the media industry in Europe, which entered an era of economic crisis after a long-term restructuring process (e.g., liberalization and privatization of the broadcasting sector, mergers and acquisitions among sub-sectors) (Papathanassopoulos, 2020). At the same time, the long-awaited digital era presented significant challenges for traditional media entities, mainly focusing on the search for alternative business models to fund journalism sustainably for the future (Franklin, 2014).

Countries in the broader Mediterranean region were severely affected by the Great Recession, which initially emerged in 2007 in the US and subsequently spread across Europe in 2008. Following a critical period of economic and banking turmoil, in 2009 strict economic measures were imposed on Greece, Ireland, Portugal, and Spain under the auspices of the relevant Memoranda of Understanding (MoU) signed between national governments and the Troika (International Monetary Fund/IMF, European Commission, and European Central Bank). Overall, while it was evident across Europe, the Great Recession mainly affected the European South.[1] It was not the first economic crisis these countries had faced in their long history, especially Greece, which had suffered a series of economic crises since the establishment of the independent Greek state and throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. However, the unique nature of this crisis was mainly based on the ways in which it affected the everyday lives of citizens in the European South.

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Cyprus is one of the most distinct examples where the crisis rapidly transformed from financial to banking: following the Eurogroup's proposal in March 2013, the country that had been considered a tax haven in 1980, attracting large sums of foreign capital mostly from Russian investors, experienced an unprecedented "haircut" on all bank deposits above €100,000, the recapitalization of the entire financial sector with bank closures, the implementation of an anti-money-laundering framework, fiscal consolidation to decrease the budget deficit, structural reforms to restore macro-economic imbalances, and a privatization program targeting semi-governmental organizations (Charalambous, 2014, p.13; Maniou and Photiou, 2017, p.44).

Malta was less affected by the Great Recession as the downturn was less severe than that experienced by its South European neighbors. Its economic growth was at the time of and throughout the crisis one of the strongest in the EU, mainly due to pronounced structural changes implemented in the economy, although the country registered a reduction in GDP in 2009 (a year after the adoption of the euro) (Grech, 2015; Harwood, 2020, p.7). As such, Malta managed to weather the crisis relatively well, according to the IMF (2011).

Several years later, while at least two of the three countries under study (Greece and Cyprus, to a lesser degree) were still striving to adjust to the new economic environment, the onset of the global pandemic crisis dealt a huge blow to national economies and, subsequently, national media markets. This continuous economic crisis is currently reflected in changing patterns in labor conditions, which advance the role of the individual media worker, along with cumulative journalists' risks and stresses, and increased job insecurity (Vatikiotis et al., 2024). This chapter presents these models of journalistic labor in Greece, Cyprus, and Malta, drawing evidence not only from the post-economic crisis media ecosystems but also from the severe changes these ecosystems experienced after the onset of the pandemic crisis in 2020, which exacerbated the structural weaknesses of journalism in the three countries, including the lack of a strong professional culture. The issues of the changing nature of creative work and employment are central to the exploration of affective labor in media ecosystems of crisis-ridden countries in the European South.

The changing nature of journalistic labor

Among the various challenges faced by journalists and news media in an increasingly digitalized age, assessing the context of journalistic labor had become a key aspect several years before the dawn of the 21st century. Even before the introduction of social media platforms, Ursell (2001) argued that new media technologies were associated with organizational changes in media entities and the implementation of new features in journalism practice, such as multi-skilling and multi-media news production, which raised serious

concerns regarding the compromise of journalistic performance. From then onwards, a series of studies delved into the context of journalistic labor in the new media age.

Deuze (2007) analyzed the flexibility of journalistic labor and the shift towards the model of freelancing. Örnebring (2010) assessed specific features for the analysis of journalism as labor, evaluating the separation of the conception and execution of labor, the use of technology to increase productivity, the increased differentiation of the labor process, and the deskilling of labor (see also analysis in Vatikiotis et al., 2024, p.2321). In this line of argumentation, Paulussen (2012) pointed out the "growth of atypical, non-standard employment within the profession of journalism", the "growing demand for functional flexibility and multiskilling", and "an ever-increasing workload" (p.195). Spyridou and Veglis (2016) agree that relevant changes have led to a "super journalist paradigm", where journalists are expected to possess multiple kinds of expertise and knowledge, remain persistent and perform well within the news labor market while experiencing at the same time "non-standard employment, reduced economic rewards and functional flexibility" (p.111; see also analysis in Vatikiotis et al., 2024, p.2322). At the same time, however, there were serious concerns that these changes had led to deskilling in other areas of more traditional journalistic practice in terms of fact checking and reporting based on multiple, independent sources (Rottwilm, 2014, p.13). Witschge and Nygren (2009) argue that these challenges to journalists' roles encourage a process of "de-professionalization" and, according to Matthews and Onyemaobi (2020), "precarious professionalism".

Historically, journalism has been widely considered a precarious profession. Rick and Hanitzsch (2023) list several dimensions of precarity in journalism, including, among others, limited access to social benefits and impossibility of long-term life planning. Örnebring (2018) shows that journalists accept precarity as part of their practice, as it seems to be in line with professional norms, like the effects of entrepreneurship and meritocracy. This sense of precarity seems to have been reinforced by the economic crisis of 2008 (Waisbord, 2016, 2019), which brought a series of changes to journalistic labor in the Western world and, in several cases, was used as a pretext by media entrepreneurs for establishing new labor norms in the industry. Media entities were forced to suffer certain effects in terms of management and organization, which entailed job losses and pay cuts. Experienced journalists were replaced by younger professionals, who were considered a cheaper solution, while journalistic manpower in the newsrooms was drastically reduced. In turn, these changes gradually resulted in content quality, losses in readership/viewership, advertising revenue and overall profits, endangering media survival and future prospects (Maniou and Seitanidis, 2018).

Simultaneously, these changing working conditions in media entities generated psychological issues for many media professionals who report feelings of dissatisfaction, insecurity, and anxiety (Papadopoulou and Maniou, 2020).

The coverage of specific news stories regarding the effects of the economic turmoil caused psychological trauma to many journalists, with symptoms similar to PTSD when covering war and terrorist incidents (Feinstein et al., 2018; Papadopoulou et al., 2022).

Several studies show that changes in journalistic labor also have significant effects on professional identity and journalism practice. Gollmitzer (2014) studied the working conditions of journalists in non-standard employment situations and shows that journalists internalize job insecurity and seem pessimistic in terms of improving their working status. Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011) point towards the notion of affective labor, which Siapera (2019) describes as encompassing emotional, material, and immaterial attributes while employing several skills and involving three significant elements, namely "the investment of one's 'authentic' self, the investment of personal time, and the investment of care" (Siapera and Iliadi, 2015, p.86). Jukes and Fowler-Watt (2020) argue that these challenges have destabilized a culture of normative practice and traditional journalistic values.

In this context, the economic crisis of 2008 is understood as a critical moment that crystallized threats to journalistic labor and allowed the implementation of dangerous changes in newsroom norms and practices. Post-crisis journalistic labor models may have set the foundations for a new era in journalism where precarity is not only understood as part of journalism practice but also as a new normality where the sense of professional security is acutely affected.

Economic crisis and journalistic labor in the European South: challenges and opportunities

As already discussed, the economic crisis of 2008 had unprecedented effects on national media industries of the European South, such as pay cuts and job losses, and falls in consumption and advertising revenues. From East to West, media entities in the European South were severely affected and the industry was desperately seeking ways out of the turmoil. In Spain, 3,500 dismissals of journalists were recorded in the first year of the crisis alone (2009) in large multinational corporations, national publishing groups, and the local press and television (de Mateo et al., 2010). In Italy, one of the Eurozone's largest economies, the media industry—especially the print press—was hit hard, fueling concerns over whether professional journalism could be financially sustainable in the long term (Mazzoleni et al., 2011; Rizzuto, 2023). In Greece, the media industry suffered huge advertising losses, drastic cuts of state advertising, and cuts in public service broadcasting budgets (Papathanassopoulos, 2020), media entity closures, and hundreds of job losses (Siapera et al., 2015), resulting in what Karadimitrou (2020) characterized as "defective journalism," suffering the loss of fundamental principles inherent to journalism practice (p.168). Similarly in Cyprus, drastic drops in advertising revenue

led to pay cuts and job losses (Maniou and Seitanides, 2018; Trimithiotis et al., 2024) with significant effects on the quality of news content. Nielsen (2016) argues that this economic crisis in the Mediterranean polarized/pluralist media system was deeply rooted in the combination of a "historically weak newspaper industry that never grew to the scale and scope of its counterparts in Northern Europe" (p.85).

All this time, journalists in the European South were in search of alternative labor models in order to survive, while hundreds of them had already started looking for a job outside the media industry. The only exception was the Maltese media ecosystem, in which the working conditions of journalists after 2008 were more affected by the decay of the media business model prompted by digital disruption than the actual effects of the economic crisis, which—as already discussed—presented only minor consequences in the Maltese economy in comparison to other crises at the time (e.g., the migration crisis) (Nenadic, 2016). However, economic pressure from advertisers was constantly rising, although the Maltese media system is traditionally characterized by a lack of monitoring and official data on market shares of media companies and newspaper circulation, and in particular a lack of insights on online media (Vassallo, 2023). Following national economic developments, one by one the media systems of the European South gradually adjusted to the new economic environment and its negative impact on the industry, mainly as the remaining media entities centered their efforts on the rapidly rising digital platforms; unfortunately, the digital response of traditional media lagged behind that of their North European counterparts.

The onset of the pandemic crisis in 2020 dealt a huge blow to all media markets and the industry was once again faced with similar challenges: huge drops in advertising revenue, pay cuts, and job losses added to new labor models (e.g., remote working, freelance employment status) (Vatikiotis et al., 2024). The already fragile media industries were once again hit hard while individual journalists were again faced with significant challenges that threatened not only their economic survival but also their professional status and norms of reporting. Within the first months of the pandemic, it became evident that this crisis was also affecting the already weakened professional culture, also evident through media subsidies, public funding channeled to the media (Nieminen et al., 2015, p.164) to support news organizations in times of crisis. Notably, media subsidies in post-war Europe have traditionally been both a means to support media entities and control the flow of information to the public.

Greece throughout the 20th and 21st centuries offers a typical example. The most recent case occurred when the Greek government of 2020 saw a unique opportunity in the pandemic crisis to silence critical voices through the "Petsas list" project: during the first lockdown that followed the COVID-19 outbreak, the government allocated €20 million to media outlets to promote health information campaigns and presented the project as an attempt to

offer an economic boost to the fragile media sector. Following public distress regarding the criteria based on which certain media entities were funded, the government initially responded by publishing the names of outlets funded, but without the exact amounts that had been allocated. The list was found, amongst others, to include non-existent news websites. Following a public outcry, the government finally released the so-called "Petsas list"—named after government spokesperson Stelios Petsas—featuring all media outlets alongside the allocated sums (Lamprou and Antonopoulos, 2021). The list confirmed what many suspected: advertising funds had been disbursed among entities friendly to the government while more critical media had been left off the list (Papadopoulou and Maniou, 2021). This turmoil in turn put added pressure on Greek journalists, who were already struggling to cope with new labor models of the pandemic era and safeguard their professional identity.

In Malta, the governmental support plan for print media was criticized by media houses, citing lack of transparency and described as drinking from "a poisoned chalice" (Welch, 2020), whereas in Cyprus there was no specific government plan to support the press at the time of the pandemic and all media entities joined the national economic support plan to reinforce the country's industry during the 2020 crisis. The plan covered part of the employees' salaries in the broader private sector (Trifonova-Price et al., 2024). All this time, journalists in the European South were striving to adjust to the new labor models: remote working conditions, lack of cooperation with their colleagues, isolation, disruptions to their daily practice due to health and safety protocols, and long working hours (Maniou et al., 2025), formed the pandemic labor model for journalists.

Notwithstanding these malfunctions for journalism labor brought by the economic turmoil and the pandemic, all crises represent an extraordinary set of circumstances that may open new windows of opportunity to transform professional roles and practices from misdemeanors of the past (Siapera et al., 2015). Indeed, there were a few shining examples in the European South that triggered hope for the future of journalism. In Greece, for example, the "Press Project" was created in 2010—a few years after the economic crisis—as an independent, reader-funded, open-access media outlet, which does not accept any funding from political or banking interests.[2] After the onset of the pandemic crisis, its readership tripled and its revenue rose significantly. Other examples at that time were the case of the Spanish online "eldiario", which doubled its subscriptions in 2020, and the Italian online "Il Post", with subscriptions rising to 40 percent in 2020. In all three cases, journalists working in these media attribute their success to the close relationship they managed to develop with their audience by putting reliability, credibility, and accuracy first in their daily struggle to cover the news (Maniou and Papadopoulou, 2021).

Conclusions: towards new models of journalistic labor in the European South

McChesney identified in 2003 that one of the most significant challenges of a crisis to journalism is the restriction of its potential to act as a watchdog and critically present a range of different opinions. In the case of both the economic crisis of 2008 and the pandemic crisis of 2020, journalists in the European South struggled to survive while maintaining their primary role and duty to their audience: their ability to offer credible and accurate information. This gradually intensified labor precarity as a crucial driver in journalistic practices capable of damaging democracy (Ferreira, 2024).

Indeed, over the last decade, the struggle for economic survival has left narrow margins for journalists to fulfill their civic and public service roles adequately and has placed added pressure on them. It has exacerbated the structural weaknesses of journalism in the European South, including the lack of a strong professional culture, rooted in the way the profession developed during the 20th century (Nielsen, 2016), which makes journalism vulnerable to various types of pressure (Vatikiotis et al., 2024). New working conditions (i.e., remote working and reporting) have widened the gap between journalists' civic role and professional practice, changes in labor conditions that appear to be here to stay. Karadimitriou (2020) characterized this as an ongoing "multifaceted crisis" in journalism formed by the chronic vulnerabilities that journalism encounters, which in turn affect both the level of professionalization and the quality of news coverage.

However, some examples in the European South show that the crises of the 21st century may have strengthened journalism's perceived watchdog and public roles (Maniou et al., 2025) as regards reporting accurate and trustworthy information and ensuring audiences are not exposed to harmful content (e.g., Muresan and Salcudean, 2023). Such cases have the potential to fuel journalists with persistence and rekindle their faith in the sector's societal mission (Maniou et al., 2025) and may open new windows of opportunity to transform professional roles and practices in times of unrest. Siapera et al. (2015) argue, "there is no going back to the status quo for anyone in the field of journalism" (p.461). It remains to be seen whether this is in fact the picture public opinion has formed about post-crisis journalism in the countries under study. This is one of the questions that Part B of this book attempts to answer.

Notes

1 http://statisticstimes.com/economy/european-countries-by-gdp.php
2 The same model was followed some years later by "Inside Story", a Greek, digital-only medium.

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