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ERT's shutdown, social amnesia, and communicative entitlements

ERT's shutdown, social amnesia, and communicative entitlements

[Rodanthe Tzanelli](#) [1] 17 June 2013

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The Greek government's decision to close ERT has been criticised in various activist channels as anti-democratic or even irrational. Yet these activists and opponents of the ERT decision are held together only by thin strands and, in truth, represent heterogenous and conflicting interests and agendas.



Former employees look out from the windows of the ERT building. Panayis Chrysovergis/Demotix. All rights reserved.

The Greek government's decision to close down the country's national broadcaster, ERT, has been

criticised in various activist channels as anti-democratic or even irrational. Though currently under negotiation as a response to the general public outcry in Greece and abroad, as a part of the present Greek coalition's proactive austerity planning the discontinuation of this public service proves a thornier issue than originally anticipated. EBU president Jean-Paul Philippot is to hand over a petition in Athens '[signed by 51 European directors general, including the BBC's Tony Hall](#) [6]'. Uniform though this condemnation may be, it currently hosts and is preserved by the disparate agendas held by global and national constituencies. A brief outline of the most important ones elucidates current Greek social fragmentation, while also providing a comparative insight into similar instances and events elsewhere in the world.

For one, Greek unions and political opposition hubs protested against the sacking of 2,700 ERT employees who, apparently, now that the Government has back-pedaled slightly, can apply for their jobs. This tactic certainly allows Greek power – currently under strict supervision by the EU and its global investors – to put the neoliberal card on the table: temporary contractual work has been the norm over the last decade in Greece. Austerity sacking simply adds new flavour to the recipe. This agenda is primarily economic in its criticisms but it simultaneously demands labour justice and protection.

Beyond this one may discern the resurrection of Greece's authoritarian phantom: ERT has been broadcasting almost continuously since 1938 and, despite its intermittent control by dictatorial regimes between 1967 and 1974, it managed to keep apace with the life of the Greek nation. The removal of this social constant from the country's ailing social landscape almost confirms eschatological scenarios concerning the end of Greek liberties, and, by extension, comes as a sign that the European 'endgame' may not be so far away after all. This anti-authoritarian agenda is geopolitical and preserves covert links with particular visions of European postwar histories.

But there is also a separate agenda in the protests that exceeds any tacit fears concerning institutional attacks on labour rights or democratic freedom. This is articulated through complaints that the dismantling of ERT will lead to the loss of national memory. The distribution of the broadcaster's vast archive to potential new shareholders – a rumour not that far from those following BBC's recent service downsizing – will lead to the erasure of uniform narratives of Greek nationality inculcated in generations of Greek citizens. Implicit in this communitarian agenda is the need to preserve electronic apparatuses that help to calibrate ideal homeland imaginaries and ideal citizenships in an era plagued by individualist greed, corporate calculation, and the loss of solidarity. This is a cultural agenda that communicates with the political and the economic ones.

The conflict among such pluralist motivations does not automatically harmonise with the original aim, which is the preservation of a public institution. It certainly highlights the importance of what global austerity measures might eliminate – namely, the presence of an organised Greek polity and a nation addressing its own needs to the world. Each of the aforementioned 'agendas' has a vital contribution to make to the preservation of public broadcasting services as part of a broader welfare programme encompassing what social theorists term 'communicative entitlements'. This refers not only to institutional provision of relevant services (e.g. the ERT) but also public access to them that grants common citizenry with a voice. The fact that a group of 'rogue journalists' from the ERT and other services '[went online](#)' [7] after the channel's official closure also attests to the need to open up communicative rights to citizens in cost-effective ways that circumnavigate the excuse of unreasonable public expenditure. Service provision alone does not entail public control or an enlargement of the already damaged public sphere. We ought always remember that.

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About the author

Rodanthi Tzanelli is a lecturer in Sociology at the University of Leeds.

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