Can Social Media Expand Public Discourse in a 'Captured' Mediascape? The Case of Greece

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Abstract: The Greek public sphere has historically been regarded by scholars as not having developed as robustly as in the West. Instead, it is dominated by patronage, clientelism, and an 'iron triangle' between the government, media, and influential oligarchs, shutting ordinary citizens and independent media out of public discourse. Amid the economic crisis of the 2010s and along with an institutional credibility crisis, many new political and media-related initiatives were launched, all heavily relying on and utilizing social media. To what extent did they demonstrate longevity and help expand the Greek public sphere? Based on interviews from two case studies of the Independent Greeks political party and the *enikos.gr* news portal-blog, the results show the initiatives were ephemeral or were 'captured' by incumbent institutions. Accordingly, the institutional credibility crisis in Greece persists. The results contribute to an understanding of how 'alternative,' non-traditional and crisis-related media and political initiatives can become subject to the same forces of capture as traditional institutions.

Keywords: Greece; Greek financial crisis; public sphere; social media; media capture.

INTRODUCTION

Greece is a country of the European south that is a member of the European Union, Eurozone and NATO, but which lies at the crossroads of Western and Eastern Europe, the Balkans, and the Middle East. Scholars have long been regarded Greece as a country where the public sphere has not developed as robustly as across most of the West. Despite joining the Eurozone in 2002 and hosting the Summer Olympics in 2004—both widely touted in Greece as signs of the country's development—the first signs of destabilization prior to the onset of the financial crisis appeared in December 2008, when the police shooting and subsequent death of 15-year-old Alexandros Grigoropoulos fueled three weeks of riots (Nevradakis, 2018). As in other parts of the world, the 2010s were a time

of uncertainty in Greece, with tremendous political, economic, and social tumult resulting from the financial crisis. One of the primary attributes of social movements during this period shared was the significance of social media in their development, operations, and public outreach (Castells, 2015; Nevradakis, 2018, p. 1). Social media platforms such as Twitter and, later, Facebook, played a prominent role in the dissemination of counter-information to the public, bypassing the editorial filters of legacy media, with the 'Indignant Citizens' movement of 2011 serving as an incubator for a wide range of political movements and grassroots media initiatives (Giovanopoulos, 2011, p. 42, Nevradakis, 2018, pp. 329-334, 344, 396; Nevradakis, 2022).

Komninou (2001, pp. 37-38), as well as other scholars, describe the Greek public sphere as having historically been dominated by partisan interests; patronage; clientelism; and an 'iron triangle' between the government, the media, and the influential oligarchs who own most major media outlets. Dahlgren (1995) defines the public sphere as the realm of social life where the exchange of information and views on questions of common concern can take place in order for public opinion to be formed, and as a "constellation of communicative spaces" which "permit the circulation of information, ideas, debates—ideally in an unfettered manner—and also the formation of political will (i.e., public opinion)" (p. 7). These are spaces where the mass media and 'new' media maintain a prominent presence and "facilitate communicative links between citizens and the power holders of society" (Dahlgren, 2005, pp. 147-148).

The lack of a strong public sphere in Greece is related to the perceived lack of credibility of national institutions, such as the government, political parties, and the mass media, as recorded by multiple public opinion surveys in Greece during and after the financial crisis (DiaNEOsis, 2017, pp. 27-30; DiaNEOsis, 2024, pp. 136-193; Eurobarometer, 2015; Gallup International, 2015; Kapa Research, 2016, pp. 5-6; OECD, 2017, pp. 1-4). Castells (2015, p. 222) describes the lack of credibility as "a fundamental crisis of legitimacy of the political system, regardless of the form of political regime, be it authoritarian or based on democratic elections." In Greece, patronage, clientelism, and *diaploki*—referring to the interplay between the government, state, political parties, and business interests—are widely recognized as significant contributing factors in the prevailing credibility crisis (Sims, 2003, p. 203).

Greece's credibility crisis has been consistently identified in the annual Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism/University of Oxford Digital News Report. In the 2016 edition of the report, Greece had the lowest levels of trust in mainstream news media and journalism across the 26 surveyed countries. The same report notes that Greeks were the third most active users of news content online, and the country had the highest usage of online-only news websites and the highest level of consumption of 'hard' news online. This trend

has continued, as evidenced by the 2023 version of the report, where Greece ranked last in news trust among a sample of 46 countries (Kalogeropoulos, 2023, pp. 78-79). This has occurred despite Greece's relatively low level of broadband penetration by European standards and, notably, during a time of widespread economic difficulty (Kalogeropoulos et al, 2016, pp. 28, 39, 45; Kalogeroupulos, 2022, pp. 82-83).

This institutional credibility crisis may also be a result of the widely held perception that domestic media is 'captured.' Media capture is defined as the interference of influential actors and "created interests in the news media, who act on their benefit, for private purposes, and to the detriment of the public interest and the democratic functions of journalism and the autonomy of journalists" (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2013, pp. 40-41). It can also be understood as a form of corruption. Transparency International's 2012 report on Greece says that corruption was to blame for "numerous malfunctions in Greece" (Transparency International Greece, 2012), while Danopoulos cites clientelism as the major contributor to Greece's financial crisis (2015, pp. 111-125). According to several scholars, throughout the crisis, Greek legacy media reinforced hegemonic and neoliberal narratives, 'naturalizing' the unpopular economic austerity measures, characterizing them as "necessary," and arguing "there is no alternative" (Doudaki, 2015, pp. 5-10; Pleios, 2013, pp. 113-117).

The concept of 'media capture' is derived from 'state capture,' or institutional capture, wherein powerful private actors impose their interests in the formation and implementation of public policy, primarily through illicit or opaque methods (Hellman & Shankermann, 2000, p. 546). Corneo (2006) makes a distinction between 'state capture' and 'media capture,' arguing that a multiplicity of private agents may capture the media, with a key factor being wealth concentration. Such capture, in which influential oligarchs leverage their media holdings to exert pressure over both the government and public opinion whilst securing business and financial benefits, is arguably one of the factors contributing to Greece's financial collapse and institutional credibility crisis (Nevradakis, 2018: pp. 1-2). As the 2023 Reuters Institute report notes, many media outlets in Greece operate at a loss, perhaps indicating that they do not operate based on market logic but, instead, by virtue of other benefits they provide to their owners (Kalogeropoulos, 2023, pp. 78-79). These characteristics have been identified by Hallin and Mancini's as attributes of the "Mediterranean" or "Polarized Pluralist" media model (2004). In this model, the traditional centrality of the state in southern Europe has resulted in the frequent intervention of the state in media institutions—and vice versa. Since the state is an important actor in the economy, the media becomes a battleground for influence and preferential access to state contracts, subsidies, relaxed regulations, selective enforcement, and other benefits.

Within this context, the parallel financial and credibility crises of the 2010s, along with a sharp uptick in activist and social movement activity, led to a blossoming of social movements, political parties, and alternative media initiatives. Scholars have proffered many definitions of alternative media. This study applies the definition that alternative media can be understood as outlets that are "devoted to providing representations of issues and events which oppose those offered in the mainstream media," (Haas, 2004, p. 115). Furthermore, these outlets advocate for political and social reform, and constitute either an alternative public sphere, or a sphere of multiple alternative publics (Haas, 2004). Contributing to this definition is Dahlgren's (2005) position that contemporary understandings of the public sphere must account for "specialized communicative spaces" (such as online spaces) and "alternative or counter public spheres" (pp. 147-148).

Combined, these factors have informed the following research questions, which guide this study and aim to examine the broader impact of social media in Greece during the country's financial crisis:

- *RQ1:* How did social and new media potentially bolster the public sphere and public discourse during the years of the Greek financial crisis? To what extent did the Greek public sphere expand to include new voices and perspectives that were previously marginalized?
- *RQ2:* How, and to what extent, did new political and media institutions that developed during the Greek financial crisis, act to a significant extent via social media platforms, as an 'alternative' to incumbent institutions, such as disseminating political, economic or social narratives distinct from and alternative to those commonly espoused by legacy media institutions and political parties?
- *RQ3:* Did such new media and political institutions that developed during the Greek financial crisis demonstrate longevity and an ability to overcome pressures to be 'captured'? Were they short-lived and ephemeral? Were they themselves 'captured' and did they end up replicating the narratives commonly espoused by legacy institutions?

This study focuses on two case studies: the Independent Greeks political party and *enikos.gr*, a blog-like news portal. These cases were selected because both entities emerged during the financial crisis in Greece via their prominent social media presences and publicly positioned themselves as 'alternatives' to incumbent political and media institutions. The two cases were also chosen with the goal of examining how such initiatives can rejuvenate an atrophic public sphere in a country with a long history of 'capture'—and the extent to which such initiatives can demonstrate longevity or were instead ephemeral. As part of a broader longitudinal study performed in Greece between 2012 and 2017 (Nevradakis, 2018), interviews were conducted with key individuals from both entities (see

Table 1) and transcribed and translated by the author. The interviews focused on how the interviewees' organizations utilized social media to intervene in the public sphere, influence public opinion, and position themselves as 'alternatives' to the status quo.

Table 1. Greek Media Capture: Experts interviewed between 2012 and 2017, their affiliations and roles

Name, 1st name	Entity (2-letter code)	Role at the time of the interview	Date of interview year. month. day	Cited Year of Interview	Full in-text citation format: Name/entity/Year of Interview
Baboussi, Alcestis	Independent Greeks (IG)	Social media Volunteer	2012.11.02	2012	Baboussi/IG/2012
Kammenos, Panos	Independent Greeks (IG)	President	2013.10.11	2013	Kammenos/IG/2013
Moiras, Ioannis	Independent Greeks (IG)	Secretary for Political Strategy	2013.02.15	2013	Moiras/IG/2013
Papadopoulou, Madalena	Independent Greeks (IG)	Head of Youth Wing	2013.11.11	2013	Papadopoulou/IG/2013
Quick, Terence	Independent Greeks (IG)	Press Representative	2013.11.14	2013	Quick/IG/2013
Syriopoulos, Vasilis	Independent Greeks (IG)	Communications Adviser	2013.10.13	2013	Syriopoulos/IG/2013
Tsatsaroni, Katerina	Independent Greeks (IG)	Communications Adviser	2013.10.13	2013	Tsatsaroni/IG/2013
Tsatsaroni, Katerina	Independent Greeks (IG)	Communications Adviser	2017.03.06	2017	Tsatsaroni/IG/2017
Makri, Rachel	Independent Greeks (IG)	Member of Parliament	2013.11.12	2013	Makri/IG/2013
Yalourakis, Dimitris	Independent Greeks (IG)	Director of Communications	2012.11.02	2012	Yalourakis/IG/2012
Baganis, Giorgos	Enikos.gr (EN)	Journalist	2012.12.12	2012	Baganis/EN/2012
Niflis, Manos	Enikos.gr (EN)	Editor	2012.12.07	2012	Niflis/EN/2012
Niflis, Manos	Enikos.gr (EN)	Editor	2017.03.15	2017	Niflis/EN/2017
Roupis, Valios	Enikos.gr (EN)	Social media Manager	2013.04.12	2013	Roupis/EN/2013

Source: Author

Diani and Kousis' (2014, p. 401) argue that "democracy, rather than the economy, was clearly at the center of popular reactions to the Greek crisis." Political polarization and various forms of populism predominated during the early period of the crisis (Papathanassopoulos, Giannouli & Andreadis, 2016, p. 8; Pappas & Aslanidis, 2015, p. 181), contributing to the establishment and/ or rise of political parties with a populist rhetoric, such as the Independent

Greeks, and the development of sensational, populist news portals, including *enikos.gr*, which was launched by prominent media figures but which sought to capitalize on the broader populist sentiment previously epitomized by the widely read but amateurish 'news blogs' whose popularity peaked at the end of the 2000s (Nevradakis, 2018, pp. 184-185).

THE INDEPENDENT GREEKS (IG)

Founded in February 2012, the Independent Greeks quickly attained a reputation of being "the party of Facebook," as the party announced its launch via this platform and conducted many of its early public deliberations there. Its founder, Panos Kammenos, referred to the party as "a popular movement, not a political party" (Kammenos/IG/2013). In the May and June 2012 parliamentary elections, it achieved significant electoral shares and easily surpassed threshold to earn parliamentary representation. Despite a markedly lower electoral share in the January and September 2015 parliamentary elections, the Independent Greeks became the minority governing partner in a coalition led by the populist-left SYRIZA party.

FORMATION

Kammenos stated that the establishment of the Independent Greeks can be attributed entirely to social media and promised this momentum would continue:

> The founding of this movement, and its visibility and sustentation, are exclusively due to social media and will remain so … I often hold referendums, even for candidates [via social media]… the party's platform was developed with public deliberations which took place on Facebook. I can say that over thirty-five thousand [35,000] people participated… we were the first movement in Europe that was developed using these tools (Kammenos/IG/2013).

Kammenos added it was citizens with whom he "had a dialogue on Facebook" who convinced him to start his own party, after having served as an MP with the New Democracy party for 21 years. He also said the party "will continue to communicate with the citizens… and the citizens with us, deciding together the party's positions and policies via the social media, which will continue at a level of importance of over ninety percent" (Kammenos/IG/2013). He added that "[w]e will not turn to traditional media, and we will try to implement direct democracy via communication with the citizens" (Kammenos/IG/2013).

Ioannis Moiras further explained how Kammenos launched the party:

> Kammenos was very deeply involved himself in social media, with an … extremely popular Facebook page and… a frequent and very astute Twitter user… As a member of parliament, he already had a wide circle of friends and co-users… within the world of social media… He announced his decision to go against the existing political system and vote against the memorandum and he found not only wide popular support through social media, but also a huge massive claim for something new, for a political party that would actually vote and stand against… the memorandum… This political movement started from the social media with a direct involvement of two hundred thousand [200,000] users… something that had never happened in this country before (Moiras/IG/2013).

Yet Vasilis Syriopoulos noted that the online deliberation "had to be compatible" with "certain specific positions" the party established at its outset, adding that "this was the first time in Greek history that the president of a party came in direct contact with the public on a daily basis" (Syriopoulos/IG/2013).

Katerina Tsatsaroni said the party initially recruited candidates via social media:

> The selection of parliamentary candidates occurred through an invitation sent out via social media. Ordinary citizens sent us résumés, came to our offices, and were selected as candidates by a committee… most of our members of parliament right now do not stem from political backgrounds

(Tsatsaroni/IG/2013). Rachel Makri explained how she was invited to stand for a parliamentary seat with the party via social media:

> I heard a speech of Mr. Kammenos after he resigned from New Democracy… that led me to look for him on social media. I became his friend on Facebook, and together with others we contacted him, exchanging our views and concerns, and we asked him to establish a party. He was reluctant at first, but he later formed this party… I was invited by Kammenos' advisers to… become a candidate from my district [Kozani]. I ended up campaigning on my own exclusively via social media, with no office, no budget or anything else, coming into contact with the public only via the internet (Makri/IG/2013).

Regarding the public deliberation and selection of candidates, Terrence Quick said:

> We used social media, Twitter and Facebook and also blogs, to discover who would be interested in running as a candidate with us, as well as how we would organize, how we would develop our first volunteer organizations and local

chapters in the periphery… We posted the names of our parliamentary candidates online to gauge local reaction. We all passed through a process of public deliberation (Quick/IG/2013).

According to Dimitris Yalourakis, the party's social media presence was influenced by the methods used by the participants in the movement of the 'Indignants' (Yalourakis/IG/2012). Kammenos said that "of our elected members of parliament, I was introduced to 90 percent of them through Facebook" (Kammenos/IG/2013). Notably, Tsatsaroni later said the party's use of Facebook during its inception was part of a broader communications strategy: "In November 2011, we developed our new strategy with Kammenos as the protagonist on social media and especially Facebook, and we were active around the 'yes-no' issue," referencing the heated austerity versus anti-austerity divide (Tsatsaroni/IG/2017).

Moiras stated that the participation of the public via social media was vital for getting the Independent Greeks elected to parliament:

> This movement became very massive because of the participation of so many users and the direct communication with the president… it really was a pivotal point for our electoral success, the use of social media, because getting ten percent the first elections was really surprising and a magnificent result for a new party (Moiras/IG/2013).

Alcestis Baboussi said that "without social media, what we accomplished in two months would never have been possible" (Baboussi/IG/2012).

SOCIAL MEDIA'S IMPACT

Yalourakis described the difference between the way the Independent Greeks utilized social media compared to other parties: "For our party, social media listen. For other parties, social media speak. That's the key difference" (Yalourakis/IG/2012). Makri, accordingly, described the party's utilization of social media in the following terms: "We are the party that truly uses social media, as the other parties have not organized their social media presence. We even have a social media department… organizationally I have not seen this in any other party" (Makri/IG/2013).

Kammenos described the manner in which he used social media as the party's leader:

> I personally respond via Twitter and Facebook to all our voters. I post items before they are officially announced by the party. I am the only administrator. No one else has access to my account on Facebook and Twitter. I do not use communication experts; they have no place in my postings on Facebook and

> Twitter. I respond personally to the citizens and am available 24 hours per day… My postings are often not politically correct: I post videos, some songs or photographs… this is not the usual style of communication for a political leader of an elected party, but I remain who I was before the party was born and that is how I will remain (Kammenos/IG/2013).

Makri emphasized that she was not a career politician and that she administered her own social media accounts:

> I personally administer my [social media] accounts. I attempt to respond to all of the messages I receive from citizens, to read them all, and I have introduced many issues in parliament… even from individuals who are not from my electoral district but who contacted me … I am not a professional politician… I was an ordinary citizen… Therefore, I would not like somebody else to [post on social media] for me, as I consider it an expression of my own thoughts towards others (Makri/IG/2013).

Tsatsaroni agreed that social media played an immense role in the electoral success of the Independent Greeks but said that there were plans to better organize the party's social media presence, warning that "going forward, [social media] could be catastrophic, if you cannot place social media within a context, a structure, and assign roles and an objective to each page" (Tsatsaroni/IG/2013).

For Kammenos, one of the most significant ways in which social media impacted the Independent Greeks was by delivering the youth vote. Kammenos stated "Ninety percent [of our voters] are between eighteen and forty-four [18-44] years of age" (Kammenos/IG/2013). Madalena Papadopoulou noted that this demographic profile was reflected in the party's leadership ranks, "where even in organizational committees of the party there are people below the age of 30" (Papadopoulou/IG/2013).

Kammenos noted that the party's emphasis on social media contrasted with its stance towards traditional media, saying "We are totally isolated, by our own choice, from all the newspapers. We have no access to any newspaper, other than sending press releases" (Kammenos/IG/2013). Tsatsaroni said "[v]ery few [television stations] give us airtime, and when they do, their coverage is negative. Therefore, for us, [social media] are a necessity" (Tsatsaroni/IG/2013).

In response to this media blackout, Yalourakis stated that plans were in the works on the part of the party to develop an online television presence and an e-magazine (Yalourakis/IG/2012). He also stated the party's use of social media would not change even if it entered government (Yalourakis/IG/2012).

ENIKOS.GR (EN)

In the years preceding Greece's financial crisis, and in its early stages, 'news blogs' were widely viewed as 'alternatives' to the legacy media, where 'truthful' news could be found. This search for the 'truth' was specifically addressed by Giorgos Baganis, who said: "the public believed that the news [provided by news blogs] was the real news, without dependencies, without hidden interests" (Baganis/EN/2012). Yet, Manos Niflis argued that while online news portals inherited their audience, sites like *enikos.gr* were not directly derived from such blogs (Niflis/EN/2012). In a follow-up interview, Niflis maintained his belief that "portals are not the continuation of blogs. Portals developed from the need for quick and accurate information, while allowing the public to judge and to be heard" (Niflis/EN/2017).

Founded in 2011, *enikos.gr* combined elements of both legacy and online media, incorporating an online news portal, blogging, citizen journalism, and television. It was created by journalist Nikos Chatzinikolaou, a prominent television news presenter and talk show host. Today, Chatzinikolaou owns the widely circulated *Real News* Sunday newspaper, the *real.gr* website, and the popular *Real FM 97.8* news radio station in Athens. He is the central news presenter for national private television broadcaster *Antenna TV* and hosts the *Enopios Enopio* talk program on the same station.

Niflis described the concept behind *enikos.gr* as "combining the immediacy of news blogs with accurate reporting." According to Niflis, Chatzinikolaou envisioned a blog "not a portal with many different sections and long articles, but something very immediate and quick which would inform the public about everything, to be everywhere, with photos, video and short pieces" (Niflis/EN/2012).

Valios Roupis noted that the site carried the name—and credibility—of its founder in its branding ('e-Nikos'), and that as a result, the site's journalists were "very careful with what they are publishing to ensure that everything has been cross-checked and verified" (Roupis/EN/2013). Notably, in its original incarnation, the design of *enikos.gr* bore a strong resemblance to *Troktiko*, once one of Greece's most popular news blogs. Remarking on this, Roupis stated that the site was designed purposely to resemble a blog, adding that Chatzinikolaou "already operates a news portal [*real.gr*], therefore he did not want *enikos.gr* to be yet another portal" (Roupis/EN/2013). Baganis stated that *enikos.gr* is indeed a blog and not a news portal (Baganis/EN/2012). Regarding the political stance of *enikos.gr*, Niflis commented that the site is accused of being both on the left and on the right, "which means we are neither" (Niflis/EN/2012).

On the topic of interaction with the audience, Roupis stated that *enikos.gr* actively seeks out news from its audience and provides ways for such stories to be submitted, adding that 90 percent of emails and Facebook messages were

replied to (Roupis/EN/2013). Niflis stated that "stories are published which are produced by members of the audience or who want to express themselves… it's something we want to invest in" (Niflis/EN/2012). Baganis added that Chatzinikolaou's own social media presence—particularly his popular Twitter account—helped deliver an audience to *enikos.gr*:

> Nikos Chatzinikolaou, with the presence he has developed on Twitter, responds to everyone who poses a question… he writes about the team he loves, he shares his philosophical musings, his thoughts on politics, economics. In doing this he won the attention of an audience who… knew him only as a television personality, and this audience in large part does not enter *real.gr* or purchase *Real News*. This audience came to *enikos.gr* because they saw a different Chatzinikolaou, who approached them and opened up to the public (Baganis/EN/2012).

Niflis described social media as the "the main pillar of our strategy," noting that many news stories were reported to *enikos.gr* via this avenue (Niflis/EN/2012), while Baganis said Facebook and Twitter were the main sources of traffic for *enikos.gr* (Baganis/EN/2012).

Another major driver of traffic for *enikos.gr* during the 2012-2013 period was the *Ston Eniko* online television program—the continuation of a conventional television program by the same name which Chatzinikolaou had previously hosted on broadcast television stations. *Ston Eniko*—a play on words incorporating his first name and the Greek term for speaking in the informal tense—was a live discussion program with invited guests interviewed before a studio audience that could also pose questions. Baganis described *Ston Eniko* as "an experiment which is being attempted for the first time in Greece, to show that it is possible in the future to combine the speed and liveliness of television, with the web" (Baganis/EN/2012). Roupis said *Ston Eniko* was a reflection of Chatzinikolaou's "desire to host a program as he would want to do it and as he imagined it… without the restrictions which any given television station could impose" (Roupis/EN/2013). Niflis also described the changes made by Chatzinikolaou when the program was transferred from broadcast television to the web: "Chatzinikolaou changed the format of the show… now there is a live audience—around 50 to 60 people who submit questions. In essence, Chatzinikolaou doesn't host the show, the citizens do" (Niflis/EN/2012). Roupis described the audience's response to *Ston Eniko*: "… the viewers literally bombard us with questions via phone calls to *enikos.gr*, via Chatzinikolaou's Twitter account, and via the Twitter and Facebook accounts of *enikos.gr*" (Roupis/EN/2013).

In remarking on the audience's engagement to *enikos.gr*, Niflis said that in its first 10 months of operation, the site entered Nielsen's top 10 websites in Greece

and Alexa's top 20. Nevertheless, Niflis stated he considered *enikos.gr* an "alternative" medium due to the way it operates: "speed, credibility, contact with the audience, integration of social media"—in other words, being 'alternative' to its main competitors (Niflis/EN/2012). Yet, Baganis noted the site's influence within the political sphere:

> Usually when we write about a politician or a government minister or ministry and we publish a complaint from a reader, within the next 20 minutes at most… there is a response from the ministry, or from the minister or politician (Baganis/EN/2012).

Notably though, in a follow-up interview in 2017, Niflis described the site as a *portal*—which he did not do in 2012—but one which visually resembles a blog and differs from a static news website. "Speed and immediacy" remained the site's selling points, according to Niflis, and though *Ston Eniko* had stopped its webcasts, he stated it would "probably return" (Niflis/EN/2017).

That a news portal such as *enikos.gr*, founded by a prominent media personality, was widely recognized—particularly during the early crisis period—as an 'alternative' to legacy media, is reflective of the broader credibility crisis afflicting 'traditional' media. It is also reflective of the often-blurred boundaries between 'alternative' and 'mainstream,' where audiences may value alternative *content* (neglected issues, diverse voices, mobilizing information) more highly than alternative *form* (being nonprofit, noncommercial, small-scale) (Rauch, 2015, p. 124).

EPHEMERALITY AND REPLICATION

At face value, it could be said that the Greek public sphere expanded during the years of the financial crisis and that social media served as 'incubators' for many such efforts, thereby 'strengthening' the public sphere by including new voices and counternarratives to those of the incumbent political parties and legacy media outlets. The Independent Greeks rapidly attained electoral success as "The party of Facebook," while *enikos.gr* rapidly adopted the populist tactics that had previously made 'news blogs' so successful, albeit aided by the broad visibility and name recognition of the site's founder. Both the Independent Greeks and *enikos.gr* capitalized on the broad popular dissatisfaction with incumbent political and media institutions by giving voice to alternative narratives that were critical of the politics of austerity, about which major political parties and legacy media said there was 'no alternative'.

But while the years of the financial crisis saw the birth of numerous new political parties and 'alternative' media initiatives, were these initiatives able to demonstrate longevity? Or, instead, was their existence ephemeral—a reaction to conditions at a particular moment in time, without broader staying power?

Or, perhaps, were these entities eventually 'captured' by the institutional forces they once professed to oppose?

The case of the Independent Greeks is indicative. After failing to enter parliament in the July 2019 elections, the party dissolved, while Kammenos today is not a visible figure in Greek politics. But even before the dissolution of the party, some notable contrasts were already evident regarding how it utilized social media as of 2017, when it was co-governing with SYRIZA, compared to the party's early days. In a follow-up interview in 2017, Tsatsaroni said the party's high-level members, including Kammenos, continued to use their own Twitter accounts, but the party's official Twitter account was defunct (Tsatsaroni/IG/2017). She attributed this to a lack of resources, saying a "huge team" was needed to effectively formulate and implement a social media strategy, describing this as "almost impossible" (Tsatsaroni/IG/2017). Yet, she stated that the party operated, at the time, with approximately 100 people involved with its social media presence and a strategy focusing on promoting an "anti-corruption" message (Tsatsaroni/IG/2017).

Although the Independent Greeks openly campaigned as an anti-austerity party in 2012 (Tsatsaroni/IG/2017) this strategy changed in the January and September 2015 parliamentary elections, to a message portraying the Independent Greeks as the party that "can implement [austerity] in the fairest possible way" (Tsatsaroni/IG/2017). Belying the party's shift away from online public deliberations, Tsatsaroni said: "whoever tells you that there is an organized dialogue on the part of any party with the citizens is lying" (Tsatsaroni/IG/2017). Plans for a web TV station and e-magazine never materialized.

Unlike the Independent Greeks, *enikos.gr* continues to operate today and remains a recognized presence in the Greek online news market. However, the site has abandoned its previous blog-like layout, adopting a design like the news portals, with which it competes. Moreover, the *Ston Eniko* television program never resumed. Instead, Chatzinikolaou continues to be a prominent figure on 'legacy' television and radio. Cross-promotion of *enikos.gr* on Chatzinikolaou's other media ventures, including *Real News* and *Real FM*, is frequent. While *enikos.gr* has expanded into podcasting, its social media presence primarily reproduces the portal's content. As Iosifidis and Wheeler (2015, p. 14) argue, "it remains to be seen whether these movements will have lasting effects in terms of political change and a shift in economic direction." Perhaps, though, ephemerality is simply the confirmation of a longer-standing trend in Greece. Indeed, Panagiotopoulou (2013, pp. 453-454) notes that public spheres in Greece have traditionally been ephemeral.

It could be said that on the political front, the Independent Greeks (and its governing coalition partner SYRIZA) succumbed to state capture. Despite being elected on a populist, anti-austerity platform, the parties voted in favor

of the third memorandum agreement with Greece's 'troika' of lenders (the International Monetary Fund, the European Central Bank, and the European Commission) that year—2015. In the case of *enikos.gr*, as the 'oppositional' influence of news blogs and 'alternative' online news portals waned in Greece, *enikos.gr* moved away from a format which closely resembled such outlets and reduced the public's level of interactivity and involvement with the site's content. This activity is evidenced by the fact that the *Ston Eniko*'s live audience-participation program never returned. Moreover, Chatzinikolaou and his media properties have come under scrutiny. In March 2023, SYRIZA MP Pavlos Polakis publicly accused Chatzinikolaou and the Real Group of owing tens of millions of euros in loans, taxes, and social insurance contributions, implying that these media properties were kept afloat due to *diaploki*-esque interests (CNN Greece, 2023, March 29)—hallmarks of media capture theory and Hallin and Mancini's (2004) "Polarized Pluralist" or "Mediterranean" media model.

Twelve years later, Hallin and Mancini revisited their 2004 comparative models of media systems, highlighting that in the "digital age", there was an increasing convergence toward the "liberal" model—but that replication of the existing legacy media system in the digital realm was a possible outcome (2016, pp. 162-165). Replication can be understood as a euphemism for "capture", in that established narratives and practices end up being *replicated* by entities purportedly opposed to them. In the case of *enikos.gr*, the portal was established in response to a popular demand for alternatives to the legacy media but ended up operating in a manner quite indistinct from legacy outlets. This reflects the replication of and capture by offline practices in the digital realm that has been observed with other similar outlets in Greece (Nevradakis, 2022). In one example, the 2022 Reuters Institute Digital News Report highlighted the "government's payments to particular news organisations for broadcasting COVID 'stay at home' messages in 2020" (Kalogeropoulos, 2022, p. 82)—a form of media capture wherein those same outlets were then unwilling to challenge the government's pandemic-related policies. Indeed, *enikos.gr* received 25,000 euros in such subsidies (Ioakeim, 2020). While this sum may typically not represent a significant amount for a major news portal, it is likely quite significant for an outlet whose ownership is reportedly heavily in debt. It is also likely that it is not the only such subsidy *enikos.gr* received, although this is difficult to ascertain due to the near-complete lack of transparency regarding state subsidies to the media in Greece.

Kalogeropoulos (2019) states that "[t]he abundance of news sources in Greece can be explained by attempts of some businesspeople to influence the political agenda or to gain revenue from state advertising." He argues this implies "that media owners see state subsidies as a potential offset for the marginal economic performance of their media properties (p. 88). Contributing to this

lack of transparency is the government's apparent reluctance to investigate its own activities. A parliamentary investigation examining the "Petsas List" was closed in January 2022 with no finding of wrongdoing on the part of the ruling New Democracy party (Voria.gr 2022, January 14). Then in June 2023, the government's registry of online media outlets was disbanded, eliminating another potential avenue for transparency for information regarding state subsidies provided to media outlets (Typologies.gr 2023). The lack of transparency makes it practically impossible to ascertain what additional subsidies *enikos.gr*—or any other media outlet—have received from the state.

Also worth noting is that "Petsas List" subsidies were intended for COVID-related public service announcements (PSAs), contradicting contemporary understandings of the purpose—and their free or unpaid nature—of PSAs, as recognized by Greek law, Greece's independent broadcast regulator, the National Council for Radio-Television, and global standards (McGuire, 2019; Ypovoli, n.d.).

The Independent Greeks and *enikos.gr* may well have represented a broad desire for a change from the political and media status quo in Greece during the financial crisis. They were two initiatives that, for a time, helped expand the range of voices and opinions heard in Greece's 'official' public sphere. They also firmly operated within the incumbent political and media 'system' and could not be said to have been part of an 'oppositional' public sphere as such. In turn, any expansion they made to the 'official' sphere was itself proven to be ephemeral.

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