

Investigative journalism, access to public information and Media Corporate Governance: Is there anything new?

13 International Anti-Corruption Conference

Athens, Greece

2 November 2008, 11-13hs

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Even though there are similar trends across the world as far as the media are concerned, local parameters determine the concrete problems that arise concerning transparency and the role of the press.

If we take into account the Greek experience then one could argue that a basic factor limiting the ability of the press to provide an effective check on illegal practices in government and businesses is its inherent lack of economic viability.

This is the result of many factors some socio-economic in character as for example the fact that in Greece newspapers have some of the lowest readership rates in the world.

At the same time though, the economics of the industry are heavily influenced by the changing structure of media ownership. In the past couple of decades many newspapers have been bought by business magnates for whom they were only a small fraction of their business interests.

Although this provided vital capital for newspapers that were either on the brink of collapse or had already folded it has also created a situation that in Greece we call "diaploki" and refers to the conflicts of interest that arise between business and journalistic endeavours.

This is especially important not only for Greece but for many developing countries where most big companies rely on the state for contracts and ultimately for their survival.

After a point such a distortion of the market creates a vicious circle crowding out independent media groups or forcing them to seek alternative sources of capital and alliances. Especially when there is a liberalised market with few constraints on the number of newspapers or electronic media that one may own.

This is the case of Greece where the degree of concentration in media ownership has been

increasing in recent years- in many cases involving the collaboration competitors in the running of radio or TV stations.

Even in developed markets of course we observe similar trends with big corporations acquiring some very well known newspapers as Le Monde or Liberation creating fertile ground for conflicts of interest. In this case nevertheless size matters.

A big newspaper with a strong journalistic tradition behind it is in a better position to defend its integrity and a relationship based on trust with its readers whereas in small markets a newspaper can be maintained solely for the purpose of promoting specific interests.

Still it is fair to say that every newspaper today feels the pressure of declining revenues on the one hand and the shareholders desire for increased profits.

The trend with very few exemptions is for newsrooms to decline and journalists to be laid off. Soon investigative journalism will be a luxury that we will not be able to afford. In Greece few newspapers can commit the necessary resources for such projects.

Increasingly we rely on leaks from civil

servants or businesses that are not always innocent and in many cases one has the feeling -even when true scandals are concerned- that there is also a hidden agenda.

The declining economics of the newspaper industry has some other, equally important consequences. The first is the relationship with the state. One can talk about a symbiotic relationship where the state provides vitally important funds -as advertising from state companies or as contracts for public works- and in turn the politicians buy influence or immunity.

The second concerns the relationship with the business community. In times of declining revenues advertising becomes a lifeline for newspapers. And this provides a strong leverage for big corporations which can exert a strong influence on some media. Advertising is a sort of protection money and at the same time a tool that can be used in many ways.

Of course not everything is black. There are still a number of newspapers in Greece that maintain their journalistic independence even in the face of rapidly worsening economic conditions. And there are a number of reasons why their effort may yet succeed.

The first is their readers. Newspapers that are

able to maintain a relationship of trust with their readers are usually the most successful. Transparency is a value in itself in today's society and media groups that appear to serve other agendas than informing the public are punished. All the more so in the era of internet as many newspapers are becoming interactive and readers criticism is immediate while at the same time alternative sources of information make sure that such comments reach a wider audience.

The second is the journalists themselves. The tradition of publish and be damned is still strong and no matter what the constraints it is difficult for a major newspaper to ignore issues that are of interest to its readers. Of course we need to find new ways to enhance the editorial independence of the press for example by institutionalising internal proceedings which may guaranty transparency.

It is also very important to have a forum where journalists and academics could discuss the problems that arise and exert peer pressure whenever there are gross violations of the ethics of our trade.

The third is technology and the availability of a score of resources -and sources- for a journalist to research a story. Through the

internet he has immediate access to relevant information and archives and he can be assisted from academics and NGO's that have specialist knowledge in the relevant area.

The fourth is competition and the multiplication of media outlets. For a newspaper to withhold information for whatever reason is a dangerous decision because it is almost certain that a competitor will publish it. In such cases it has been proven time and again that there is no protection for a politician and even the friendly press will follow the story.

Competition of course is a two way street. And in many cases the pressure to be the first and the more vocal in your criticism has led to scandals that are either not scandals or are blown out of proportion. For example investigative reporting is the Abu Graib scandal and so is the Monica Lewinski affair. The second was enough for a proposal to impeach the president but not the first. To many of us this is a complete reversal of values.

It was John Rowls that said that if you put a persons affairs under close scrutiny it is almost impossible not to find even a technical violation of the law. Which reminds us of the need for a sense of proportion and balance in

our reporting.

But all these are in a way backward looking. At the moment we are in a phase of profound transformations in the media landscape and of the way people obtain their information. Historic newspapers as the Christian Science Monitor are abandoning print for the internet. We don't know where this trend will lead. Some believe in to a new age of electronic democracy where it will be a lot easier to obtain and distribute information overcoming the various obstacles that media concentration creates. This is certainly the case with blogs that have created a new media community.

On the other hand people still need to trust their sources of information which means that traditional media groups have an advantage. And there are signs that as the various kinds of media are merging into new multimedia groups the degree of concentration will increase rather than decrease. Which implies that there is no easy way out: we will have to stand on our toes to defend transparency and the right of the citizens to be fully informed.