

Crime and Punishment in Contemporary Greece

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Media, Crime and Criminal Justice

The influence of the mass media, and especially of television, on public opinion in Greece is an issue complicated by the low credibility of the media in the eyes of the public. On the one hand, nearly half of the population believes that public television is more independent from the government than it was in the past. Indeed, it is the media that has appeared to increasingly encroach upon the state's sphere of authority (see further Demertzis, 1996: 540). An illustrative example of such encroachment was presented by the kidnapping of a bus containing passengers in May 1999. The kidnappers chose to communicate their messages and demands live via the media rather than directly to the police, in a spectacle which lasted more than 24 hours. On the other hand, a significant minority (one in four) considers the independence of public television to have decreased, whilst levels of public trust are, in any case, greater towards private television (Papathanassopoulos, 2000; see also Darzanou, 2002; compare Deliyanni, 2004). Moreover, a significant proportion of journalists themselves believe that Greek TV is 'hostage' to economic interests (19 percent), that it promotes the abuse of power (15 percent), and that it is governed irresponsibly (14 percent) (Papathanassopoulos, 2000). Much, then, as the mass media may constitute a platform for the presentation and diffusion of party-political and materialist agendas, the extent to which the latter are accepted by the public as a result of media consumption remains unclear. It has been argued, for example, that only 10 percent of viewers are influenced by televised political debates (Kakepaki, 2002: 166; see also Mendrinou, 2002). From fuelling crime to fuelling fear of crime, and from hindering the work that the police and the judiciary are expected to undertake, to reproducing stereotypes, the media play a highly contentious role in discourses about crime in Greece. This chapter suggests that, whilst the progressive potential of the media has been little explored, responsibility for media output cannot be left in the hands of the media alone.

The Mass Media, Crime and Fear of Crime

The public in Greece receives information about deviance and crime in the country (and elsewhere) mainly through television and radio, as well as through newspapers and magazines (see further Zarafonitou, 2002, 2006, 2008). Media regulation by the state has been characteristically weak over the past twenty years (see, e.g., discussion in Pleios, 2002: 259). The independent authority charged with monitoring the output of radio and television (the 'National Council of Radio-Television', or 'ESR'), has typically been handicapped in its administration of appropriate financial sanctions by bureaucratic complexities, the inadequate experience of its personnel, and political pressure.¹

The extensiveness and forms of Greek media representations of violence has been the subject of considerable criminological interest, not least since the frequency of such images is believed to have significantly increased over recent years (Papathanassopoulos, 1997, 1999, 2004; Papathanassopoulos and Giannakouloupoulos, 2006). In particular, a number of criminological studies have focused on the extent and variety of media consumption reported by children (see, e.g., Papathanassopoulos, 1998: 505) and by convicted prisoners (see, e.g., Symeonidou-Kastanidou, *et al.*, 2003: 364; Kodellas, 2006), with particular attention paid to the consumption of violent media formats (such as thrillers and action or martial arts films). In the case of juvenile convicts (surveyed in the prisons of Korydallos and Kassavetia), the relation between the media consumption habits of prisoners before and after conviction has also been explored (Courakis *et al.*, 1995).

1 The existence of ESR is mandated by the Hellenic Constitution (Article 15) to regulate radio and television output. ESR operates in accordance with its own Code of Ethics, in addition to professional standards set by journalists' associations (see further Karakostas, 2005). There are three public TV channels in Greece (ERT, NET, and ET3), and various private ones (e.g., STAR, ANTENNA, MEGA, and ALTER), two of which are run by political parties: 902, by the Greek Communist Party (or 'KKE'), and Tele-Asty, by the nationalist party 'Popular Orthodox Rally' (or 'LAOS').

Beyond concerns about the criminogenic potential of the media are those related to its role in generating social panics. As regards the coverage of crime in news reports, it has been noted that homicides and drug-related crimes are reported more frequently than any other type of crime in the Greek media (Lambropoulou *et al.*, 2000). With respect to homicides, reporting tends to be extensive (e.g., up to three pages in newspapers) and focused mainly on offenders and their profile, often also including their photographic identification (Koukoutsaki, 2000; Varvaressos, 2000). As a general rule, and as the public and even journalists themselves commonly point out (see, for example, discussion in Panousis, 1991), media representations of deviance and crime are inaccurate in the sense of exaggerating the extent of the problem at issue, being selective in their content, reproducing stereotypes, and misconstruing the profile of offenders (Paraskevopoulos *et al.*, 1990; Ploumpidis, 1990; Artinopoulou, 1995; Lambropoulou, 1997; Papaioannou, 2001; Zarafonitou, 2002; Moschopoulou, 2005; Roussis, 2006; Tsalikoglou, 2007). As illustrated by a study of the way in which six Athenian newspapers reported anarchist activities in 1980, 1985, and 1995, above and beyond the common reproduction of associated stereotypical notions such as 'vandalism', 'enemies of democracy and morality', 'menace for public security', 'conspiracy', and 'moral panic', media representations were also shown to be significantly influenced by the political standpoints of the newspapers in which they appeared (Kalamatianou, 2007: 263–265).

Their low credibility notwithstanding, media representations of deviance and crime are said to generate, boost, or at least sustain alarmist and exclusive attitudes amongst the public (Pleios, 2004; Panousis, 2006a, 2008). And nowhere appears this paradox to be more pronounced than in the cases of school violence, immigration, and drug abuse and addiction. By way of dramatising isolated incidents and grossly exaggerating pertinent statistical data, the Greek mass media present violence as widespread in schools across the country (Beze, 1998; Artinopoulou, 2001). Indeed, such headlines as 'When school becomes a nightmare', 'Violence goes to school', and 'Crash course in violence at schools' help give rise to moral panics (see further Panousis, 2004b). That violence is shrouded in conceptual ambiguities makes schoolchildren prone to reproduce and legitimate its myth, as when they respond to survey questions by interpreting otherwise normal (if not necessarily welcome) behaviours as instances of bullying (*ibid.*).

As for the immigration-crime nexus (on which see further Karydis, this collection; and Cheliotis and Xenakis, this collection), this is more often than not presented in the Greek media by non-specialist journalists whose main sources of information are the Internet and their colleagues. The offences most commonly reported in connection with immigrants span illegal entry into the country, human trafficking, prostitution, theft, and robbery (Tsiakalos, 1997/1998). A content analysis of two daily nationwide newspapers for the period 1990–1999 showed that immigrants were deemed responsible for nearly half of the crimes reported – a proportion far larger than the actual representation of immigrants in official crime statistics. Headlines were invariably negative when they referred to immigrants and Albanians in particular ('Albanians kill without mercy' being but one example; Giannarou, 2008), also presenting victims as gravely angry, and demanding more and harsher measures of crime control in response (Moschopoulou, 2005; see also Karydis, 1996; Konstantinidou, 2001; Tsoukala, 2001; Galanis and Triantafyllidou-Galani, 2002).

Turning to drug abuse and addiction, and in stark contrast with pertinent statistics, media reports regularly speak of 'waves of crisis', even though they shed scant light on the risks of drug abuse as such (Roussis, 2006). Furthermore, in line with the dominant policy-making mindset, drug abuse and addiction are associated in the media with immorality and lawbreaking. Drug-related lawbreaking itself is attributed to the pursuit of hedonistic pleasure, and arbitrarily linked to a range of activities such as anarchism, organised crime, or terrorism, hence also the urgent calls for further and more effective measures of penal control for drug abuse and addiction (Panousis, 2006b).

Challenges for Criminal Justice

The power of media spectacle to negatively influence criminal justice processes (see further Demertzis 1996: 540), as a consequence of its proclivity for exaggeration and titillation in crime reporting, has been recognised as

a significant challenge by diverse voices from the state bureaucracy, politicians, and civil society. Studies of Greek police personnel carried out in 1995 (Panousis, 2001) and in 1998 (Georgoulas, 2003: 26–71) indicate that they are as much influenced by negative media distortions of the realities of crime as are the rest of the general public. Equally, however, the media commonly reproduce a stereotypical image of Greek police officers as a force bedevilled by political partisanship, corruption, and a lack of meritocracy (see further Panousis, 2001: 103–110). This stereotype serves to reinforce public assumptions of police ineffectiveness – a problem of representation of which the police are themselves only too aware (Leandros, 2000), given low levels of public trust in the police (see further Vidali, 2007; and Cheliotis and Xenakis, this collection). As underlined by a survey carried out in 1994 of 465 police officers, 49 percent felt that the public regarded them as ‘batsous’ – a derogatory term akin to ‘cops’ (Tsalikoglou *et al.*, 1999). Thus, an overwhelming majority of police officers surveyed in 1995 believed that alongside the influx of immigrants and the role of contemptuous public attitudes towards law-abiding behaviour, the media also played a role in fuelling crime (Panousis, 2001).

Turning to the administration of justice, the mass media in Greece have a reputation for generating endless reports and debates concerning criminal trials which are ongoing, in which the goal of exciting public passions clearly surpasses that of neutrally elucidating the subject matter. The influence of the media in this field has not been entirely unchecked, however. A key example of the contrary came in 2002, when members of the terrorist organisation ‘November 17’ were identified, and newspaper and television coverage were replete with commentaries on the group. The entire criminal process (from arrest and preliminary judicial proceedings onwards) swiftly became reminiscent of a Hollywood production (see further Panousis, 2005; on discussion of such ‘virtual justice’ processes, see Kardara, 2003). There was nevertheless a sufficient degree of political consensus that making a spectacle of terrorism would not be conducive to a fair or orderly trial (Panousis, 2004a). Law 3090/2002 was therefore passed in order to prohibit any televised transmission or video-recording of the trial, in part or in whole (even for archival purposes). Interestingly, whilst both the state (i.e., government, judiciary, and other elements of the state

bureaucracy) and the accused opposed the televising of the trial, a small number of academics specialising in Constitutional Law and Criminology supported such use of the media (see Lambropoulou, 2005: 239).

More generally, however, the vast majority of the mass media in Greece has been almost exclusively oriented towards the support of victims of crime. For example, even when the notoriously overcrowded Greek prisons have been the subject of media attention (see further Cheliotis, this collection), reporting typically reproduces the stigmatisation of prisoners by focusing upon their deviant behaviour and minority or subcultural identities, and endlessly characterising their prison environment in such terms as 'violence', 'chaos', 'hell', 'a jungle', full of 'fear', 'blood', and 'anarchy' (Nikolaides, 2006: 274–283; see also Kartalou, 2006: 238).² In stark contrast, a study published by the independent media website *Indymedia Athens* offered a qualitative analysis of discourses by the electronic media on prison, which focused upon the complaints of inmates concerning living conditions, institutional violence, and the demands and rights of prisoners (Vatikiotis, 2006: 306). Such latter perspectives have shone an entirely different media light on the predicament of those imprisoned.

Conclusion

Greek criminology has only recently begun to concern itself with the mass media and the influence they exert on public attitudes in the country towards crime and criminal justice. An accumulating throng of studies support the notion that the Greek media legitimate and reproduce widespread exclusive attitudes amongst the public (Kaytlatzi-Whitlock, 2005). Public susceptibility to distorted media content is tightly linked to what Beck (1992) has famously described as the rise of the 'risk society', whereby

2 This study, conducted in 1995, analysed the coverage by four Athenian newspapers of a riot at Korydallos prison (see further Nikolaides, 2006).

the insecurities of everyday life are projected onto scapegoated targets. This, however, is not to say that the socio-political role played by the mass media is unavoidably negative. The mass media, much like technology more generally, are merely means of communication, and it is their use that should constitute our ultimate concern. To the extent that the media may deter crime by constituting a conduit for awareness-raising and knowledge-building, studies on the effects of reporting on drug use (Roussis, 2006: 88–90) and rape (see Artinopoulou, 1995: 295–298; Alygizakis 2007), for example, show that the Greek media has scarcely met such expectations. The challenge for criminologists is to acknowledge and act upon the fact that responsibility for media output on crime extends beyond media professionals, the ESR, or even the state, but also to themselves as well. Acting upon this fact means forsaking academic isolationism in order to dispel public myths and to accurately reconstruct reality (see further Melossi, 1999; Deliyanni, 2004; Barak, 2007).

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