

Public televisions brought into question: the diversity in danger

Can we imagine our national channels suddenly stopping their transmissions, on grounds of budget austerity? Nonetheless, this is what happened last week in Greece, member of the European Union and of the eurozone, where the government abruptly decided to shut down the public television group ERT. If this extreme measure is without precedent in the history of our modern democracies, it appears, unfortunately, symptomatic of the threats affecting today the public media, in the overall Euro-Mediterranean region.

Everywhere, there are plenty of examples: in Portugal, the government announced its willingness to totally or partially privatize the public television RTP, and the shutting down of the cultural channel RTP2 seems to be irrevocable. In Spain, RTVE was obliged to make important budget cuts - even renouncing to broadcast a qualifying match to the World Cup. In other countries affected by the sovereign debt crisis, public television is also in a fragile situation, like in Cyprus.

Under the pressure of the economic crisis, governments bring into question these media, based on two types of issues: on one side, the sometimes weakening management of these public groups, ideal targets of a policy aiming at rationalising the budget; on the other side, audiences at half-mast (about 10% in Greece), exploited as a proof of the apparently useless nature of these broadcasters. When we want to kill a dog, we blame on rabies; when we want to shut down a public television, we blame on the fact it is not watched.

Without denying the reality of these problems nor the efforts necessary to solve them, this kind of attacks are worrying. In fact, they seem to reduce the issue of media public service to a simple budget equation, while it is first of all a civic stake. If public televisions and radios exist, under different forms, in the majority of modern democracies, this comes from the essential contribution they give to pluralism in all its forms, as it is recognized also by the Council of Europe and the European Union.

Thanks to the independence assured by public financing, these media are able to offer a different information coverage: in Greece, it is also, with no doubt, a clashing voice to die, leaving the monopoly of the information to private groups linked to financial and industrial interests, rightly when the country is facing one of the worst economic and political crisis in its history.

But public television also assures the diversity of creation: at a time where, thanks to a strong mobilisation, the defence of cultural exception gets its first success in the framework of trade negotiations between the United States and the European

Union, it would be a paradox to let, at the same time, these actors disappear, considering that they give the public access to a diversified creation, and that they often highly contribute to its financing. No matter what we think about ERT faults, it was the real one coproducing the movies of Theo Angelopoulos, and not its private colleagues.

In the fight for cultural diversity, there is therefore a second front to be opened: the one in defence of public broadcasters. It is up to us, professionals of the audiovisual sector, to stand up and raise our voice.

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