DIMITRA L. MILIONI
Cyprus University of Technology

PANTELIS VATIKIOTIS
Panteion University of Social and Political Sciences

The unbearable lightness of being alternative: Idealism–realism and purism–pragmatism in Greek alternative media

ABSTRACT

The article explores alternative media sustainability across a wide range of Greek projects. In this regard, it probes into a number of factors related to both the political economy (funding, organization) of these projects and the nature (real/'imaginary', broad reach/niche) of the relationship with their communities/ audiences. The findings of the research reveal a dynamic and contradictory field regarding alternative media resilience in terms of the dialectical relationship of idealistic/realistic (on the production, organization level) and puristic/pragmatic (on the communication, reach level) features. The article concludes by highlighting the strategies employed by the most successful projects in terms of sustainability in relation to their positioning along the idealism/realism and purism/pragmatism nexus.

INTRODUCTION

In her well-known swamp metaphor, Rodríguez deconstructed the view that the often contingent, ephemerous, 'fragmented and improvised nature' (2001: 22) of alternative media is a reason to dismiss their political potential and disregard them as powerful agents of change. As she writes, alternative (or citizens') media's short life cycles leave 'what at first glance seems to be – no signature, no accomplishments, no successes. […] Instead, what we find is a multitude of small forces that surface and burst like bubbles in a swamp' (2001: 22). Rodríguez is of course right in pointing out the situatedness and historicity of subversive political action. At the same time, however, as much as 'these bubbles are a clear sign that the swamp is alive' (2001: 22), the vulnerability of alternative media is a crude reality, one that has consequences that surpass the life cycles of specific projects and the life experiences of their participants. Sandoval and Fuchs (2010) point out a particular danger they associate with participatory media but can be extended to alternative media in general, namely, the marginality that prevents them from gaining public visibility and establishing a broad counter-public sphere (the 'alternative ghetto' risk).

The literature on alternative media spares no effort in producing different definitions of the projects' social reality (radical, community, participatory, citizens', alternative, social movement, tactical, critical, rhizomatic media, to name some). Objections raised point either to the vagueness, emptiness, or the particularistic frames and connotations of these terms (Downing 2010). Acknowledging that none of these terms can provide a once-and-for-all term of a very heterogeneous, fluid and contested field, this article employs the term 'alternative' to acknowledge this elusiveness rather than as a definition 'to which [social] realities are then required to conform' (Gumucio Dagron 2004: 54).

Questions of sustainability touch upon two factors that have rarely been discussed in tandem: funding and structural organization, and community formation and outreach. The present study attempts to provide a dialectical understanding of these axes vis-à-vis alternative media resilience, exploring how a large number of diverse alternative media projects in Greece position themselves in terms of their political economy (idealism vs. realism) and their relationship with communities and audiences (purism vs. pragmatism). Besides theorizing the dialectical relationship of these axes, best practices and strategies are identified and discussed with a view of tackling the many challenges of the alternative media sector.

ALTERNATIVE AND COMMUNITY MEDIA

The renewed focus on alternative media has been sustained by approaches that work through syntheses of different areas and positions, evaluating the multiplicity and transformative nature of the research subject. Prevalent is here the employment of the 'alternative and community media' framework. For instance, a recent and vast companion to the subject, Chris Atton's (2015b) edited collective volume, evaluates alternative and community media as analytical categories to work with, reflecting on diverse applications across various contexts. The terms 'alternative' and 'community' reflect on two main reference points of the research subject: its tension with mainstream media (alternative) and the setting it takes place (community).

Several approaches put emphasis on the production/organization and the content/form of alternative media. A number of issues highlighted in the respective literature include alternative news and counter-information (Traber 1985; Herman and Chomsky [1994] 2002), alternative production/distribution (Duncombe 1997; Atton 2002), resistance/prefigurative politics (Downing 2001), activism (Lievrouw 2011) and critical content (Sandoval and Fuchs 2010). Other approaches focus more on the communication/usage and the context of participatory/community media. Here, prominent issues of consideration are community-building/development (Servaes 1999), public communication (Jankowski and Prehn 2002; Rennie 2006), civic engagement (Dahlgren 1995) and the enactment of citizenship (Rodríguez 2001).

Presenting alternative and community media as analytical categories allows us to capture the dynamics developed across such diverse domains (production/distribution, form/content, agents/users, engagement/reception, objective/purpose) of their realization. Studies avoiding a 'prescriptive definition' (Lewis 1993) and a 'reductionist understanding' (Atton 2015a) of the field have drawn on these categories (interchangeably, or jointly used). Lewis' (1993) study on alternative/community's media impact (an UNESCO project on different media projects and contexts) has elaborately sketched a number of modalities (motive, funding, organizational structure, message content, relationship with audience, composition of the audience etc.) upon which 'alternativeness' is constructed (experienced or expressed). In the scope of a broader study on alternative and community media, Atton highlights also multiple dimensions of their implementation, from the political economy of media production (organizational practices, critical content) to community formation and engagement, considering also a number of challenges addressed as 'practices develop and the context around them develops' (2015a: 3).[1]

AND SUSTAINABILITY

Questions of sustainability have a practical relevance to both political economy and relationship with the community/audience. As Coyer et al. (2007) put it,

> sustainability is not just about financial security but it is also about how your project is set up and organised, how it is distributed and who the audience is – and what other means of social support and community participation might be a part of it.
>
> (2007: 261)

Research on the production and organization of alternative media has pointed out that a very controversial issue for alternative media is whether or not to employ mainstream economic and organizational mechanisms, techniques and skills. In Atton and Hamilton's (2008) words, 'the general political-economic dilemma for any critical project is that it needs resources with which to work, but those crucial resources are present only in the very society that it seeks to change or dissolve' (2008: 26). According to the Comedia (1984) report on the underdevelopment of alternative press, the marginality of the sector ('alternative ghetto') stems from its internal weaknesses:

1. The hybridization of alternative media (see Carpentier et al. 2003) and the ambivalent role of the corporate social web (see Fuchs 2014) figure prominently in this regard.

the absence of a clear conception of target audiences and of marketing strategies to reach new audiences; the failure to develop necessary skills in the areas of administration and financial planning; and the commitment to an inflexible model of collectivity as the solution to all organizational problems.

(1984: 95)

On the other hand, Khiabany (2000) critically reflects on Comedia's proposal for alternative media to employ mainstream economic and organizational techniques, drawing on the failure of a British leftish publication (*Red Pepper*) that followed Comedia's business strategy; by contrast, leftish publications that followed the more orthodox, Leninist-socialist model (closely tied to working-class or socialist parties), 'have survived longer and have attracted more readers that did the attempt to construct a broader and more commercially sophisticated alternative' (2000: 462).[2] The discussion on the sustainability of alternative media provides a prolific context for further research. These crisp reflections on the financial and organizational levels of alternative media ask for considering and comparing different strategies employed in the political economy spectrum (from idealistic to realistic ones): reject or accept advertising and any kind of funding related to capitalism; collective or more institutionalized organization; volunteer engagement or paid labour models; and de-professionalization or distinct professional roles.

Regarding communication and usage of alternative media, the discussion on sustainability has been addressed in terms of the democratization of communication, satisfying the communication needs of certain groups, from diverse perspectives. In the development paradigms, the issue at stake is the redistribution of communication power, in terms of facilitating access and participation of excluded, marginalized communities in the communication system (see Berrigan 1979), eminently addressed in the MacBride proposal (MacBride and International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems 1980) to consider another human right entitlement, the 'right to communication'. In the western context, community communication is conceptualized in terms of small-scale forms of public communication, promoting communicative exchange and social action (Hollander and Stappers 1992). Both above-sketched frameworks of democratization of communication have fuelled further reflections on the field, acknowledging subtle complexities and dimensions in regard to cultural and social identities as well as to subordinate and specialist groups' interests. Accordingly, different accounts evaluate diverse aspects of reflexive engagement in/with community media, on the grounds of enhancing participatory communication, or the very realm of public sphere(s). In any case, 'processes of empowerment, conscientization and fragmentation of power' (Rodríguez 2003: 190) run through the dispersed nature of engagement in/with citizens' media. That said, the issue at stake is how such an engagement is constructed. Elaborating into the communicative procedures (of production), Huesca points out the 'two-sidedness' of alternative communication: 'participatory media involve marginalizing, as well as empowering, giving voice, as well as taking voice away' (1995: 115). Broadly, this contradiction reflects on the nature of the relationship of alternative media with their communities/audiences/users, in terms of either creating/preserving a niche (purism) or reaching out to broader audiences (pragmatism).

RESEARCH FOCUS

Few studies have dialectically probed into diverse domains of alternative media, and they do so by focusing on a single-case study. Bailey et al. (2008) contextualize their multi-dimensional approach on alternative media highlighting diverse positions, identities (serving community, alternative to mainstream, linking to civil society, rhizomatic links) articulated in the Brazilian movie *Radio Favela.* Kejanıoğlu et al. (2012), drawing on the Independent Communication Network (BIA) in Turkey, examine participation at both production and reception ends,[3] paying attention at a rather neglected dimension of the alternative media studies, the audience/user (Downing 2003).

The present study, having an interest in alternative media sustainability, probes into a number of factors related to both the political economy of these projects and the nature of the relationship with their communities/audiences. It does so by considering and comparing diverse alternative media projects implemented in a specific social, political, cultural and technological context (Greece), 'tak[ing] account of the situatedness of these media' (Atton 2015a: 9). Specifically, the research evaluates alternative media producers' positions on the production/organization and the communication/reach of their projects, pointing out challenges and tensions in running and maintaining alternative media projects. The sample of the study reflects on diverse inputs (social movements, communities and civic actors) in the production of alternative media projects. Also, the research interest in the communication/reach of these projects cannot but come across the audience side too. As Downing (2003) points out, 'alternative-media activists represent in a sense the most active segment of the so-called "active-audience"' (2003: 625–26). One would imagine that they above all would be passionately concerned with how their own media products were being received and used'.

Against this background, the study explores alternative media sustainability across a wide range of Greek projects[4] (see Appendix for a brief description), reflecting on two research questions:

1. To what extent are the various projects characterized by idealism or realism in terms of their political economy?
2. What approaches and practices (purism vs. pragmatism) do they employ to consolidate or extend relationships with their communities/audiences?

FIELDWORK

To answer these questions, we carried out interviews with media producers in fifteen alternative media projects.[5] To sample them, we first created a comprehensive map of alternative media projects from various sources (lists aggregating alternative media in Greece, searches in search engines, lists of projects provided by the most well-known alternative media). Sixty alternative media were originally selected and separated into different categories, according to their aim, core identity (e.g., topical focus, political affiliation), frequency of activity and media type (e.g., print, online, radio, TV). According to this categorization and aiming at creating a sample that would reflect the diversity of these projects, a list of 31 projects was compiled. Up to three invitations by e-mail were sent out, followed by telephone calls (where available). Participants from fifteen media projects replied positively and face-to-face or teleconference in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted by the authors (individually or in groups of two). The interviews lasted on average

one hour and 45 minutes, ranging from 43 minutes to 2.5 hours. Being part of a larger project, the interview guide included 40 open-ended questions focusing on wide range of topics (e.g., the producers' life trajectories, the projects' characteristics, aims and claims, structure and funding, principles and values, ideological positions, perceived effects and self-criticism). In the current analysis, we draw on materials addressing our research questions. The analysis was complemented with information and documents available in the projects' websites (e.g., mission statements, project description and aims).

ANALYSIS

The analysis of the case studies in relation to their (1) funding and organization and (2) the relationship with their community is deployed across two axes accordingly (Figure 1): (1) idealism (rejection of advertising and any kind of external funding, collective organization, volunteer engagement, de-professionalization) – realism (acceptance of advertising and other sources of funding despite dependencies, more institutionalized organization, rejection of voluntarism, distinct professional roles); (2) purism (creating/preserving a niche and establishing an 'imaginary' relationship with audiences) – pragmatism (reaching out to broader audiences and engaging in interaction with them).

FUNDING AND ORGANIZATION: IDEALISM VS. REALISM

Idealism

In the idealism-realism axis (see Figure 1), several alternative media projects occupy the one end, exhibiting all features of the 'idealist' condition in terms of their political economy: *Black-Tracker*, *Anarxeio*, *RebelNet*, *Clandestina*, *ResPublica*, *M, Babylonia* and *Omikron*. All these projects are self-funded, mainly through unpaid work by the producers.
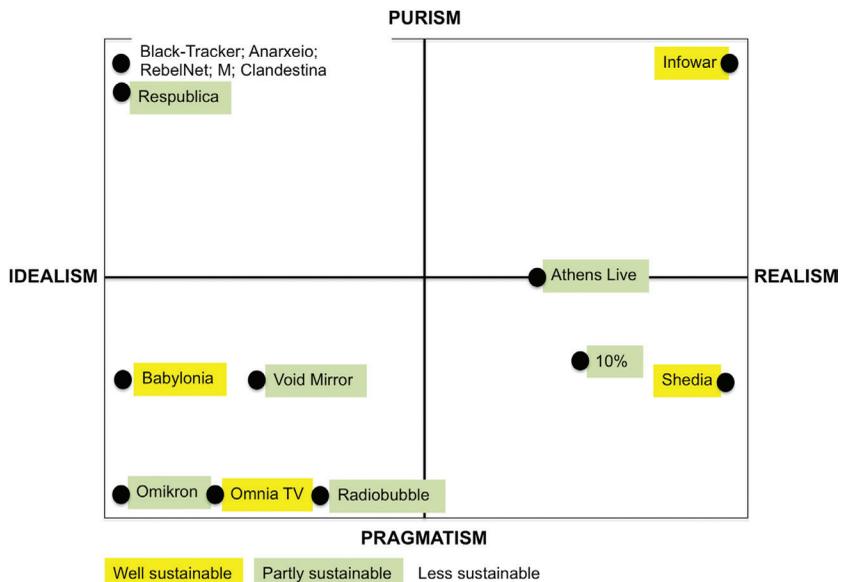

Figure 1: Mapping of alternative media projects in two axes: idealism-realism and purism-pragmatism.

> I have supported financially all expenses – and indeed amid unemploy-
> ment. Because with one and a half months of work per year, you cannot
> cover the costs of a website.
>
> (Markos, *M*)

As they are all online-only projects (with the exception of *Babylonia* that
publishes a print issue of the magazine annually) with low-operating costs, the
producers either cover these costs themselves or fund them through events,
such as parties and festivals, some donations, and, in the case of *Babylonia*,
the sales of the annual issue of the magazine. The decision to create a web-
native project was in most cases dictated by cost-related reasons. *Babylonia*,
for instance, started as a print newspaper in 2003, shifted to print magazine in
2011 and became an online-only magazine in 2015.

With the exception of *Babylonia*, which is one of the most long-lived
projects studied and has a firm presence, the rest of the projects are, more or
less, in a state of precariousness. Despite this, they outright reject advertising
and any other kind of external funding, such as sponsorships and grants, for
ethical reasons as well as to preserve their trustworthiness:

> No, out of the question. This would be a disgrace.
>
> (Pinelopi, *Clandestina*)

> No, no, no, this is against all principles! […] Otherwise, our credibility
> is gone. […] Nothing, nothing, nothing! There is no company behind it,
> there is no scheme. It's just a group of volunteers who do this.
>
> (Christina, *Omikron*)

Even practices such as crowdfunding are out of the question, in principle
(because they have been 'appropriated by capitalism') but also out of frustra-
tion for the lack of support by audiences in Greece:

> Interviewer: Have you considered crowd-funding as a model?
> Of course not, because there is also an ideological issue […] We are
> trying to avoid using capitalism's tools […] Where is crowdfunding
> based? On solidarity. On free financial contribution […] A very good
> tool for capitalism, that's what it is [nowadays].
>
> (Markos, *M*)

> generally, people go to concerts but do not spend money […] It's the
> existing mentality. They don't support any endeavors […] raising money
> to support a counter-information project is the worst part […] Not
> doable.
>
> (Markos, *M*)

Omnia TV also falls under the idealism category in terms of its political
economy, sustained by voluntary work, contributions by people close to the
producers, donations through the website and, occasionally, by selling prod-
ucts such as T-shirts. Having tried advertising through AdSense (in their view,
the only form of advertising that does not create direct dependencies), they

soon abandoned it, because of low turnout and high management cost. In general, they outright reject direct advertising because of the dependencies it incurs:

> Whatever principals or rules we establish about what kind of advertising we accept, we would still be operating as a company, more or less. For instance, if a small shop or enterprise places an ad and tomorrow, we realise that there is a complaint by employees for labor exploitation, what will we do? Take the ad down? Return the money? Play dumb? Not publish the complaint? These are the problems that stem from capitalism and we don't want any of that.
>
> (Andreas, *Omnia TV*)

Omnia TV's producers have many qualms about the use of corporate social media (Facebook, Twitter) and are very conscious about the inequalities they create. Although they use them heavily, they are aware of their disempowering effect on *collective* alternative media projects:

> What probably plays a role in the weakening of grassroots information projects is that many users now act directly, individually. I don't know if this is good or bad but social media encourage direct uploading by any user. They build a brand, e.g. user x is a well-known user who takes pictures and informs about what happens in Athens etc. This functions in a dissipating way regarding the past tendency for more collective media.
>
> (Andreas, *Omnia TV*)

Other projects combine idealistic with realistic positions. *Void Mirror* is based on a principle of 'zero economics', meaning no investment in neither profit from the project. While all activities are self-funded (external funding is precluded), more popular activities (e.g., festivals) help fund smaller and more artistic projects. The 'zero economics' strategy reflects an idealistic 'counter-corporatization' ethos within the collective that has helped participants establish 'authentic relations', without 'allowing capital to come between them' (Damianos, *Void Mirror*). In more realistic terms, *Void Network*, the collectivity that runs *Void Mirror*, assists artists and intellectuals publicize and sustain their art/work by 'dipping into the mainstream by any means they prefer', beyond the project. *Radiobubble* has also combined various means and models of financing. It started as a self-financed web radio project (later included a citizen journalism project, #rbnews) by two participants, who got a loan to initiate the project. Attempts to attain sustainability included offering courses (the 'hackacademy'), crowdfunding, drinks from a café-bar that was the physical place of the project for a period of time, donations by participants in the project, and advertising local, neighbouring businesses and organizations. Financially unstable but successful in terms of citizen participation, the project underwent a crisis when the prospect of making profit, as well as accepting state sponsorship, created a cleavage in the core team. At the moment, the project works as a social cooperative enterprise and is hosted by a theatre in Athens, compensating for its rent and bill expenses by advertising the theatre.

In terms of internal organization and structures, these projects also resemble the alternative media archetype (see Atton 2002). The preferred model of internal organization is characterized more or less by structurelessness, which

takes the form of absence of distinct roles and tasks for participants and firm time frames. Partly due to the small size of the project teams and the friendly relations among the members, a formal organization becomes unnecessary.

> Relationships are made of friendship, camaraderie and politics all at once and this is, let's say, the big strength of any collectivity.
>
> (Pinelopi, *Clandestina*)

Organization is generally collective and de-professionalized, with rotation in allocation of responsibilities, based on the values of solidarity, respect, trust and accountability. The form and intensity of participation is usually decided by the participants themselves, consciously avoiding formal designation of roles:

> everyone knows a bit of everything […] there is a common experience that's shared, because everybody goes through every position.
>
> (Damianos, *Void Mirror*)

> Each one puts in whatever time they have. It's just that John [fake name] and I and some of the other guys do a little bit more because we are more attached to it […] It's a collective effort because each one does what they can. Now it so happens that for the meetings us two are more flexible […] For some of the other guys who have jobs, it's a bit harder.
>
> (Christina, *Omikron*)

> there is solidarity amongst us, meaning that when someone has under-taken something, there is no way someone won't go to help out.
>
> (Zoi, *Babylonia*)

Omnia TV, despite following the same lines, is the only project in the idealist category that is not afraid of (a degree of) institutionalization. For instance, its producers consider the possibility of creating a cooperative company to implement productions (e.g., documentaries) that could help sustain the main project (*Omnia TV*). Also, they are open to a partial professionalization of citizen journalism in exchange for being granted some privileges now restricted to professional journalists (e.g., accreditation and subsequently access to official sources).

Realism

At the other end of the idealism-realism spectrum, we find four projects: *10%*, *Athens Live*, *Infowar* and *Shedia* – the latter two being the 'purest' types of realist projects. In terms of funding, *Shedia* is the most successful project of our sample. With a business model that combines commercial advertising, subscriptions, fundraising events and donations/sponsorships from the private sector (~50 per cent of the magazine's expenses combined), as well as revenue from sales (the remaining 50 per cent), *Shedia* has achieved financial stability during the past five years. As recounted by one of its producers, the people who had envisioned the project spent six years looking for a start-up funding. Utterly disillusioned by the rejections due to the nepotism of the Greek political system, they applied for a grant to Stavros Niarchos Foundation[6] and submitted an elaborate and well-thought business plan. After scrutinizing the plan, the foundation granted them €80,000 as start-up funding.

6. A charitable foundation supporting various non-profit organizations created by a multi-billionaire shipping tycoon.

10%, a magazine focusing on gay issues and fighting homophobia, attempted to follow a similar path combining advertising, sponsorships and volunteer work, but abandoned this model after two years finding itself in debt due to advertisements that were never paid. Frustrated by the failure of the advertising model and rejecting online ads due to poor revenue and low quality (explicit sexual content), the magazine has now ceased looking for advertisers. Yet, they are still in favour of mainstream advertising despite the possible dangers (e.g., 'pinkwashing'); achieving financial independence to achieve their end objective is preferred over maintaining a pure ideological stance:

> To achieve my goal, I can use whatever means I deem appropriate. Mainstream advertising is one such means. […] It's one thing to have a leftist opinion, I respect it but […] I believe it's wrong because it doesn't help me fight homophobia and repression […] It is possible, of course, that a coca-cola ad will facilitate pinkwashing. I will take this into account, I will take measures not to allow it.
>
> (Pavlos, *10%*)

Similarly, *Shedia*'s producers have few concerns about advertising (state or commercial). Based on their experience so far, they do not believe that advertising interferes with their social mission or their journalistic writing. Therefore, with the exception of extreme cases, they are not selective towards advertisers.

In short, *Shedia* operates in ways similar to a healthy corporate media organization, and its producers do not regard this funding model as antithetical to their function as an alternative, socially oriented media project. *Infowar*, an independent, critical but largely professional news project, is funded by selling its radio documentary to affiliated radio stations, publishing articles in other outlets, by online donations and commercial advertising through AdSense. Online ads were chosen because of the project's inability to attract advertisement through traditional channels: although the journalist attempted to get a share in the advertising market, his project was 'blacklisted' by advertising agencies, due to his radical journalistic stance. *Athens Live*, a project started in 2015 to create an alternative model for independent professional media, employed crowdfunded, earning €25,000 from the campaign, and set up a non-profit organization. Accepting neither advertising nor sponsorships and depending mainly on volunteering journalists (who work as freelancers for other media), it is funded so far by international projects (funded by Google and the European Union) and similar funding schemes.

In terms of internal organization, *Shedia* is a rather centralized organization with a core team of seven paid professionals. The content of the magazine is produced by volunteering journalists, some of which (those in the most precarious state) get paid occasionally. The people who make up the core team have distinct professional roles, according to a clear hierarchical structure. In general, *Shedia*'s producers view the magazine through the lens of 'professionalism', striving to make a 'product' as good as possible to satisfy the audience – alongside the social goal of supporting the homeless. Likewise, the producer of *Infowar* carries the mentality of the media professional. Being the sole producer of his project (apart from a paid collaborator responsible for the technical support), he objects to volunteers' engagement – in principle (considering it exploitation) and for practical reasons. *10%* and *Athens Live* also embrace professionalism. *10%* has a rather centralized organization with

a small core editorial team. There is some hierarchy (there is a director), but other roles are more flexible. *Athens Live* experimented with horizontal organization practices but abandoned them in favour of a model of clear division of tasks and roles.

RELATIONSHIP WITH COMMUNITIES AND AUDIENCES: PURISM VS. PRAGMATISM

Purism

Several of the projects analysed in this study occupy the 'purist' end in respect to their relationship with communities and audiences of their projects. Purism consists, on the one hand, in maintaining a rather enclaved community and not reaching beyond a niche audience – what Sandoval and Fuchs call 'individualistic spaces of withdrawal' (2010: 143) – and on the other hand, in adopting a fairly monological model of communication and forming an imaginary relationship with audiences.

The projects adhering to anarchist politics (*Black-Tracker/Anarxeio/RebelNet*, *M*) are rather closed circuits. They exclusively address the anarchist public sphere, and the projects are not actively communicated in the broader alternative media realm. Despite some concerns about how the broader anarchist movement can reach to 'the people', *M*'s producer considers the project's readers as a niche audience (in ideological terms), which is not expected to increase or decrease considerably:

> We have to think in today's terms and conditions, how we'll be able to fight based on our ideology and how we'll approach the people […] [M]'s audience is pretty standard. You don't expect it to grow nor shrink. This is a significant matter.
>
> (Markos, *M*)

The producer of *Infowar* acknowledges that his radical/polemical analysis of news 'preaches to the converted':

> This is always the problem of all these efforts, what in English is called 'preaching to the converted'; with Debtocracy [documentary] only a few times I feel we succeeded in opening up to a world we had no relation with […] more or less these projects get stigmatized and […] people who are politically and ideologically across from you […] you don't win them over easily, […] very slowly you may expand your reach.
>
> (Leonidas, *Infowar*)

Similarly, the producers of *Clandestina*, when asked about the project's weaknesses, acknowledge the need to further bring together dissimilar groups to form a common front:

> we didn't manage to create many self-organized cells with immigrants and Greeks, all together, all over Greece.
>
> (Pinelopi, *Clandestina*)

The producers of these purist alternative media imagine their audiences in terms of homophily, namely, as broadly like-minded people, open to critical analysis of ideas but within a certain ideological sphere. Envisaged as

channels to communicate and strengthen a particular 'voice' or achieve certain goals, they do not typically encourage discussion, at least not in the online spaces their projects operate. For instance, in *M*, dialogue with readers is generally rare, whereas in the immigration-focused project *Clandestina,* the producers have an imaginary relation with their audience – solidarity citizens/ groups, individuals working in non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and media professionals on the basis of providing information for immigrants and refugees. Similarly, the producer of *Infowar* engages rarely in actual interaction and discussion with the audience: social media are used mostly for the promotion of his articles and radio documentaries. From a different perspective, the producer of *ResPublica* imagines his audience in terms of 'people who are doing PhD' (Iraklis, *ResPublica*). Moreover, he has reservations about the role of the Internet and social media in communicating a discourse, as they are considered 'suitable for dissemination/promotion, not for discussion'.

Pragmatism

Pragmatism is used here as 'reaching out' to a broader community and involving processes of interaction and discussion so that a 'real' relationship with audiences is formed.

Pragmatism is adopted by several alternative media projects. *Omikron*, for instance, embraces a strategy of open participation in the project by welcoming anyone who is willing to contribute in the group's physical meetings. In terms of reach, *Omikron* producers adopt a tactical approach: they attempt to get their message across mainstream media by, first, creating content that the latter cannot ignore and, second, by working with journalists to show them different viewpoints about political and social issues in Greece, using the language of 'facts' instead of advocating 'opinions':

> We give the data and tell a story with them […] You don't see an opinion anywhere. You don't see an editorial line being forced […] our goal is to make them think twice about what they'll say. Not just the journalists but whoever consumes these media. We are successful in that. […] It's just facts, nothing more. […] You just show two sides of the same coin.
> (Christina, *Omikron*)

Omnia TV is the only project in our sample that adopts the open publishing model: anyone can publish an article or create a TV show, without pre-moderation; any objections are discussed openly in the comments section in each post. *Omnia TV* not only pays particular attention to web analytics to understand the audience but also establishes a real relationship with readers, utilizing the feedback mechanisms of social media. At the same time, it assumes an inclusive approach and invites diverse (political) voices, aspiring to reach beyond the anarchist milieu and not be restricted to 'counter-information':

> we want to reach as many people as possible, beyond specific political camps […]. We always had in the back of our minds another way to make [the project] a bit broader accepted. Meaning you don't have to tell someone 'I am anti-…' beforehand. Not to hide your position but there is no reason to say, 'do you accept me? I'm anti-…' Present information in the right way with the right methodology, without lies, without

misinformation, without spin, distortion or isolated truths to support a point of view, and one will decide whether your position makes sense or not.

(Andreas, *Omnia TV*)

Radiobubble has been a very successful case of citizen-led media, in journalism (the creation of the data journalism project rbdata.gr, collaborating to The Migrant Files project that won European Press Prize), and beyond it. It succeeded in forming diverse communities of interest (around music and news), virtually and physically, extending its reach to conventional as well as radical voices across a wide spectrum of perspectives. Like *Omnia TV*, it established a real relationship with its audiences and users through regular interaction in physical and digital spaces alike – what they themselves called 'phygital'. However, this vibrant community subsided over time and the citizen journalism part of the project died away, leaving a smaller group of amateur producers focused on music. *Radiobubble* interviewees reflect on the extreme difficulty to manage in practice, without sufficient resources, such a plethoric and open project – from training everyone in technical issues to maintaining a diversity of perspectives within it. Interviewees express their feelings of 'failure' in this respect:

We were failing miserably […] to manage the ideas that kept emerging from our people. Because all of this was happening by putting in personal work hours without pay […] whereas it could thrive if there was financial autonomy […] In my opinion we failed to manage all this panspermia because it outgrew us.

(Ermis, *Radiobubble*)

The pragmatic ethos is less explicit, but still noticeable, in *Babylonia*, *Void Mirror*, *Shedia* and *Athens Live*. *Babylonia* has attempted to extend its reach beyond anarchist publics. It organizes the annual, international, anti-authoritarian festival B-Fest and engages in many ad hoc initiatives and collaborations with other alternative media, social centres and journalists from mainstream left-leaning media. The online magazine 'hosts' different voices, sometimes even liberal positions, and facilitates interaction with its users through various channels (e-mail, social media and the circulation of a weekly newsletter). At the same time, however, this outreach is generally situated within the broader institutional framework of anti-authoritarian politics, excluding perspectives that may challenge this framework:

There are red lines of course […] Anything that contains the notion of power doesn't have a place in [the project].

(Athina, *Babylonia*)

Void Mirror perceives its audience as a community of already active, critical-thinking people, as 'comrades':

We don't differentiate between ourselves and the audience, in fact, we are addressing comrades, people who are already active […] with critical thinking […] and we are trying to create the conditions where the audience becomes a participant in the production.

(Damianos, *Void Mirror*)

It establishes a 'real' relationship with audiences based on the creation of 'actually lived realities' (events or situations). This emanates from their 'counter-theoretical' philosophy, namely, the conviction that the production discourse should be experiential (lived experiences) rather than textual (articles and speeches). The *Void Mirror* interviewee also stressed the diversity of perspectives and backgrounds of participants in the project and reflected on the project's main aspiration, that is, to bring various subcultures in contact with each other and allow them to blend. The collectivity has initiated various projects with other groups, some of them from different political milieus. However, this diversity occurs within a rather well-defined ideological framework, the 'libertarian culture'. *Shedia* is a street paper and its journalistic content touches upon various topics, news of general interest as well as entertainment, for example, sports, targeted at broad audiences. Although the producers do not have in place mechanisms of regular interaction with readers, they employ market tools such as audience surveys to understand the audience and strive to satisfy their informational needs by delivering a 'product' (the magazine) of high quality by professional standards. *Athens Live* has chosen to report news about Greece only in English, with a clear orientation towards international audiences. Its goal is to highlight and communicative alternative perspectives about political events in Greece and reach broader audiences, overcoming what they consider a short-sighted perspective prevalent in Greece about 'alternativeness':

> We don't want to stay an alternative project. We want to have a truly credible voice and a profile that will bring us a wider audience, that will break free from […] that mentality of the alternative.
>
> (Alekos, *Athens Live*)

Lastly, the gay magazine *10%* exhibits some elements of purism, such as providing limited interaction with readers of the magazine and addressing a particular community (gay men). On the other hand, the producers have seized every opportunity to contribute to mainstream venues in order to get the message across and not preach to the converted (Pavlos, *10%*), even if they have been criticized by purists:

> Because of *10%*, I was asked to write articles for other magazines. *Time Out Athens* discovered me from *10%* and asked me to do a gay column […] I did it to diffuse the message to the broad public […] To my expense, since I had to write about nightlife and I didn't know anything about that […] When I published this article in Protagon, I was accused of being a sell-out […] [Regardless, I did it] to diffuse the message where I do not have access.
>
> (Pavlos, *10%*)

Despite the absence of mechanisms for regular interaction with readers in the online magazine itself, the producers of *10%* engage in other activities that they regard as synergistic to the media project, such as excursions, dance lessons and board games, aiming at creating shared realities for gay people. In their view, these activities attract significant numbers of people due to the 'brand name' the magazine has created, in respect to its quality and trustworthiness, which, in turn, has earned the gay community's trust. Participation in these events is, therefore, the means by which the project creates a sustaining

relationship with communities and which, in turn, creates a solid basis for further developing the project.

> We have gotten much feedback about all that *10%* has to offer not only as a publication but as a brand name, because our dances are the *10%* dances, our yoga is the 10% yoga […] So this brand name, with the trustworthiness that has now, provides a safe setting, one knows that he will go there and […] will be safe.
>
> (Pavlos, *10%*)

DISCUSSION: STRATEGIES AND PRACTICES TO ACHIEVE SUSTAINABILITY

The sustainability of alternative media projects is assessed in terms of their financial viability and their longevity. In this section, we discuss how the positioning of the various alternative media discussed, in terms of their political economy and their relationship with their audiences and communities, is related to their (prospects of) sustainability. The most successful projects in this respect are found at the bottom and the top right in the respective mapping according to their idealistic-realistic and puristic-pragmatic features (see Figure 1).

Realism-pragmatism

Clearly, the most accomplished project in terms of financial stability is the street paper *Shedia*, selling up to 30,000 copies monthly and attracting significant funds from the market. *Shedia* combines a realistic approach in its political economy with a pragmatic approach in terms of its relation to its audience. More particularly, *Shedia*'s success seems to be a result of crafting a well-thought business model, adopting mainstream tools and strategies such as commercial advertising, sponsorships from the private sector, and professional tools for audience analysis to produce a 'marketable' product. The success of this model allowed them to overcome the volunteering model and sustain a team of paid 'employees', embedded in a hierarchical organizational structure. Key to this success is their decision to reach beyond partial publics, by producing journalistic content with a broader appeal, by professional standards. *Shedia* has succeeded thus far in maintaining a balance between editorial independence and its embeddedness in the market: its producers do not feel that these strategies mess with the social mission of the project or threaten their independence in terms of editorial practices. However, *Shedia* is not engaged in radical political criticism or counter-information reporting practices that can be seen as openly challenging the status quo.

Other projects that combine realistic and pragmatic approaches have less apparent prospects of viability, such as *10%* and *Athens Live*, mainly because neither of them has settled in clear business strategies, although they have been experimenting with many models (e.g., social, cooperative enterprise, non-profit organization). A positive strategy that stands out, despite not (yet) translated into a clear model for revenue, is *10%*'s practice of creating a 'real', rather than imaginary, relation to its audience by engaging affiliated communities through events that create shared realities. Here, sustainability emerges mainly out of the trust with which the magazine is endowed by audiences and is then extended to synergistic activities, which, in turn, deepen this relationship. *Athens Live*, on the other hand, in its quest of novel ways to achieve

financial independence, is at the crossroads of a strategic decision – to run as a non-profit organization or as a start-up company (calling for investors). Still, some rather dubious strategies of organizing the project echo practices quite common in neo-liberal markets. For instance, the motivation of journalists volunteering in the project is based on the expectation of building a personal reputation and being 'discovered' by professional media as freelancers for paid assignments. At the same time, participants are expected to 'get rid of the ideology of the freelancer' (Alekos, *Athens Live*) to advance the 'collective good' of the project (which means that the project is credited for news pieces produced instead of individual media workers).

Realism-purism

Infowar, the only project in this sample that combines realism with purism, has also proven viable so far. Basically a 'one-man project', it has managed to build a reputation and sustain itself, as part of a broader network of the journalist's productions, including critical documentaries produced through crowdfunding and articles published in other outlets. Uncompromised in its radical stance of reporting and news analysis, it restricts itself to a specific audience, to which is related in a rather monological manner. Yet, the key factor to this project's viability seems to be professionalism and the subsequent high quality of reporting and documentaries, which has gained the audience's trust, although this is not yet translated into direct revenue. In this sense, purism (addressing a niche audience) is not necessarily antithetical to sustainability, as long as there are some mechanisms of capitalizing audience loyalty.

Purism-idealism

When mixed with idealism, however, purism does not seem to create favourable conditions for sustainability. The purist-idealist projects under study are in a precarious situation as they depend entirely on the participants' continued availability in terms of time and resources. The producers themselves recognize this weakness as they report difficulties in keeping the project updated in a consistent basis, while being active in the off-line world (*Clandestina*, *ResPublica*), and under-functioning of these initiatives as they realize that they have not reached their full potential (*Black-Tracker*, *Anarxeio*, *RebelNet*). Some of them (e.g., *M*) are not particularly optimistic about the future in this respect. Therefore, maintaining an idealistic position, namely, excluding any form of external funding and depending on volunteer engagement of a rather closed circle of participants, while preserving a puristic approach on communication, by refraining from extending their outreach to broader audiences and engaging in interaction with existing audiences, renders the endurance of these projects challenging.

Idealism-pragmatism

The idealist-pragmatist projects analysed show rather good prospects of sustainability, especially *Babylonia* and *Omnia TV*. The former is a project that has survived for a long time (fifteen years, in different formats) and shows no signs of decline. Despite depending on voluntary work, its broad network of collaborations, and the organization of successful events such as B-fest, provides the project with sufficient resources to go on. *Omnia TV* producers' commitment and enthusiasm, as well as its solid organization (secure space,

equipped studio), also create positive prospects. In addition, *Omnia TV* is open to partial institutionalization and conditional professionalization as a potential strategy to develop the project further, without compromising its critical character. Structurelessness, then, does not emerge as an inhibiting factor for these projects. In fact, for the *Omikron* project, its structurelessness, flexibility and de-institutionalization are considered by its producers its strongest assets in terms of its sustainability. Being a project constantly in motion, where a plethora of different people come and go, is considered by its producers the element that averts the danger of the project being shut down; instead, it increases the possibility that it evolves into something different. Structurelessness, however, proved less beneficial for *Radiobubble,* in the long run. In its current phase, *Radiobubble* seems to lurch compared to earlier phases of vibrant engagement of citizens and important achievements. In this case, structurelessness combined with rather spasmodic experimentation with many projects at the same time (live broadcast, podcast, citizen journalism on Twitter) and random choices of ways to secure resources did not increase the project's chances for sustainability. In the case of *Void Mirror*, what emerges as a rewarding strategy (like *10%* discussed above) is the creation of synergistic events, which continuously engage interested groups and individuals in meaningful activities.

In conclusion, the dialectical evaluation of the political economy of alternative media and their relationship with their audiences and communities adds further nuances to the questions of sustainability of these projects, evaluating various interdependent factors that impact the ongoing stability and health of alternative media. The findings of this research reveal a dynamic and contradictory field of less deterministic prospects than the ones implied by the Comedia's commercial strategy and the critique on it. Several resilient projects are situated in the very extreme edges of the research's two-axes spectrum, combining idealistic and pragmatic, or realistic and, more or less, puristic features. These reflections call for further research on how such hybrid practices are associated with their critical-oppositional character and deal with challenges and tensions that arise.

APPENDIX: DESCRIPTION OF THE PROJECTS

10%: established in 2000 as non-governmental organization (NGO); in 2004, it launched a print magazine which since 2006 is online only. It covers LGBT issues, against gendered oppression (http://www.10percent.gr).

Anarxeio (2000): digital library of texts and publications that support the broad anarchist, anti-authoritarian movement (http://anarxeio.gr).

Athens Live (2015): independent on-the-ground source for stories, news and images about Greece (in English), cross-platform based – Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram and Medium (http://athenslive.gr).

Babylonia: launched in 2003 as newspaper, changed into magazine in 2011, and since 2015 online only (and publishing an annual print issue); supports the anti-authoritarian movement.

Black-Tracker (2006): counter-information web project sharing anarchist movement-related resources through torrents (http://www.black-tracker.gr).

Clandestina: launched in 2007 as website and since 2009 a blog of independent information for refugees and migrants coming to Europe (http://clandestinenglish.wordpress.com).

Infowar (2008): independent, critical, professional online news project (http://info-war.gr).

M (2012): anarchist news website (initially blog).

Omikron (2012): website covering the 'untold' side of Greece's crisis (http://omikronproject.gr).

Omnia TV (2011, originated in a blog formed in 2008): independent grassroots news platform, covering various social struggles (http://omniatv.com).

Radiobubble (2007): grassroots web radio – initially a music radio; then initiated a citizen journalism project; now an 'intergalactic radio' (http://radiobubble.gr).

RebelNet (2010): website and publisher (translations) of theoretical texts supporting the antagonistic movement (http://www.rebelnet.gr).

ResPublica (2015): online magazine of political and philosophical theory (http://www.respublica.gr).

Shedia: established in 2010 as a non-profit organization; in 2013, launched a street paper supporting homeless people.

Void Mirror: launched as website in 2004, since 2007 online magazine about the anti-globalization movement, initiated by the collectivity *Void Network* (http://voidmirror.blogspot.com).

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CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Dimitra L. Milioni (Ph.D. in new media and communication, BA in journalism and media studies, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki) is currently assistant professor of media studies at the Department of Communication and Internet Studies, Cyprus University of Technology. Her research generally focuses on the impact of communication technologies on the public sphere and civil society. She has published about 30 journal articles and book chapters on topics relating to media, media audiences, journalism, communication technologies and social and political conflict. She is currently coordinating the H2020 RePAST project, which focuses on the analysis of conflict discourses about troubled pasts, and she has directed, co-directed or participated as a researcher in several other national and international projects. Her research interests include alternative and participatory media, activism and protest, audience participation, political communication and critical data/algorithm studies.

Contact: Department of Communication and Internet Studies, Cyprus University of Technology, 187, Anexartisias Str., Limassol 3040, Cyprus.
E-mail: dimitra.milioni@cut.ac.cy

http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2342-4952

Pantelis Vatikiotis (Ph.D., MA in media and communication studies, University of Westminster, London; BA in sociology, Panteion University, Athens) is assistant professor at the Department of Communication, Media and Culture, at Panteion University of Social and Political Sciences in Athens, Greece. He supervises two research labs on critical analysis of the Web and alternative journalism, and he is currently coordinator of the postgraduate programme in information society, media and technology. His research interests include sociology of media, digital journalism, social media, alternative media practices, social movements and activism, media and democracy. His publications include several book chapters and journal articles in international academic publications.

Contact: Department of Communication, Media and Culture, Panteion University of Social and Political Sciences, 136, Syggrou Av., Athens 176 71, Greece.
E-mail: p.vatikiotis@panteion.gr

http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1124-0061