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Greek Media and the Politics of Globalization

by

Sofia Iordanidou

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About the author of WP No 8 / August 2008

Dr. Sofia Iordanidou teaches Journalism at the University of Thessaloniki and is the CEO of *NetNews*.

She was born in Thessaloniki and studied Comparative Literature and Theatre at Queens College in New York. Her thesis was on the Italian play writer Luigi Pirandello.

She has worked in the USA as a journalist accredited to the White House, news broadcaster at the “Voice of America” and correspondent for various Greek newspapers. For four years she taught as a Lecturer at the Romance Language Department at Queens College. Returning to Greece in 1989, she worked as a journalist, TV anchorwoman, and producer at ERT and Mega Chanel. In 1995 she organized and directed the Public Relations Department of Mega Chanel for three years. In 1998 she founded *NetNews*, the first TV news agency in Greece and in 2003 she founded *NetResult*, a Public Relations company. In 1993-1995 she taught Theater and Journalism at the University of Athens.

She has published several articles and studies in the field of Mass Media and Communications and she is the author of the books *Dalga Dalga* and *The game of the parts – How Pirandello Was Received in Greece*.

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Greek Media and the Politics of Globalization

by Sofia Iordanidou

Introduction

Greece is a country with a young media market. Private TV was launched in 1989 and satellite in 2000. In October 2003 the country sent its first satellite into orbit. As a relative newcomer to the information age Greece still plays a peripheral role in global media networks.

The media represents power. It is an industry, as well as a profession—one which influences the lives and identities of anyone who owns a TV set or a computer equipped with a modem. The media is a culture, a custom or a habit, a ceremony between those who create and those who use it and try to understand the way it works.

As befits a country which is, at times, deeply traditional and at other times preoccupied with modernity, Greece's media often behaves paradoxically. To begin with, it has been almost wholly shaped by foreign raw materials and ideas—American when it comes to TV, European when it comes to print media—resulting in a distinctively new media landscape, unique and unrecognizable. While the media has been one of the main channels through which globalization exerts an increasingly strong pull, it has also provided a way for Greece to reach the rest of the world. Although Greeks spend much of their leisure time enjoying programming that comes from the United States, anti-Americanism is still pervasive. In general, globalization has not erased the "Greek exception" – the stubborn insistence on differentiating ourselves from world opinion.

At the core of Greece's experience with the media age is the identity crisis that each and every Greek journalist has, as does each and every Greek viewer, listener and reader.

It is exactly the opposite of what happens in America. Although the population of America comes from different cultural and ethnic roots, they live under the same framework of identity. Greeks, by contrast, are more or less homogenous ethnically, and yet are torn apart by different and contradictory elements of the same identity: the Balkans vs. Europe, east vs. west, north vs. south. As we shall see, this contradictory identity defines the Greek media's DNA.

Both Greece and the United States are proud of their free press, in part because of its importance to the concept of democracy. The United States is the strongest democracy in the

world and Greece is the place where democracy was created. It stands to reason, then, that both countries should be exemplars of freedom of the press.

According to Reporters Without Borders, however, this is not quite the case. Greece and the United States share the same ranking: 31st place. That puts them behind many European countries, including some in eastern Europe where an independent media became possible only recently, as well as behind some Latin American countries, such as Uruguay, Costa Rica, and Jamaica. In other words, the two great democracies of the west share a noteworthy shortcoming when it comes to their media.

To understand the Greek media, we have to take into account its history and culture. The conditions for developing a free, pluralistic press did not exist until 1974 when the colonels' junta collapsed. Before that, Greek television viewers had two choices: state-run TV and the navy TV. Even after democracy was restored in 1974, radio and television remained under state control until 1989 when the monopoly was finally lifted. Politics affected the pace of reform, with governments reluctant to let go of the tremendous advantage provided by state media. Indeed, since private TV took root, the influence of state TV has waned.

Now, let us take a look at the Greek media culture.

Greeks love newspapers, but are crazy about TV. They trust newspapers more than they trust TV, but they continue to buy fewer and fewer newspapers.

With 64 buyers for each 1,000 inhabitants, Greece is very low on the scale of world newspaper readership. Newspaper sales went down after 1989 though they stabilized after 1993. But in 2002, a dismal year for newspapers worldwide, Greek papers suffered the largest drop anywhere in Europe: 6.4%.

Greeks may harbor a certain disdain for television, but that hasn't stopped them from watching it in ever greater numbers and for increasing periods of time. The Greek viewer, for the past 15 years, watches a little over four hours daily—a figure that places Greeks among the most addicted viewers worldwide. Moreover, Greece has the second highest percentage of households in Europe with two TV sets per house: 41.8%.

The ascendancy of electronic media, and the corresponding decline of the print media, is noteworthy for many reasons, not least of which is the fact that the two have radically different cultural roots. Whereas the print media originates in a European tradition, television's point of origin is the United States.

A distinction is often made between the journalism of reporting and the journalism of expressing a view. The first has its roots in the Anglo-Saxon press, especially in the United States,

the second has its roots in mainland Europe. And this is the model which the Greek press reproduces.

The titles of the Greek newspapers do not only refer to the story but express an opinion. The journalists do not become the best through their reporting but through their editorial writing and their articles. The good column is not as much the most revealing one but the one that is best written.

The relationship of the Greek Press to the European tradition is significant not only for style, but also for substance. For years, neo-Hellenic thought—and by extension, the heart and the brain of journalism—adhered to the currents of the European intellectual tradition, especially that of the French.

Newspapers have to do with mythology. I do not mean that they narrate myths and therefore lie, but rather that for them to impose themselves onto time, they have to establish a personal myth and the reader has to connect them with a ceremony.

The paperboy is a figure right out of the American myth. In Greece, the equivalent to the paperboy is the *peripteras*, the kiosk man. It is not a coincidence that in Greek, there is no word for the paperboy and that in English there is no word for *peripteras*. It is very simple: in Greece there is no paperboy and in the US there is no *peripteras*.

Greeks, indeed, have a more personal relationship with the *peripteras* than with the newspaper itself. Subscriptions are uncommon. The percentage of home delivery is close to zero, compared to 93% in Japan, 80% in the US, and 62% in Germany.

The reason for these differences has less to do with marketing and more with the ethnic culture.

In Greece, the milkman does not leave the milk at the front door. Breakfast at the Greek home is the most underrated meal of the day and it does not relate to newspaper reading. That is why in Greece, the rule is the afternoon paper and not the morning paper, as is the case in Great Britain and in France. This tiny distinction tells us much about the two different cultures of readers. If the media is a middleman, the paperboy or the *peripteras* is the middleman of the middleman.

Here are three words that relate to the mythology of Greek newspapers: kiosk, clothespin, and front page.

Picture the pedestrian who stops for a while at the kiosk, this tiny place the size of a phone booth and with the contents of a department store. The papers hang, as if they were clothes drying in the sun with clothespins. Their front pages aim to attract the attention of the passersby. Some, more serious, are trying hard to fit all their contents in a page folded in two.

In Athens today, there are 28 dailies: 16 afternoon papers and 12 morning ones. This is a

large number for such a small country, but it comes as no surprise to anyone—since time immemorial people in Greece have had the need to communicate and express themselves by making their opinion known.

Although there is a high number of Greek papers and TV channels, only a few newspapers and channels have a high market share. Four of the 18 Sunday papers command 81% of the sales.

The press in Greece traditionally leans more to the left than to the right. Today, this trend has even stronger characteristics, as the three highest-circulation newspapers, *Eleftherotypia*, *Ta Nea* and *Ethnos*, have a left-of-center tendency. Only one newspaper from the right, *Kathimerini*, has a significant presence.

Almost without exception, all the daily newspapers are based in Athens, although they have national coverage and distribution. Local press has a very low circulation.

In the Greek market, there is also a trend towards specialized magazines. Within the last 20 years the picture has changed totally. Fewer than one of four magazines today can be described as being of general interest, whereas in 1990 the ratio was one of two.

Also, in the Greek market there is a clear tendency to look outwards, not only at Mother Europe, as usual, but also at Stepmother America. In Greece, there are Greek editions of *Cosmopolitan*, *Vogue*, *Elle*, *Esquire*, *National Geographic*, *Playboy*, *Penthouse*, *Max*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *Car and Driver* and *Time Out Athens*. Also, only a few days ago, we had the first imitation of the *Village Voice*. It is called *Athens Voice*, it is free and it is not the Greek edition of the Manhattan weekly but the equivalent.

The history of Greek TV has a direct spiritual link to American TV. Greek private TV is a teenager, since it is only 15 years old. This is not a Greek paradox, since almost the rest of Europe, Asia and parts of Latin America discovered private TV at the same time. And it was the American model they all copied.

In 2000, at the height of the private TV boom, an estimated 160 TV channels and 1,600 radio stations were in operation, a massive number for a country the size of Greece. Today, there are four state channels (including the Parliament channel) and nine private channels—again, an impressive number, since the advertising market can only sustain two or three.

The first private TV broadcaster to go on the air in Greece was *Mega*, in November 1989. The new channel greeted Greek viewers with a TV game, *Wheel of Fortune*. Since then, many things have changed but the main objective remains entertainment, by any means.

Perhaps, with the exception of Italy's TV, Greek TV is the most American in Europe. It is a commercial TV, entertaining, popular, colorful, recreational, trying very hard to be funny while

becoming more and more trash. It is not by, by any means, cultural, serious, specialized or elitist.

Greek Media and the US

The question that pops up is how the Greek TV that is so heavily influenced by America can, at the same time, be so anti-American. Anti-Americanism in Greece, as in other parts of Europe and in many parts of the world, is not marginal anymore but a mainstream tendency. In Greece, we have the awkward phenomenon of having an American TV that broadcasts anti-Americanism.

Once mostly confined to the left, anti-Americanism now occupies the whole political spectrum and by extension, the whole spectrum of mass media. It has roots that differentiate it from anti-Americanism elsewhere in Europe, which can also be intense. The traditional anti-Americanism of the left considered America the source of all evil, not only due to the American opposition to the ideology of the left, but historically, because of the continuous American intervention in Greek politics. To this traditional anti-Americanism, one has to add the newly discovered anti-Americanism of the right, which perceives America as carrying the virus of globalization.

In Greece, we face a compartmental and contradictory anti-Americanism. What Greek media reject, of course, is not America in its entirety but American **hard power**. In other words, they reject the political and military strength of the superpower, the American imperium.

This is one side of the relationship of Greek media with America. The other side expresses exactly the opposite: acceptance of **soft power**, which is the adaptation of the American imperium's agenda: movies, TV serials, TV games and all kinds of cultural products, but also ideas, values, lifestyles.

In this way, Greek TV becomes ultra-commercial. The education of the TV viewer takes place along with the consumption of products. The Greek viewer is initiated and submits to the culture of the image.

Globalization

This bipolar situation between Americanism and anti-Americanism, in other words between soft power and hard power, summarizes the relationship of Greek media to globalization. The stance of Greek media regarding America is extreme and fanatical, no matter whether it is positive or negative, whether it says YES or NO.

When it comes to globalization, the Greek media suffer from a duality. On the one hand, they are the transmitter of globalization. They have the technology and the economic means to

function truly as a mass media, pouring out information and broadcasting their programs as a product and the expression of an ideology.

On the other hand, they are a transmitter against globalization. Here lie two opposite trends: the search for identity and the entrenchment in it.

The Greek market is young and limited and incarnates all three missions of globalization: First, three different and antagonistic spaces are unified:

- ω **Journalism**, through electronic and press media aiming at providing information
- ω **Communication**, through marketing and advertising aiming in propaganda
- ω **Mass culture**, through the music and cinema aiming at entertainment.

Second, the three forms of communication – text, sound and image – are blended under the same ownership, adding the portals, of course. Third, markets are internationalized. National media become international corporations, they increase their capitalization through the stock markets and they look for strategic alliances abroad.

The biggest media organization in Greece has fulfilled all three challenges. The Lambrakis Press Group has a long history that goes back many decades. Some five years ago it converted the assets of tradition into corporate dynamism. With capital from the Athens Stock Exchange, the Lambrakis Group had become involved with all kinds of mass media ventures, from publishing and educational products, to the internet, telecommunications and tourism. Also, it came close to sell shares of its empire to the German group WAZ. Today, the business plan seems to have failed, for other reasons.

There are also limits to globalization, though.

Looking at the Top Ten most popular Greek TV programs, I expect to see American serials and movies that hit the charts in the United States or sell millions of tickets in movie theaters there. But no. In the Top Ten there isn't a single American product. The most watched programs are Greek productions – Greek serials, sitcoms and soap operas.

Today, the world is more globalized than in the 80s, but Greeks watch less American TV programs than they did ten years ago. This is not a local Greek phenomenon, but a world TV trend.

A Nielsen survey in 2001 showed that 71% of the 10 most popular programs in 60 countries were local productions. In the five largest countries of Europe, the percentage of local TV serials since 1996 went up 46%.

The victory of the national against the international, the local against the imported, has become the rule. European TV viewers, if they wish to watch their favorite American series, have

to stay up past midnight. Prime time for American serials is over. Local productions are more popular; they adapt better to their own culture, identity and history.

A while ago, *The New York Times* was wondering if globalization is going through a crisis, since American serials have hard time finding markets outside the United States. The *International Herald Tribune* had a different point of view. "Eighty percent of world cinema is made in the USA," the paper noted. "The answer can be found in the difference between the two media. Cinema is global, TV is not."

Sex and the City

Here is a brief outline of a serial for the new season in Greece: "Four unmarried women in a big city. We follow them as they confess to each other their love affairs in plain language, daring, with no taboos." If you're thinking "Sex and the City", you're wrong. It is a Greek spin-off. The original has been shown on Greek TV, but it wasn't enough.

These and similar serials copy the American metropolis, but give it a Greek passport. The ingredients are local, but the recipe is ecumenical.

In the spirit of globalization, it is interesting to see what happens when the current changes direction – that is, when the US imports rather than exports programming, and Europe becomes the producer rather than the consumer. This has happened, for instance, with reality shows. "Big Brother" and its descendants originated from Holland. At this point, the American public – confronted with a reversal of its usual role as transmitter of globalization – turned anti-global. Fortified in its own national culture, it rejected "Big Brother".

In Greece, by contrast, there was a period when all 10 of the most popular TV programs were connected in some way with "Big Brother". On New Year's Eve 2001, Greeks stayed up not to welcome the New Year, but to see who the Big Brother winner would be. The winner became an instant celebrity. When he returned to his village he received a welcome equivalent to that given to Olympic winners in ancient times. The same thing happens today with dance and other shows from where major names arise.

Talk Show as Agora

I think this is the "secret recipe" of Greek television today: its ability to appropriate an original idea with an ecumenical idea and transform it into something characteristically local, Greek. An example, par excellence, is the talk show. This quintessentially American concept, gathering

guests of interest to the audience in a studio and simply letting them talk, immediately charmed Greeks. They recognized it, perhaps, as a metaphor for the ancient Agora, or as a *metexelixa* – an evolution of the modern *kafeneion* where Greeks pass their time talking.

TV Windows

The revolution started with windows – not Microsoft's but those of TV. In Greece we use “windows” to mean the division of the screen into many parts so that many images can be projected simultaneously.

Today in Greece, analysts are talking about a new form of government. Not parliamentary democracy, not even TV democracy, but rather the democracy of windows.

The possibility of a live broadcast fed through links with any part of the world led to the era of the windows. The guests of a program do not have to be in the studio; they can be “there” while still physically at their homes.

All kinds of people and all kinds of opinions are stirred up in the mixer of ideas, views and gossip. It's all a matter of who sells better. The famous anchorman becomes a judge, a policeman, a prosecutor.

This amounts to the defeat of journalism. News becomes entertainment, aiming to mesmerize the viewer more than to inform him. Furthermore, the path TV took has also influenced traditional, print-based journalism, since newspapers and TV channels are under the same ownership. Newspapers have contracted the virus of sensationalism, and lifestyle and glamour have replaced news and reportage.

Sunday papers have become the producers/products of huge advertising revenues and now weigh three to five pounds. Along with the paper, you buy a series of magazines—not inserts but regular magazines—about TV, style, home, science, food, travel, sport, books and sundry other topics. You also enrich your library with C.D.s and books, thus, heavily damaging music and publishing industry. With “infotainment” – paid ads that appear as news – the blurring of distinctions crosses the line into fraud.

A crucial word in today's Greek vocabulary: DIAPLOKI

Walter Benjamin wrote in 1938: “information history is very hard to write separately than the press corruption history.”

Yiorgos Koskotas, Yiorgos Mihalopoulos, and today, Themis Anastasiadis, are perhaps Greeks whose names are related with *diaploki*. Koskotas, especially, is probably the only Greek in the past 25 years who has made the cover of TIME magazine. As a media owner, a businessman, and a defendant in a criminal case, he is a richly symbolic figure. Once an obscure Greek-American businessman, Koskotas created a whole galaxy of corporations—a bank, a media, a soccer team—from scratch. He was deeply connected to the PASOK government, but also maintained ties with the other political parties during the 1980s. Having accumulated tremendous power and influence, he collapsed overnight when his money was proven to be the fruit of embezzlement. And when he collapsed, he took down the government with him.

The Greek language has a word—*diaploki*—for the complex of political, financial and other forces which govern the media, and which Koskotas epitomized. In the environment of *diaploki*, the rules of the game change. No longer simply a middleman between citizens and those who wield power, they become power brokers themselves. Or they become the middleman between businessmen and politicians, that is, between power and power.

Being part of the global village, Greece is not immune to world trends. The hyper-concentration of power that has reshaped media globally is seen in Greece as well. Out of the big eight media owners-publishers in Greece, two have to do with merchant marine (Kyriakou and Alafouzos), one with construction (Bobolas), one with oil (Vardinoyiannis) one with telecommunications (Kokkalis) one with enterprises (Yianna Aggelopoulou) and one with insurance (Kontominas). Only two (Lambrakis and Tegopoulos) during the past five years were what we call traditional publishers, although they appeared *diaplekomenoi* as well with the aforementioned business interests. Following Tegopoulos' death two years ago, it remains to be seen what will come of *Eleftherotypia*, which leaves Lambrakis literally as the last traditional publisher, before corporate journalism takes over completely. The mainstream broadcast media, meanwhile, are concentrated among five or six owners.

Although this concentration resembles what is happening elsewhere, including in the United States, the media business in Greece is distinctive in that it still retains a "family business" flavor. The media interests have a name and a face. Instead of the gray CEOs of multinational corporations, Greek publishers are personalities imbued with myth. Some are real public persons and appear in social columns, others stay in the back, away from the public eye. The publishers spread their influence on the country's public life by investing in art and in sports, financing big cultural events or buying popular soccer teams.

In Greece, there is an ongoing battle for control of three arenas: the political (who will be in

the government), the business (who will be in charge of public works), and the sports (which soccer team will win the cup). Media is used as a lever of pressure on all three fronts.

Let me return to the Koskotas publishing scandal. The critical factor there was not Koskotas the publisher, but the publishers who brought down Koskotas and the Papandreou government. That left the publishers with the new private TV stations that the state distributed after the Koskotas scandal. The timing, of course, was just a coincidence!

Since then, the state decides who gets a license and from whom it is retracted. When the TV owners are awarded the public works they are interested in, they support the government. If not, political turbulence can be expected.

The government has established the Greek version of the Federal Communications Commission, but without the power of its American equivalent. The National Council of Radio-Television has no means, no voice, no power whatsoever, to impose its will. It is appointed by the government and the parties of the opposition. It is completely dependent on the government.

A while ago, I attended the First Media Reform Conference in Madison, where a lot was said about a totalitarian American system that has full control of the media. Nevertheless, the effort that is being made in the United States to stop the media owners from expanding their power further is significant. Some 1,600 showed up at the conference and raised their voice. In Greece, we still have a Ministry of the Press. What kind of a role could a Ministry of the Press have today in a free democratic country?

Nea Mesa

Despite its traditional foundations, the Greek publishing establishment hasn't neglected to look to the future, in the form of what we call "new media"—starting with the internet.

Four publishing companies invested part of their gains from the Athens Stock Exchange in buying out start-up companies, thus launching new portals. Lambrakis started in.gr, Kokkalis flash.gr, Bobolas e-go.gr, and Alafouzos e-one.gr. The Greek market followed the international market. First it was up then, as time went by, it came down. Ultimately, the internet in Greece is only taking off recently, partly because of a decrease in high telecommunication costs.

Today, there are hundreds of blogs welcoming mass journalism in Greece, almost all newspapers created internet sites and give out all kinds of information, whereas traditional media is doubted more than at any other moment in their history.

But there is another side to the "new media" in Greece, one in which publishers have

invested heavily. This is the audio text, the phone services that inform or entertain via the phone during TV broadcasting.

Audio text is the fourth medium in the world after the press, radio and TV. One could say that it is the Fourth Power in media.

Audio text has brought hidden profits to the Greek media industry during a time of economic crisis. Everything and anything can become audio text, from gambling to astrology to ring tones. For the consumer's point of view, it can hardly be called a bargain. For the price of a newspaper he gets a minute's worth of text. A kind of love-hate relationship exists between audio text and its host environment, the TV. Audio text is slowly devouring TV – first by eating a section of the screen, then with horizontal bars in the upper and lower parts of the screen, and eventually by taking over the screen in its entirety.

Another medium that has brought a revolution in Europe is SMS text messaging. In Greece, millions of messages are exchanged daily. Both SMS and audio text are closer to telecom than to the media. But the future of the media cannot be seen separately from telecommunications.

Identity

In Greece, Noam Chomsky is revered, whereas in the United States he is marginalized. This one example sums up a whole array of issues which separate Greeks and Americans and their differing concepts of identity.

The fact that identity remains such a strong factor in the era of global networks and transjournalism is telling. Certainly, Greek newspapers today are outward-looking as never before. *Kathimerini*, a very credible newspaper, collaborates with the *International Herald Tribune* and more recently with the *New York Times*. Every day, the *International Herald Tribune* is printed in Greece, along with the English edition of *Kathimerini*. *Eleftherotypia* in its Sunday edition has an insert in Greek from the French leftist *Monde Diplomatique*. *Ta Nea* and *To Vima*, as well as *Kathimerini*, have bought the rights to reprint articles from the biggest papers in the world. A Greek, while drinking coffee with his favorite paper, can read in Greek what Paul Krugman or Thomas Friedman or Maureen Dowd wrote in the *New York Times*, or laugh at the cartoons of Plantu in *Le Monde*, or read the columns of Gabriel Garcia Marquez or Jose Saramago in *El Pais*.

Europeans and Greeks hardly ever agree on one single issue. Sometimes, though, they look at things from the same angle, especially when they oppose Americans.

For example, in the US you say "The Israeli problem" while in Europe we say "the Palestinian problem". For Europeans, the late Yaser Arafat was "President Arafat" or "Arafat the

fighter”, while in the US, he was “Arafat the Terrorist”. Similarly, Ariel Sharon is the “butcher” and the “terrorist” for Europeans while for Americans, he is “prime minister” or “ally Sharon”. Behind the words, there is always a meaning.

Every time something happens in Israel with deaths from this or the other side, the media in Europe and in the US present the issues from different angles. In the end, the average American always blames the Palestinians, while the average European always blames the Israelis.

Under the same pretext, assurances are built on the foundations of ignorance. In the war in Iraq, the Americans are wondering “How come the Europeans are not with us?” while the Europeans are wondering “How is it possible that the Americans don’t see how wrong this war is?”

Greece and its media used to be confined to a geopolitical margin. As the country sought to build connections in the west, its ties with the east weakened. But today the geopolitical landscape is changing. Greece has ceased being a marginal country. Greece has become a necessary crossroads for the immigrant current from the east and is also at the center of the geopolitical interests of the west. A little bit to the north, there is Kosovo and FYROM. A little bit to the east, Turkey. A little bit to the southeast Cyprus, Palestine and Israel, further on, the Middle East.

During the war in Kosovo, Greek media differed from its counterparts nearly everywhere else and took the side of the Serbs. It was public opinion that formed this attitude; in return this attitude formed the public opinion. Some said the driving factor was religion, since Greeks and Serbs both are Orthodox Christians. Let us remember that Greeks, despite the prejudices stemming from the Ottoman Empire, supported Islam more than once, backing Iran and Iraq against the west, the Palestinians against Israel, and the Muslims in Turkey against the Turkish military government.

The September 11 attacks provided yet another example of the gap in perceptions that exists between the two sides of the Atlantic.

At the time, a Greek friend of mine was exchanging e-mails with a cousin of his in the States. When my friend started sending his cousin some of the jokes that were being circulated in Europe, his cousin in America – aligned with Bush – replied that she found none of the jokes funny and went on to blame the unethical attitude of the Europeans for September 11. They never spoke again.

Conclusion

I will conclude with an image, not a TV image, but one that brings us back to where we started: to the fascinating culture of the press.

It is a Saturday night in the big city. The pedestrians look like characters in a Woody Allen

movie. They cross the street holding the Sunday papers, which weigh about five pounds each, loaded with insertions and magazines. Cars and pedestrians are lined up at the kiosks as people rush to buy tomorrow's paper. It is a classic New York scene, but it's not taking place in New York. It's happening in Athens.