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<https://informs.org/2021/03/07/old-fashioned-alpha-males-against-professional-homosexuals-media-justice-and-discriminatory-reporting-in-the-wake-of-the-greek-metoo-movement-dimitris-akrivos/#more-48520> (7 March 2021)

‘Old-fashioned alpha males’ against ‘professional homosexuals’: media justice and discriminatory reporting in the wake of the Greek #MeToo movement

From the exposure of Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein’s crimes to the Westminster sexual harassment scandal, the #MeToo movement has in recent years spread around the world, empowering survivors of sexual violence to share their traumatic experiences on social and news media. It was not until January 2021, however, that the impact of the movement became apparent in Greece.

Talking in an online event about the protection of children in sports on the 14th of January, Greek Olympic medallist Sofia Bekatorou [publicly accused](#) the vice president of the Hellenic Sailing Federation of sexually assaulting her in 1998. Bekatorou’s allegations led to the emergence of the hashtag #metinSofia (i.e. with Sofia) on Twitter with many other athletes but also actresses, singers and influencers following her example and reporting their own experiences of physical and/or psychological victimisation by powerful men (including famous actor Giorgos Kimoulis as well as actor and former Deputy Minister of Social Security Pavlos Haikalis). It was no surprise that, due to the celebrity status of many of the alleged victims and perpetrators, such claims dominated the Greek news agenda during these past two months alongside stories about the COVID-19 pandemic.

In February 2020, the Greek #MeToo movement acquired even greater momentum with clear political ramifications when former director of Greece’s National Theatre Dimitris Lignadis was [remanded](#) over allegations of serial rape – some of which involved underage victims. Responding to criticisms for appointing Lignadis, culture minister Lina Mendoni [stated](#) that he is a ‘dangerous man’ who ‘deceived her’ and ‘with deep acting talent tried to convince her that he had nothing to do with all this’. At the same time, Lignadis’ defence attorney Alexis Kougias [dismissed](#) the allegations against his client as a ‘crude fabrication’ made by ‘professional homosexuals’.

The news media’s involvement in Lignadis’ and all the other cases forming part of the Greek #MeToo movement constitutes an indicative example of what [Greer and McLaughlin](#) (2010: 27) define as a *trial-by-media*: ‘a dynamic, impact-driven, news media-led process by which individuals – who may or may not be publicly known – are tried and sentenced in the “court of public opinion”.’ In the era of 24/7 news, media seek to perform an alternative function of ‘justice’ which runs parallel to that administered by formal institutional authorities. There is an undeniable benefit in shedding light to such historic cases of sexual violence and thereby encouraging an honest, free-from-stigma discussion around the issue. Despite its belated emergence (or possibly because of it) the Greek #MeToo appears to extend the boundaries of the movement even further by also placing emphasis on cases of gender-based workplace bullying as well as male victimisation.

The shortcomings of this ‘trial-by-media’, however, including its impact on the defendant’s right to a fair trial, the consequent reputational damage and the risk of vigilantism also need to be taken into consideration. In the context of the ongoing discussion on the allegations made, journalistic objectivity and due process can easily give way to moralising, sensationalist speculation about the motives and actions of the accused who are assumed to be ‘guilty until proven innocent’ and therefore deserving to be ‘named and shamed’.

In addition, the homophobic dimension of some of the relevant mediated discourse also need to be highlighted. From the Greek state television [censoring](#) a gay kiss from an episode of *Downton Abbey* to bishop Amvrosios publicly [urging](#) people to ‘spit on gays’ because they are ‘freaks of nature’ and the killing of LGBT+ activist [Zak Kostopoulos](#) by the police, there is still a lot of progress to be made in order for LGBT+ people to achieve equal rights in Greek society. This is something that became even more apparent with the recent rise of the Greek #MeToo.

Apart from Kougias building Lignadis’ defence around [claims](#) (in Greek) of ‘crude lies’ told by ‘professional homosexuals’ who are ‘untrustworthy personalities’, the language used in some relevant news stories in the Greek press has been salacious, offensive and discriminatory: indicatively, tabloid newspapers ran controversial front-page stories with headlines like [‘Fa—\[anti-gay slur\] and paedophile bathhouse brings down the](#)

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[government](#) (*Makeleio*, 20 February 2021), [‘Dirty nights with Ali and Saleem: dark-skinned boys at Lignadis’ disposal](#) (*Espresso*, 25 February 2021) and [‘Homosexuals, perverts and paedophiles run the country with Mitsotakis \[the incumbent Greek PM\] in charge’](#) (*Makeleio*, 27 February 2021).

Such stories clearly associate homosexuality with paedophilia, creating a ‘signification spiral’ (Hall et al., *Policing the Crisis*, 1978) in the context of which both behaviours are constructed as sexual ‘perversions’. Such an association is intrinsically linked to and largely legitimised by the patriarchal discourse used by some of the accused to explain their actions – for example, [Haikalis’ claim](#) that he is an ‘old-fashioned alpha male’ – which also favours a view of non-heterosexual masculinities as deviant and socially reprehensible (Buchbinder, *Studying Men and Masculinities*, 2013).

There is extensive research on moral panics and the media’s role in marginalising social groups, portraying them as ‘folk devils’ who allegedly behave in ways that pose a risk towards society’s dominant moral values (Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, 2002[1972]). The aforementioned homophobic reporting can largely be made sense of within this framework. What is disconcerting, however, in the case of Greek media is not merely the exposure but most importantly the limited protection offered to LGBT+ people against such prejudicial and sensational media coverage on a regulatory level.

On the one hand, ESIEA, which is main trade union of Greek journalists based in Athens, provides in its [Ethical Guidelines for Journalists](#) (in Greek) that news reporting should be free from ‘discrimination based on nationality, sex, ethnicity, religion, political beliefs, financial situation and social status’ [Article 2(a)]. Although discrimination on the basis of gender identity or sexual orientation could in principle fall under the broad category of ‘social status’, it could be argued that the Code’s failure to refer explicitly to this particular form of discrimination creates an ambiguity which allows cases of homophobic reporting like those mentioned earlier to emerge without any threat of serious sanctions.

On the other hand, the National Council for Radio and Television (NCRT), which is the main regulator for public and private broadcast Greek media, seemingly adopts a more inclusive approach in its [Code of Ethics for News and other Current Affairs and Political Programmes](#) (in Greek): Article 4.1 of the Code specifically states that discriminatory reporting based on sexual orientation is not allowed while Article 4.2, which prohibits demeaning comments towards ‘ethnic and religious minorities *and other vulnerable or powerless social groups*’ (emphasis added), potentially covers sexual minorities too even if these are not explicitly mentioned.

This prima facie protection from discriminatory reporting offered by the NCRT Code to LGBT+ people is contradicted by the Council’s regulatory practice which has on several occasions led LGBT+ supporters to accuse NCRT of institutional homophobia and transphobia. For instance, in 2013, NCRT [rejected](#) (in Greek) the request of the Athens Pride organisers to air the event’s TV spot on all major Greek TV stations free of charge on the grounds that the spot ‘could not be described as one with a social message’.

Similarly, in 2010, NCRT imposed a fine of €20,000 on the Star Channel afternoon show *Fotis and Maria Live* for interviewing trans actress and author Betty Vakalidou based on the following [rationale](#) (emphasis added):

‘the issue of homosexuality (the sexual preference for individuals of the same sex) and of sex change with or without surgical intervention that was presented in the show constitutes a social issue and a reality that *concerns only a small minority of people*. It constitutes a condition that *goes beyond the normal* and, for that reason, it largely sounds strange to the underage viewer... The presentation of information about the sex life of homosexuals or transsexuals, about the sex change procedure and the feelings and experiences of the woman being interviewed, *could possibly have a negative impact on underage viewers.*’

Such discourse not only fails to protect LGBT+ people from discrimination but has the potential to add to their vulnerability and marginalisation even further by portraying them as ‘others’ who live outside the boundaries of the normal, heterosexual society. By prioritising a moralistic argument about how a discussion on LGBT+ issues might affect underage viewers, it also neglects the [impact](#) that prejudicial media portrayals or the lack of media representation can have on LGBT+ people’s mental well-being, self-image and aspirations. Positive LGBT+

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representation in the news and entertainment media can play a [key role](#) in promoting social acceptance and tackling homophobic and transphobic violence. In a country like Greece where, according to a 2020 [survey](#) by the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights, 73% of LGBTI individuals avoid holding hands in public out of fear of being assaulted, threatened or harassed (one of the highest percentages among the 28 EU member states), it is profoundly disappointing and alarming that regulatory bodies like the NCRT fail to see the importance of responsible media reporting in creating a more inclusive Greek society and thereby improving LGBT+ individuals' quality of life.

Finally, it is worth noting that, in our [multi-mediated world](#), those identified as 'folk devils' and their advocates can use different outlets to challenge their demonisation in mainstream media instead of being completely defenceless against it. Following Kougias' statement about his client's reputation being tarnished by 'professional homosexuals', several well-known public figures hastened to criticise the lawyer's language on news and social media: songwriter Foivos Delivorias [condemned](#) (in Greek) Kougias' attempt to associate homosexuality with paedophilia and rape while, in a sarcastic move, both he and journalist Elena Akrita changed their employment statuses on Facebook to 'Employed at Professional Homosexuals'.

The power to resist the conservative ideology of traditional media, however, does not change the fact that more work is required by media professionals and the relevant authorities in order to approach and report on the complex issues raised by the #MeToo movement sensitively. The Greek #MeToo movement can be seen as a tipping point which has the potential to effect societal change by eliminating the stigma attached to those issues and encouraging an open dialogue around them. But, as shown by some of the news coverage in former National Theatre director Dimitris Lignadis' case, more responsible reporting is needed for this potential to be materialised.

In an attempt to show it is taking these allegations seriously (and perhaps also to divert attention away from its own unforeseen implication in Lignadis' scandal), the Greek government set up the website metoogreece.gr to provide victims with the contact details of relevant support services. Allegations of rape, sexual assault, paedophilia and bullying against Lignadis and other powerful men of the Greek show business still dominate the Greek media at the time of writing. The exact number of victims and perpetrators, the actual impact of the ongoing 'trial-by-media' on due process and ultimately the extent to which the Greek #MeToo movement will succeed in rocking the hetero-patriarchal foundations of the Greek society remain to be seen.

Dr Dimitris Akrivos (dimitris.akrivos@essex.ac.uk)

Lecturer in Media Law

University of Essex