

THE ROLE OF THE PUBLIC IN THE GOVERNANCE OF PUBLIC SERVICE MEDIA—THE RISE AND FALL OF THE CITIZENS' COUNCILS IN GREECE

Katharine Sarikakis¹ and Gentiana Ramadani¹

The Hellenic public service broadcaster, ERT, represents a pivotal case in public service media (PSM) governance and citizen participation. In 2013, ERT was abruptly shut down by the Greek government amid the financial crisis, provoking public outcry and raising concerns about censorship and political interference. Following sustained public resistance, ERT was reinstated in 2015, introducing the Citizens' Councils to institutionalise public participation, enhance transparency, and promote democratic engagement. Despite this formal mechanism, meaningful participation was limited by entrenched organisational cultures and ongoing political pressures. This case highlights the tensions between citizen involvement and institutional structures, particularly in politically and economically unstable contexts. Situated within broader European debates on media governance, the study argues that without cultural shifts embracing public engagement, mechanisms like the Citizens' Councils remain insufficient to democratise PSM. The paper underscores structural and cultural barriers that continue to constrain public influence over media policy and practice.

KEYWORDS public service media, Citizens' Council, Greece, deliberative democracy, governance

Introduction

Public service media have long played a fundamental role in the European media landscape. Their value lies in fostering democratic engagement by catering for citizens' access to information and encouraging critical and reflective perspectives on political and social developments. The Citizens' Councils represent a distinctive and rare case developed within Hellenic broadcasting, offering a valuable lens through which to examine participatory processes in the evolution of Public Service Media (PSM) governance. This study explores the historical context that shaped the emergence and decline of these

councils as an institutional effort to include ordinary citizens in the governance of PSM in Greece. Central to this inquiry are the concepts of “governance from below,” public participation in internal PSM structures, and the notion of “public value,” all essential to understanding how citizens engage in shaping PSM governance across Europe. The pursuit of a more participatory democratic culture underlies the political demand for a reformed public broadcasting system.

In modern democracies, PSM continue to play a significant role in shaping national culture and contributing to the broader cultural landscape. However, their institutional autonomy is historically affected by intensified politicisation and direct governmental influence, which challenge the foundational principles of independent public media (Połowska and Beckett 2019, 4–9). This continuing dynamic not only disrupts traditional governance models, but also reflects deeper structural transformations and recurrent crises that PSM have undergone since the 1990s.

Over the years, PSMs have been described repeatedly as being in a state of crisis, with each iteration linked to evolving structural and normative challenges. These crises can be broadly classified into three interrelated dimensions: first, a legitimacy crisis, rooted in the growing perception that private broadcasters can fulfil similar functions to those of public service providers, thereby questioning the unique role of PSM. Second, a financial crisis, driven by increased competition in media markets, which has resulted in declining revenues and heightened production costs, including those for content rights, skilled personnel, and the maintenance of complex bureaucratic infrastructures. Third, an identity crisis, as the influence of market-driven principles and commercial logic becomes more pronounced in public media management and decision-making processes (Richeri 1994).

PSM governance aims at strengthening democratic communication spaces by fostering citizen participation in decision-making processes. In this context, media governance is not limited to formal institutions but encompasses a broader constellation of social, political, and economic actors (Sarikakis 2012). In this work, governance is operationalised as the set of institutional arrangements and practices that structure interactions between citizens and media organisations (Pierre 2000; Sarikakis 2002). Governance is operationalised primarily through the lens of “governance from below,” understood as the institutionalisation of citizen participation in decision-making processes. While concepts such as deliberative democracy and public value inform the normative expectations of participation, they serve as supporting frameworks to assess whether and how participatory mechanisms translate into meaningful influence within institutional structures.

The primary focus lies on the participatory mechanisms and practices that mediate the relationship between citizens and institutions, mechanisms that are foundational to the governance of democratic communicative spaces. Such spaces are defined by a rich network of both formal and informal communication channels that are accessible, responsive, and reciprocal (Wagenaar 2007, 37).

Deliberative democratic theory underscores the importance of citizens’ ability to rise above individual interests and engage in argumentation grounded in the common good (Bohman 1998; Dryzek 2000; Innes and Booher 2003). Hence, governance is a process through which diverse citizen preferences are translated into effective policy decisions and coordinated collective action, ultimately securing compliance and legitimacy (Kohler-Koch 1999, 5).

Building on this empirical foundation, the article adopts governance from below as its primary analytical lens. This approach allows for a critical examination of how participatory mechanisms are integrated, or rejected, within existing power structures. While deliberative democracy provides the normative ideal for dialogue, and public value offers a metric for societal benefit, “governance from below” serves as the operative framework to analyse the tension between citizen input and institutional resistance. This article contributes to debates on public service media governance by demonstrating that participatory mechanisms alone are insufficient to democratise media institutions unless they are supported by institutional integration, decision-making power and organisational commitment.

Methodology

This paper examines the establishment and functioning of the Citizens’ Councils within ERT and their implications for public service media governance through a qualitative research design. The analysis draws on internal strategic and regulatory documents of the Greek public broadcaster, with particular attention to issues of interaction, co-creation, participation and both national and institutional policy frameworks.

In addition, semi-structured expert interviews were conducted with ten media professionals and participants between October 2017 and March 2022, followed by one additional online interview in 2024 to confirm the current status of the Council.

Interviewees included representatives from the media sector, academics, journalists and civil society representatives, all selected for their relevant expertise and involvement in/with public service media. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes, was recorded with consent and supplemented by written notes. Access to the recordings was restricted to the authors. The interviews were transcribed and organised into thematic categories based on their content.

The interview material was analysed using a thematic approach, allowing key patterns to emerge across the dataset. The main analytical categories included: (1) perceptions of participation among institutional actors, (2) institutional responsiveness to citizen input, (3) limitations related to power and decision-making, (4) the level of expertise among council members and (5) organisational and political constraints.

Participatory observation was planned in order to directly observe council meetings and interactions. However, during the period of data collection (2018-2024), the Council was no longer actively convening, which made direct observation unfeasible. Nevertheless, one of the authors served as Chair of the administrative board within the executive board of ERT between 2017 and 2018. This position enabled direct engagement with the Citizens’ Councils and provided valuable insights into their operation. This positionality also requires critical reflection. As an insider, the author had privileged access to internal documents and decision-making processes, which facilitated data collection but also introduced potential biases in interpreting the Council’s effectiveness. To mitigate this, the analysis triangulates internal perspectives with external interviews and employs a reflexive approach, explicitly acknowledging how the author’s role may have influenced interactions with Council members and the framing of institutional resistance. Competing perspectives, particularly between management and civil society actors, were weighed by cross-referencing interview data with documented outcomes and policy changes. Further, data interpretation was cross-checked between authors and interview material was used to triangulate institutional perspectives with those of external actors.

The work is also informed by fieldwork conducted by both authors at ERT in Athens and Thessaloniki at different stages between 2017 and 2019, as well as by earlier engagement by one of the authors during the period of self-managed broadcasting (ERT Open) between 2013 and 2015. By combining interviews, document analysis, and experiential insights, the research explores the conditions under which citizen participation was enabled or constrained within public service media governance.

Citizen Engagement and Deliberative Democracy as Derivative of ‘Governance from Below’ in Public Service Media

Efforts to institutionalise citizen participation within public institutions, especially in the media sector, are deeply intertwined with the democratic values of transparency, accountability, and inclusivity. In PSM, these participatory ideals underpin the broader aspiration for a democratic transformation, what scholars have referred to as “governance from below” (Sarikakis 2012). This bottom-up approach challenges hierarchical structures, proposing instead that audiences should be recognised not merely as consumers but as co-creators and co-stakeholders in media governance.

Calls for greater citizen involvement in PSM governance have emphasised the need to enhance legitimacy, trust, and democratic accountability. Scholars (Bardoel and d’Haenens 2008; Jakubowicz 2010; Enli 2008a) have argued that engaging citizens in decision-making processes is not only normatively desirable, but also practically necessary in the face of digital disruption and declining public trust in media institutions. The idea that participatory governance can contribute to the public value of PSM has gained traction, although its implementation remains inconsistent across Europe. Some PSM have already emphasised audience participation as a strategic response to the challenges of the digital age in their policy documents by employing different forms of public involvement (Jackson 2010; Murray 2013). However, PSMs’ interests in partnership with the public ‘often appear to be for the organization’s self-interests rather than the public interest’ (Lowe 2010, 9–35). While some public broadcasters, such as the BBC with its influential report *Building Public Value* (2004), have framed participation as a mechanism to evaluate public interest and innovation, critics argue that such approaches often instrumentalise participation to serve institutional legitimacy rather than empowering the public itself (Moe and Syvertsen 2009). The strategic rhetoric of “audience empowerment” may mask a managerial logic focused on compliance and brand strengthening, rather than fostering genuine deliberative engagement.

Nonetheless, there have been noteworthy efforts across European PSM to experiment with participatory governance models. Finland’s Yleisradio Oy (YLE, the Finnish Broadcasting Company) declared a consumer-centric orientation (Klein-Shagrir and Keinonen 2014), and Denmark’s Radio committed to “building bridges” with audiences. Meanwhile, Austria’s ORF institutionalised public value within its organisational structures, establishing a Public Value Competence Center in 2007 and subsequently incorporating audience research and public consultation into its quality-assurance system (Mitschka 2023) and Germany’s ARD (*Arbeitsgemeinschaft der öffentlich-rechtlichen Rundfunkanstalten der Bundesrepublik Deutschland*) and ZDF (*Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen*) involve audience representatives in programming boards.

These cases illustrate a spectrum of participatory integration: from consultative (BBC, ORF) to representative (ARD, ZDF). The Greek case, by contrast, attempted a hybrid model of random citizen selection combined with stakeholder representation,

positioning it as a unique experiment in direct democratic engagement within PSM. However, unlike the German or Finnish models, the ERT Council lacked statutory decision-making power, rendering it more vulnerable to institutional neglect. These examples demonstrate a range of participatory strategies, from consultative forums to more structured forms of civic representation. In Greece, the 2015 reinstatement of ERT following its controversial shutdown brought a unique initiative: the establishment of the Citizens' Councils in Athens and Thessaloniki. These Councils represent a bold, though not unproblematic, experiment in deliberative democracy within PSM, attempting to embed civic voice directly into institutional governance. Their existence raises critical questions about the mechanisms, sustainability, and impact of such participatory models in real-world settings.

Citizen participation refers largely to individuals taking part in organised efforts, voluntarily and without payment, to influence collective outcomes (Zimmerman and Rappaport, 1988). In public service media, this can mean contributing to decision-making bodies, content evaluation, or institutional consultations. However, real participation must go beyond symbolic gestures. It should enable citizens to genuinely influence decisions and share power with public institutions (Coleman and Moss, 2012). Yet, the concept itself remains complex and debated across many fields. Scholars offer various perspectives, as Pateman (1970) highlights the many forms participation can take. Cunill (1991) sees it as civil society's presence in the public sphere, while Roberts (2004) emphasises power-sharing between citizens and public managers. Dragomir (2021) argues that fostering citizen participation in public service media is crucial for creating a more democratic media environment where citizens are actively involved in decision-making processes, including content creation, financing, and governance. For the purpose of this work, citizen participation is understood as a vital mechanism for enhancing transparency, fostering accountability, and involving citizens in media governance, particularly within public service media.

Citizen Participation Model for the Co-Creation of Public Value and Shifting Paradigms in Public Service Media

A key component of citizens' empowerment lies in fostering genuine public participation. Rather than being limited to one-way information dissemination, public participation involves reciprocal communication that promotes active citizen engagement through dialogue and collaboration (Reddick et al. 2017). Yet, despite the longstanding debate around citizen-centred media, especially since the 1990s, public service media have often fallen short in practice. Their bureaucratic and hierarchical nature has hindered the development of close, responsive relationships with their audiences. However, new forms of media interaction now offer opportunities for more meaningful and direct engagement between PSM and the public. As Dragomir (2021) notes, this technological shift has the potential to reshape citizen participation by enabling more open, interactive, and participatory forms of governance within public service media. In this evolving context, rethinking and restructuring PSM to genuinely include citizens in decision-making processes becomes not just desirable, but necessary for a more democratic media environment. Therefore, the deliberative approach highlights the importance of dialogue and discursive exchanges as means of achieving mutual understanding and consensus among participants. Within this framework, citizen engagement plays a crucial role in fostering inclusive discussions and reaching broadly accepted agreements among stakeholders (Godowski et al. 2020).

Between 1999 and 2005, debates on commercialization and digitalization raised questions about whether public service media should focus on what citizens need or want, leading to reforms that made broadcasters more flexible and platform-oriented (Murdock 2004; Coleman 2005). This shift brought citizen participation to the forefront, with scholars examining new ways for audiences to engage and access content (Coppens and Saeys 2006; Enli, 2008b). The move from broadcasting to public service media emphasized the potential of independent, open platforms to promote civic engagement and active participation (Lowe and Bardoel 2007; Iosifidis 2011).

From 2010 onwards, scholars increasingly examined how PSM could adapt their missions, governance structures, and digital services to changing media environments and expectations of public participation (Larsen 2010; Iosifidis 2010; Flew 2011; Just, Latzer and Saurwein 2012; Van den Bulck and Moe 2012; Lowe, Goodwin and Yamamoto 2015; Głowacki 2015). This growing emphasis on participation and institutional adaptation also shifted attention towards the question of what value PSM should create for society and how this value can be defined and assessed. The concept of public value was originally introduced by Mark H. Moore in his seminal work *Creating Public Value* (1995), where he framed it as a tool for public administration. Moore proposed a model that blended economic and management theory to guide public managers in their efforts to generate societal benefit. He defined public value as “a structure of practical reasoning to guide managers of public enterprises,” offering a normative framework that shifts the role of public managers from merely implementing legislative directives to actively creating value for the public (Moore 1995, 1).

Over time, the concept of public value transitioned from public administration to the field of media and communication studies, where it has become one of the most extensively debated ideas. In this context, public value not only concerns economic or operational effectiveness but also addresses issues of legitimacy, accountability, and democratic responsiveness. The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) was the first public broadcaster to adopt and institutionalize the public value framework, publishing a public value manifesto in 2004 (BBC 2004). This document justified the continuation of the licence fee while simultaneously committing the organization to greater accountability to citizens by assessing services based on the value they generate for the public (Collins 2007).

In media governance literature, public value is understood as the societal benefit produced by public institutions, particularly in how they engage with citizens and respond to democratic needs (Knoll 2012; Lowe and Martin 2014) and it has redefined the mission of public broadcasting across Europe by integrating public input into content, financing, and strategic decisions (Coyle and Woolard 2010). This shift in thinking repositioned public service media as not only providers of content but also as participatory institutions. It emphasized accountability, citizen engagement, and co-production, thereby aligning public media more closely with democratic values and civic participation. According to Nabatchi et al. (2017), co-production focuses on identifying the participants involved and the specific stages at which they engage in the process. Although it encompasses various forms of voluntary participation, its essential characteristics include reciprocal interaction, shared responsibilities, long-term involvement and a commitment to creating public value. Building on this conceptualization, this article operationalises public value empirically through: (1) the extent to which citizens’ inputs are incorporated into decision-making, (2) the responsiveness of the institution to public feedback, and (3) the perceived legitimacy of participatory mechanisms

among stakeholders. In the case of ERT, the Council scored low on all three metrics, revealing a gap between normative aspirations and institutional practice.

The Establishment of the Citizens' Council at the Hellenic Public Broadcaster (ERT)

The question of citizens' participation calls for a shift from linear, top-down, expert-driven development toward more inclusive and adaptive forms of governance. A bottom-up approach that integrates new modes of audience involvement, reflecting increasingly individualized publics, engages a wide range of stakeholders who collectively contribute to the co-creation of public value. This marks the point where transformations in the internal governance of public service media begin. Focusing on the Greek case, the analysis explores the emergence, purpose, and eventual decline of the Citizens' council in the country.

ERT was abruptly shut down overnight by the then Greek government in 2013. Two years later, the broadcaster was reinstated by the successive government in 2015, following a two-year period of self-governed, "guerrilla" continuation of news and factual programme production by its then-dismissed employees. During these two years of contested operations, journalists and employees broadcast factual and news programmes in the first half year (until November 2013) from both Athens and Thessaloniki sites, Radio and Television, under an occupation status. Meanwhile, the government took the first steps towards establishing a 'thinner' version of PSM, an organisation that was never accepted by the majority of citizens (Sarikakis 2014; Mark 2013). The ERT reinstatement included two new articles in the existing law governing ERT, which served specifically to introduce this comprehensive mechanism of citizens' participation in a civic Council. Through the legal basis of 2013 on the functioning of ERT, the Greek government introduced several legal changes, which highlighted the shift from NERIT (a watered-down replacement) to the new ERT. Law no. 4324, which entered into force on 29 April 2015, clarifies these changes in Article 7. Among others, the formula used for organising the civic council is not defined by law; rather, it is regulated by the broadcaster managers.

Since 2016, ERT's new governance structure dealt with organising the Citizens' Councils (called *Symvoulia Koinonikou Elenchou*, meaning Social Accountability Councils) by an open invitation to the public. The invitation was published on the public Hellenic radio and television. Around 2260 people showed interest and 55 of them were selected through a simple random procedure, after a media campaign and the distribution of information through the media channels. Another 55 representatives were chosen from academia and NGOs. In total, 110 people composed the Citizens' Council of Greek public broadcasting at the headquarters in Athens. The procedure for the participation of ordinary citizens was by an email application. The email had to contain only the general data such as name, surname, age and education. Meanwhile the application for the representatives of civil society was made through a direct invitation. The invitation was directed to different groups of interests, such as churches, universities and well-known NGOs. The Council met once a month and discussed the topics it was in charge of, such as education, sport, financial issues and culture. It established seven committees whose representatives discuss the content of culture, education and sports programs, including program financing issues. This initiative was elaborated by the media managers and tested in Athens and at the ERT branch in Thessaloniki, the country's two biggest cities.

This mechanism was the first ever attempt to make the broadcaster accessible to the ordinary citizens that had no background in the field or industry. The process represented a novelty in the way the opinion of the citizens was going to be included in the framing and decision-making policies. The Attica-based council held 29 three-hour plenary sessions and had 7 thematic committees. More than 80% of the 110 members participated in at least three plenary sessions, with the average participation being 30 people. Overall, 300 hours were dedicated to meetings on a completely voluntary basis without any remuneration or other benefit. The findings of five committees had been submitted to the Board of Directors of ERT by December 2017 (Interview, ERT official, Athens 2018). In an interview with an ERT official conducted in October 2018, the importance of democratising public service media through direct civic engagement was emphasised. It was also underscored that ERT is "not a state company, it's a public company," financed by citizens and therefore accountable to them." The use of random selection of citizens for this initiative was introduced as a means of enhancing inclusivity and democratic legitimacy, ensuring that the council will reflect a broad cross-section of society rather than organised interests or elites. However, this design choice also generated inherent limitations.

Participants often lacked familiarity with the institutional, technical and regulatory dimensions of media governance, which constrained their ability to engage effectively in complex discussions. This revealed a fundamental tension between inclusiveness and competence. While random selection strengthens representativeness, it may weaken deliberative capacity if not supported by training or facilitation mechanisms. Rather than viewing this as a failure of participants or solely as managerial resistance, it points to a structural challenge in designing participatory governance frameworks. Despite relatively high initial participation rates, the absence of formal decision-making power constrained the councils' impact, reducing participation to a consultative rather than influential exercise.

Furthermore, the Council's purely advisory status meant that even well-formulated proposals could be ignored without consequence. This design flaw, combined with the absence of formal feedback loops, led to participatory fatigue among members who saw no tangible impact from their contributions.

In an interview with an ERT official, a threefold model for democratic communication between public service media and society was outlined, consisting of: "first, enabling citizens to propose ideas for the broadcaster's future direction; second, providing channels for critique and feedback and third, actively co-creating future projects in collaboration with individuals, academic institutions, market actors, and civic groups". This participatory approach, he argued, would ensure that "the foundations we lay for tomorrow, reflect society's collective aspirations, positioning public media as a shared cultural and social project" (Interview, ERT official, Athens 2018).

The Rise and Fall of the Citizens' Councils in Greece

The creation of the Citizens' Councils within ERT, Greece's public broadcaster, raised several important questions regarding its effectiveness and long-term impact. While policy-making processes often signal macro-level progress in media infrastructure, it is equally crucial to observe developments at the micro level, particularly the lived experiences and structural shifts within media institutions themselves. The Citizens' Council, as a newly introduced body within ERT, served as a key space for examining how openness and transformation are enacted within a public broadcaster.

This structure offered a lens through which to explore governance practices and the evolving relationship between state influence and societal autonomy. This relationship is central to understanding the present condition of public media, which differs significantly from the model established in the 20th century. Transformations in public broadcasting are increasingly driven by external factors such as digital innovation and rapid technological development.

Regardless of how swiftly these changes unfold, public service media across Europe, including ERT, are compelled to adapt to this evolving environment. An ERT official responsible for the Citizens' Council reflected in an interview (Athens 2019): "for the first time in Greece and in the public service media, what happened with the Citizen Council helped ERT to understand and realise how this television is seen by the public, how people work and what they offer to the public. I find this initiative an asset and a positive way that someone else is allowed to tell us what we should improve as public servants".

The Citizens' Council prepared several proposals for the board of the television but the administration of ERT had other priorities and did not engage further with them. The Citizens' Council was never established as something that could affect policies, even at the level of suggestions. In this experience, no differences were seen in television programming, even after citizens' discussions and comments. The lack of skills among people engaged in the initiative was another challenge. Most of them did not have expert knowledge about television or the programs, something that was held as a point of critique from management. This stems from the formula and conception of this council since its inception. The random selection, in principle a welcoming approach, together with the basic selection criteria set for citizens in the competition, led to the inclusion of individuals with a low level of education or experience in the field. This tension between democratic inclusivity and functional expertise remains unresolved in the literature on participatory governance. The ERT case suggests that without structured capacity-building or expert facilitation, random selection may inadvertently reinforce existing power asymmetries, as non-expert voices are easily dismissed by institutional actors.

The council did not survive and did not legitimise the voice of public opinion within the broadcaster. Despite its potential and early promise, the Citizens' Council is no longer operational, although no law has ended its operation. This discontinuation followed multiple successive changes in ERT's leadership and, later, a shift in national government, which brought in turn further changes. While the legal framework supporting the Council remains in effect, its termination in 2017 was not the result of dysfunction. Rather, as an ERT representative explained in an email interview (August 2024), the Citizens' Council was not officially re-established after 2017 because the broadcaster's management at the time "did not consider it necessary to approve its continued operation and therefore we did not reorganise it as a department." It was also clarified that the council was not dysfunctional; rather, "it simply completed its cycle." The discontinuation, the interviewee noted, was ultimately due to the decision of subsequent managers, who "chose not to revive the initiative, and so it was eventually forgotten as a project" (Interview, ERT official, Athens, 2024).

Furthermore, this initiative is little discussed among citizens and interest groups, which makes it appear more formal than functional. Government intervention in every television initiative renders such initiatives ineffective and prevents them from fulfilling their purpose. At the same time, governmental intervention in television interferes with trade unions, which often serve the interests of executives rather than of workers. As the analysis shows, beyond political interference and organisational resistance,

several structural limitations contributed to the councils' decline. First, their purely advisory status limited their capacity to influence decision-making, weakening participants' motivation.

Second, the lack of institutionalised feedback loops reduced transparency regarding how citizen input was used. Third, participatory fatigue emerged as sustained voluntary engagement without tangible outcomes diminished commitment. Finally, the absence of systematic training further constrained meaningful participation. These factors, rather than solely political interference, explain the Council's inability to sustain momentum.

The case of ERT again exemplifies how, together with the new government of the time, a new role for citizens in cooperation with the institution was envisaged.

In its genesis, this Greek initiative mainly aimed to raise awareness among citizens concerning their role in the co-creation of value rather than playing a role in regulating the market. At the beginning, this council brought hope for a more transparent and more independent media because it looked almost like a mission which, by experimenting with the bottom-up approach, would have had the opportunity to explore society's expectations and needs in depth, and to reflect them through programme creation. For the managing board of the broadcaster, gathering ordinary citizens at a table with field experts was a great challenge. All this endeavour was of course related to a new concept of governance within the public broadcaster.

Discussion

Three key findings emerge from this analysis, highlighting how the Hellenic Public Broadcaster (ERT) has addressed governance "from below" and the challenges of institutionalising citizen participation.

The first finding emphasises the creation of a space for audiences to be heard. The citizen council provided opportunities for diverse citizens to engage in information exchange, express concerns, and promote public-interest awareness. This reflects a broader argument for openness in public service media, where participatory initiatives can transform traditional broadcast communication. However, while the initiative shows willingness to cooperate and acknowledges television's central role, it also reveals the need for more structured mechanisms, such as improved organization, management, or dedicated digital platforms to support citizen engagement.

The second finding concerns the limited transparency and inclusion of civil society stakeholders. Although the council was structured on democratic principles, broader societal actors beyond television were largely excluded. As one academic noted, the council's advisory role was restricted, lacking executive power and being modelled after foreign systems that did not account for Greece's specific political culture and public media understanding (Interview academic, Athens 2019). Interviews with journalists and academics emphasized that a functional public sphere requires diverse stakeholders acting as intermediaries, yet the council failed to empower citizen understanding or translate institutional policies into accessible language. Conversely, an ERT official highlighted ongoing efforts to incorporate public opinion through research and digital tools, reflecting incremental progress in participatory governance (Interview, ERT official, Athens 2022).

The third finding addresses the relationship between decision-makers and council members, exposing power imbalances. While intended as a forum for inclusive dialogue, the council remained dependent on political structures, and some participants displayed

self-interest. Critics argued that the council often functioned symbolically, exerting limited genuine influence despite being framed as serving the “common good” (Interview academic, Athens 2019). This underscores broader challenges in Greek society, where formal mechanisms for citizen participation exist, but entrenched institutional and political dynamics constrain their effectiveness.

Comparatively, the ERT case aligns with patterns observed in other Southern European PSM contexts, where political volatility and weak institutional traditions hinder participatory reforms. Unlike the more stable participatory frameworks in Northern Europe (e.g., YLE, ARD), the Greek experiment lacked the institutional scaffolding to survive leadership transitions. This suggests that participatory governance in PSM is not merely a design issue but deeply contingent on broader political and administrative cultures.

Conclusions

In an era of increasing demands for media accountability and public trust, citizen participation in media governance has become a defining challenge for the future of public service media. The sustainability and legitimacy of PSM depend on its ability to translate governance from below into a lived democratic practice rather than a symbolic ideal. Historically, while public broadcasters have operated in the name of citizens, the latter have been largely excluded from meaningful participation in decision-making processes. The transition from state-controlled broadcasting to PSM, shaped by digital technologies, has revealed the need for new, inclusive approaches to content creation and governance.

The case of Greece’s Hellenic Radio and Television (ERT) illustrates this ongoing struggle. The closure of ERT in 2013 exposed the fragility of public media governance under political pressure. The subsequent establishment of the Citizens’ Council represented a promising attempt to introduce participatory structures, yet its discontinuation after two years reflected deep-rooted obstacles: limited institutional support, the absence of a culture of citizen engagement and recurring governmental interference. The council generated ideas but failed to translate them into concrete reforms, constrained by administrative inertia and the exclusion of academic expertise. As this article went to press, Article 15 of Law 5253/2025 (ΦΕΚ Α’ 212/25.11.2025) replaced Article 11 of Law 4173/2013, formally abolishing the Councils and substituting a duty on ERT’s Board to commission rolling audience research, published semi-annually on the broadcaster’s website. The repeal was enacted in the statute implementing the European Media Freedom Act.

This experience highlights the need to rethink how citizens can be systematically integrated into governance processes. Frequent consultation, transparency, and collaboration between media institutions, civil society and academia could foster more accountable and responsive public media systems.

At the same time, the rise of digital governance and artificial intelligence (AI) introduces new layers of complexity. Data-driven decision-making and algorithmic systems increasingly shape media production and audience engagement, offering both opportunities for innovation and risks of opacity and bias. The challenge ahead lies in ensuring that technological advancement remains accountable to democratic principles.

The evolution of PSM governance in the digital era requires balancing innovation with participation, embedding citizen involvement and ethical oversight into a model that safeguards creativity, transparency, and democratic legitimacy.

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Katharine Sarikakis (corresponding author) from the Department of Communication, University of Vienna, Währinger Str. 29, 1090 Vienna, Austria, E-mail: katharine.sarikakis@univie.ac.at

Gentiana Ramadani is from the Department of Communication, University of Vienna, Währinger Str. 29, 1090 Vienna, Austria