

REFLECTION

*MEGA mou*¹: An Insider Perspective on Working for Greece's First Private Television Channel

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I spent most of my twenties studying the way women and men engaged with soap operas. In my Ph.D. thesis, I explored how soap opera texts were transformed in the hands of their fans and given a life of their own; or, how fans could take a little bit of power away from the formal creators and distributors of television texts. Little did I know then, in the dawn of the 00s, that I would spend the next fourteen years working for the industry I was researching as an academic; helping create television shows and even writing a few of my own.

This piece delves into my experiences developing and overseeing the production of television series for MEGA Channel, Greece's first and most established private TV station, which went dark in October 2018, just shy of its 29th anniversary. I will refer to the way we approached television texts and audiences in our capacity as 'gatekeepers' between creators and viewers, from the golden days to the challenging times after the Greek financial crisis struck the local media market. Although I will touch upon shared experiences, this is a very personal account; I would never assume the privilege of speaking for others, especially my former co-workers and associates during a period of time that I consider the happiest, most creative and most fulfilling in my professional life.

¹ For some reference, *MEGA mou* (or *my MEGA*) was the slogan of an on-air branding campaign that was launched in 2010. The campaign won MEGA a PROMAX award and the slogan became a ubiquitous and polysemous signifier for the channel for years to come.

FROM STUDYING ACTIVE AUDIENCES TO ENGAGING CONSUMING AUDIENCES

I joined the Greek Fiction department of MEGA as a Program Consultant in the fall of 2002. After years of academic work on television studies, I was well aware that my heart's desire was to make television. As a longtime MEGA fan – like most of my peers, I had been immersed in its iconic sitcoms *Oi Aparadekttoi/The Unacceptables* (1991-1993) and *Treis Harites/Three Graces* (1990-1992) –, but also having been absent from Greece for 6 years, I was overjoyed to be given this opportunity and eager to prove that I could hold my own in this brand new world.

Thirteen years into its history as Greece's first private broadcaster, MEGA was consistently ranking first or second in the daily war of ratings. These were simpler times in the Greek media landscape: ANT1 (the next broadcaster to operate privately in the country) was MEGA's perennial and only serious opponent and there was a salient difference in the brand identity of the two channels (Aitaki 2018). The mediascape was much more saturated than the first years of private broadcasting, when the advertising costs funneled into television had a 57% rise, of which 85% went to MEGA and ANT1 (Xydakis 1992; as cited in Frangou 2002: 70). By 1996 private TV stations were monopolizing “approximately 90% of the total viewing audience and 95% of TV advertising revenue” (Doulkeri and Terzis; as cited in Aitaki 2018: 114)

The rise of the new millennium saw more competition among private broadcasters: stations like SKAI, ALPHA, STAR and ALTER were claiming their piece in the ratings pie, but in terms of original entertainment programming they were just beginning to carve out a place for their offerings. ANT1 and MEGA were still the major players when it came to series and entertainment shows and achieved the highest viewership shares as the table below demonstrates:

	ET1	NET	MEGA	ANT1	ALPHA	STAR
1998	5,5	3,2	19,9	21,7	15,6	16,0
1999	5,1	3,4	20,2	22,8	17,3	14,6
2000	5,5	4,3	23,8	21,55	16,6	13

Fig. 1: A snapshot of percentage market shares from April 1998, October 1999, October 2000 (AGB Media Services, adapted from Frangou 2002: 70)

The end of the 90s promised full-blown dominance for private broadcasters, with domestic dramas and comedies topping the ratings. However, a general drop in viewership in 2001 coincided with a 25% drop in advertising revenue for television channels, trends that reflected the universal crisis in broadcasting and global stock markets (Metaxa 2001; Papathanassopoulos 2001; both as cited in Frangou 2002: 75). At the same time Internet access and speed kept growing, and thanks to data sharing viewers had a whole gamut of entertainment at their fingertips, free of television channels and schedules, whereas subscriber channels were steadily developing. All of these factors contributed in a sense of slow-coming, but imminent doom for the world of global broadcasting, which had just begun to reach the antennae of the Greek media industry. Things were definitely simpler than today, but still, the future was already looking challenging for Greek private television, as audiences became more and more satiated, demanding something different from the increasing supply of broadcasters and television programs.

When I joined MEGA, the competition between the two channels was at an all-time high. The previous season had seen the launch of reality shows on Greek television screens, a clear sign of the increasing globalization of television markets, with ANT1 taking the leap and shaking up the ratings with the Greek version of *Big Brother*. MEGA made a comeback with its own reality species: *The Bar* (a Swedish format), whose production team, interestingly, utilized human resources from MEGA's Fiction Department to highlight the narrative qualities of the genre, but also invested in a romantic comedy with high production values, fresh faces (that would become TV stars) and an unexpected sense of humor: *Eisai To Tairi Mou/You Are My Soulmate* (2001-2002). The show hit all the right notes and exemplified the paradigm of bright, dynamic and youthful series that came to stand for MEGA's brand of television fiction, a brand shaped by Petros Boutos, who took over as Program Director in the summer of 1999, and Loizos Xenopoulos, the head of the Greek Fiction Department.

Loizos met with me a few days before the 2002-2003 season launch and gave me my first assignment: a pile of pilot scripts of the series that would be premiering in the following weeks, to study and familiarize myself with. Among them were Christoforos Papakaliatis' *Klise Ta Matia/Close Your Eyes* (2003-2004) and Mirella Papaoikonomou's *Leni* (2003-2004) – both instant successes, as well as prime examples of what constituted a 'MEGA Hit': that rare, perfect mix of a catchy

premise, a charismatic writer, good production values, inspired casting, consistently effective directing style, and soaring ratings.²

Our team's goal was to look for *MEGA Hits* in the plethora of scripts and treatments that arrived daily in our mailbox. Anybody could pitch an idea: from well-known writers who would primarily meet with Petros and/or Loizos to present their concept before an actual script reached our eager, curious eyes, to aspiring young writers who would be represented by a producer who believed in them, to absolute strangers from every corner of Greece who believed in themselves and wanted a shot. Our invaluable administrative assistant would go through the lot of the 'unknowns' and pick the promising ones to pass on to the team. All the proposals, even the ones that were handwritten on ripped notebook pages and treading on the grounds between the surreal and the bizarre, received a response. The ones that attracted our interest got a phone call, a meeting, or even a request for additional material. They represented a promise, an expectation, the hope that they may be the bearers of the next *MEGA hit*.

Loizos had built a close-knit group of incredible women and men who would become my second family in the next 14 years. Together we would work, laugh and break bread daily; exchange views and notes on scripts, storylines, television and film favorites; spend endless hours reading and rereading scripts, brainstorming for casting ideas, waiting for late beta tapes to arrive, watching formats, pilots, episodes ready to air, shows produced by 'the competition', production dailies, casting tapes, you name it. We looked out for each other, fed off each other's strengths, had each other's back, and were there for each other's good times and hard times. There were also tensions, 'artistic' or ideological differences, group dynamics, and some bad days, but all in all, we were passionate about television, and took pride in our work and MEGA's longtime tradition in television fiction.

The Greek Fiction team was, among other things, responsible for curating the content that would make up the fiction component of MEGA's program each season. Once the right mix of dramas and comedies was selected, each member of the team was assigned a handful of projects to supervise closely during their run, from pre- to post-production. In the good days, each one of us used to take on at least three

² Other emblematic MEGA Hits would be the aforementioned *Oi Aparadektoi* and *Treis Harites*, but also *Dyo Xenoi/Two Strangers* (1997-1999), *Dolce Vita* (1995-1997), *S'agapo, M' agapas/I Love You, You Love Me* (2000-2002), *Anastasia* (1993-1994), *Psithyroi Kardias/Whispers of the Heart* (1997-1998), *Kato Partali* (2014-2015), *Sto Para Pente/In the Nick of Time* (2005-2007) and of course *To Nisi/The Island* (2010-2011).

series, more or less depending on experience and workload (everyday serials presented double, or even triple the work).

Proposals for series and format adaptations would be reviewed on a weekly basis. We would submit a detailed report about each proposal we read, but our opinions were also discussed in length during our weekly staff meetings, where we would also report on the progress of ongoing productions. Our meetings were the hub of the team's energy, chemistry, creative dialogue and exchange of ideas, as we rarely shared a unified front. What we did share, though, was enthusiasm about new voices, whereas new work by our favorite writers was always something to get excited about. There was a lot of joy, anticipation and passion in those meetings, and sometimes disappointment; like, when a certain work wasn't turning out the way we had hoped, for example, or when a project we loved ended up in another channel.

Apart from providing insight about the strategic goals of the program (regardless of whether it would be taken into consideration) and feedback in relation to potential content acquisition, a MEGA program consultant would act as the designated liaison between the channel and the company commissioned to execute content production. We were expected to communicate the channel's expectations for the visual and narrative gestalt of the show we were responsible for and make sure that everyone on the production team was on the same page and (hopefully) share the same vision. This was particularly important in the early stages: the hiring of the creative team and the casting process, with which we were involved to a great extent, as well as the story and character development. During production we had to be on top of everything that was happening on the production front: how is the writer keeping up with the production demands, what's going on story-wise, which scenes are being shot on a given week, what are the major challenges, problems or needs that the production is facing currently and what is being done to address them. This sort of supervision required constant communication with the production team, set visits and close studying of dailies and scripts of course.

In addition to our role as project managers of sorts, we dabbled in the creative process as well, in accordance with the needs of a certain project. Some seasoned and well-established writers didn't need (or want) our feedback and help with the script; others appreciated it. Some directors valued and asked for our opinion, whereas some others pretended to listen and just did their own thing.³ At times, rookie writers had to be closely guided and even taught how to structure and pace a

³ For an interesting account of our work through the perspective of TV writers and directors see Aitaki (2018).

TV script. We always held an inclusive policy in terms of new creators. If anything, we were actively looking for them. Numerous creators (notable examples being Christoforos Papakaliatis, Giorgos Kapoutzidis, Labros Fisfis, Nikos Papadopoulos, but also directors with previously little TV experience like Thodoris Papadoulakis and others) broke into the Greek TV industry – in their capacity as creators – because of MEGA’s strategy to invest on new voices and cultivate talent that lacked professional credit but showed promise and flair.

Regardless of whether a script needed extensive, just slight, or no editing and doctoring whatsoever, we still needed to approve and greenlight every script so that it could go into production. Sometimes, the process was so rushed that we literally had just a couple of hours at our disposal to work on an episode script and make sure that it was fit for production, before assistant directors started breaking its scenes down into shooting schedules. Sometimes, if production was behind, the time pressure was so intense that scenes had already been shot and we had to anxiously hope and pray that there was no inconsistency, no mistake, no visible brand (the dreaded ‘grey advertising’), anything in short that would create further problems ahead.

Another part of our work had to do with the marketing and promotion of the series we were working on. From pre-production already, the marketing campaign for each show was being developed based on what we considered marketable and alluring to its perceived audience. We would work closely with the relevant MEGA departments to decide how to best position these alluring features and how to design our campaign. We had to write summaries and briefs about ‘our’ shows and present them to the teams that worked for their promotion, namely advertisers, marketing and communication colleagues and trailer directors. We would work closely with them throughout the season in order to inform them of important storylines, interesting guests, or anything that could be used to enhance the promotion and hopefully the reception of a show. In addition, we had to review and approve all the trailers, teasers, and relevant promotional material that was to reach the eyes of the public.

Having spent a good number of years studying how viewers engaged with television shows, I found myself studying television texts with the aim of locating and enhancing qualities that would help engage, entertain and connect viewers to our stories and our brand. There are a number of ways television workers approach audiences: audience fragmentation into neat demographic categories that facilitate marketing approaches is indeed practiced and taken into account. However, in our approach as readers, viewers, and decision-makers, in other words as gatekeepers between creators and viewers, we utilized tactics that were broader and less tidy,

like intuition, personal taste, and cultural difference, past experience, imagination, and a certain leap of faith.

Politics were also a necessary evil, and in program development it was mostly associated with the sensitive power balance between the companies that were commissioned to execute projects. This predicament may have been more salient in our station, as its ownership was fragmented as well. Apart from their shares in MEGA and their other assets in Greece's publishing, shipping or construction markets, shareholders owned production companies that were commissioned to produce television content for MEGA. It was a relatively small-scale, but nevertheless, a classic example of vertical integration in media ownership. We did work with independent companies too, and as a matter of fact, there were added pressures for their programs to fare well in the ratings as they lacked the benefit of top-down favor. There was somewhat more tolerance for vehicles that represented shareholder interests, but still, this kind of favor had its limits. At the end of the day, commercial TV is mainly about ratings that bring in advertising revenue: if a show, especially an expensive one, did not yield the desired ratings after some necessary tweaking (i.e., intensifying promotion, supporting/revising storylines, bringing in exciting guest stars, shifting programming slots) it would eventually be dropped, as it would just not be worth its budget, no matter which company produced it, or how good we thought it was.

The tyranny of ratings in commercial television is a double-edged sword. Despite their indisputable flaws as a measure of popularity, ratings constitute a non-negotiable, empirical representation of audience reception that informs every decision and exercises tremendous power over television practitioners. It was a daily struggle: rating tables would be released early in the morning, and a text message by the head of the Research Department would soon reach all interested parties. Metrics and audience trends would be relayed, codified I should say, to be deciphered with great anticipation, especially if they concerned a project one supervised personally. A detailed analysis would ensue later in the day, where one could read the standard break-down of data regarding last night's offerings as well as highlights of audience activity. Who watched what, which 'quarter' did best, what other shows did our main audiences follow, which ad break made them switch channels, and how many stayed on for the next programming slot (the all-important lead-in). A constant, never-ending chase for the always elusive and unpredictable 'audience'.

Later on, as social media would become irrevocably intertwined with television content (in the Greek media context I would place the beginning of this all-growing trend around 2008), this data would be enriched by social media mentions, trends

and social activity, but there was nothing like high performance ratings (or even better, a slot win) to generate elation in our offices and production crews. In the case of meager ratings, one always looked for the silver lining: *'Maybe it was just an 'off' episode'; 'general shares were low, but the show was a slot winner with females 15-24' (advertisers' favorites); 'at least we managed to beat the competition during the last quarter'*, or more recently: *'did you see we were trending on Twitter?'* Despite the silver linings, frustration and gloominess would prevail, especially if none of the 15-44 groups were there. After a few weeks of bad ratings, a generalized feeling of discontent would fall upon the hitherto merry production team, and suddenly camaraderie would give place to finger-pointing and constant complaining.

In their study of the intricacies of creative labor, specifically in the television industry, Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2008) highlight emotional labor as a factor often overlooked by theorists – and most 'outsiders' when it comes to jobs in television. Hesmondhalgh and Baker consider the 'symbolic power' that comes with creating and disseminating cultural forms, content that will be seen, recognized, and potentially enjoyed (or criticized) by massive audiences. Rightly so, they note that "such power and prestige is of course distributed very unequally, both between different media organizations, and between different creative workers within the same media organization" (103).

Indeed, the television industry I experienced is a hotbed of power imbalances and in some cases the power exercised is not only of the symbolic kind, between creators and receivers of content, but in the sense of authority and control between stronger and weaker links on the chain of command. Executives decide, subordinates implement, and creators have to please. These roles are oftentimes reversed, or mixed and matched, let's say, and executives have to please and entertain creators' wishes or demands. At the end of the day, of course, I still believe (always the 'active audience' proponent) that despite the power of creating meanings and deciding where and how they will reach the audience, the viewer also holds a considerable amount of power, as both creators and TV executives vie and obsess over their continuous attention.

Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2008) delve into the concept of emotional labor and illustrate with concrete examples from the production of a BBC talent show how it is articulated in the aspects of television work. The precariousness and insecurity of such work, the management of emotions (in self and others) and unpredictable situations, the pressures of time and budgets, as well as tensions in power hierarchies are among the factors discussed. And although the writers focus more in the challenges faced by creative agents in the field of production (which I, too, have experienced in my career as a TV writer), in my capacity as a subordinate in the

industry command chain, I can attest that the emotional roller coaster that is embedded in the daily judgement of work that one has spent months helping develop and has deeply identified with, as well as the weight of working with creators whose own work is being judged on a constant basis does require intense emotional labor.

One could argue that by virtue of the importance placed in viewership ratings, broadcasting decisions were driven by a populist agenda. Despite the necessity of high ratings and wide audience reception, there was another criterion that informed our selection and guidance, and that was our brand image. In its heyday, MEGA was the strongest brand in Greek television, and this was a result of a methodical marketing management operation. Marketing campaigns were taken very seriously at MEGA and brand identity was in the heart of decision-making and strategy. The creative teams that handled the station's admittedly ambitious and aspirational communication were carefully selected and campaigns were designed and executed in a manner that would justify the station's reputation as a trendsetter; in a manner that would connect with the public on an emotional and experiential level.

In the same vein, fiction and entertainment content was selected and developed in order to fit and enhance our brand image. *'Is it truly a MEGA series? What will it do for the station's profile?'* were questions that were unmistakably asked in our weekly staff meetings. The MEGA brand and how it was perceived and experienced by the audience through our shows was a tangible and essential expectation that had to be fulfilled and honored. Notably, this expectation became more pronounced over the years, as the brand and its qualities would become even more clarified, but also come under threat as competition would grow more intense and multifaceted and finally, as the Greek financial crisis would take its toll on the media market.

TO NISI/THE ISLAND AS CULMINATION AND SWAN SONG OF THE MEGA BRAND

The Island, by British author Victoria Hislop, was published in 2005. There had long been discussions of adapting a novel into an ambitious television drama for MEGA and Hislop's bestseller, a fascinating love story in the backdrop of Spinalonga, the leprosy island colony off the coast of Crete was a perfect candidate. We read the novel in 2009 and knew immediately that we had something special in our hands; a project that could not only do justice to, but elevate the universal themes of the book and represent a defining moment in the history of MEGA and Greek television - if done right. And indeed it was: no MEGA production was ever given that level of painstaking attention to detail, that level of work, care, artistic control, and obviously that kind of a budget. And the result did not disappoint: *To Nisi/The Island*

(2010-2011) became MEGA's crowning achievement and Petros Boutos' legacy. It broke many records for the station and still stands on an unparalleled level of artful, resonant, and compelling television, as far as Greek-made productions are concerned.

Without question, *To Nisi* was the culmination of MEGA's aspirational vision for its identity as a broadcaster and a beacon for what could be achieved in its future. The series and its overwhelming success had mobilized, energized, and inspired us. And yet, even before *To Nisi's* run was over we could tell that there wouldn't be another production of this scope and ambition - at least in the near future. As the Greek financial crisis started unfolding after 2010 (austerity measures shaking the economy and the political status quo, media companies closing, customers being unable to pay up, bank loans becoming scarcer), it gradually became obvious that we were entering uncharted territory.

Our budgets became slimmer and slimmer: there was loads of air-time to fill without the means to produce as many shows as we used to. We would come across great scripts and formats, projects that a few years ago would have been effortlessly greenlighted, only to declare that sadly there was just not enough money to get them done. We started actively seeking market partnerships: brands and products that wished to be promoted not only during advertising breaks, but during the actual air-time of shows, featured in elaborate instances of product placement. This latter day practice, an inevitable necessity to increase the dwindling advertising revenue, was a struggle to implement. We had to negotiate with willing, reluctant or blatantly resistant talent and creators about ways to 'seamlessly' (or sometimes, to our disbelief, very conspicuously - by demand of the advertised brand representatives) incorporate products into storylines, with specific directions on how the actors should interact with said products.

Our programming went from a copious serving of 8 to 14 fiction vehicles to a meager set of 4-5 productions at best. We turned to more economical solutions: formats that could run multiple times per week, entertainment shows with cheaper production costs, and of course, Turkish dramas. Turkish shows were relatively cheap to acquire, had high production values, and their episodes ran so long, they could be easily cut in two in order to fill up space. Despite their popularity, they were seen as a sign of decline, and they obviously were. The brand image we had cultivated for years and driven to new heights after *To Nisi*, was taking hit after hit. Furthermore, MEGA and especially its news programming branch was seen as a tie-in of the political structures responsible for the country's economic collapse. A sense of resentment and mistrust towards the station was becoming more and more widespread in social media and political rhetoric, and so were its financial troubles.

Despite the precariousness and insecurity that is associated with jobs in the media sector (Hesmondhalgh & Baker 2008), MEGA had been a stable and supporting workplace. The first in a series of pay-cuts were seen as a necessary adjustment to the new national reality, but the extensive layoffs that took place in March of 2012 were devastating. Each department was asked to let go of a certain number of employees, and our own team lost two valued members. It felt unreal, unfair, and absurd as far as cost-cutting measures were concerned. The wound would remain raw and would set the somber tone for the years to follow. Senior employees started negotiating early retirement packages, others sought greener pastures and goodbye do's became more and more frequent. The lack of cash flow brought on major difficulties in paying off production companies and contracted workers and associates.

Still, despite the financial stresses and internal upheavals, we kept struggling and surviving, developing series and positioning them in a polarized media landscape, much more competitive and thirstier for original programming. Most of these would do quite well, and some would even take audiences by storm. It would gradually become clear however, that MEGA's financial burdens were sabotaging any worthwhile effort to present a consistent and competitive program. Even hugely popular shows like *Kato Partali* (2014-2015), the last of the *MEGA Hits*, with two seasons worth of excellent ratings and massive following were not able to return in the fall of 2015, as its cast and crew had not been paid for their previous work. Earlier, other shows had stopped production mid-season for the same reason – i.e., the eclectic wager that was *Iroides/Heroines* (2015) –, something that in previous years would have seemed outrageous. MEGA used to be a channel that creators and actors wanted to be part of, knowing their vision would be understood and taken care of. Now their livelihood was at stake! If dealing with ratings anxiety and creative tensions amongst casts and crews was intense emotional labor, having to work with artists and professionals who hadn't been paid for their labor, in a time when most Greeks were struggling to get by, was exceedingly more challenging and upsetting. The inability to finance show after show inevitably pointed out the elephant in the room: the future of MEGA was at stake. In March 2016 it was announced that payroll could not be covered and all remaining productions, one after the other, shut down.

It is hard to convey to readers who have not been immersed in Greek television how surreal the idea of MEGA shutting down would have seemed just a few years ago. Owned by some of the wealthiest members of the Greek business elite, established through a consistently popular and influential catalog of television fiction and news programming since 1989, it just seemed 'too big to fail'. And yet it was not. Facing a

perfect storm – its financial strains, the prolonged recession that had drained the market and polarized and exhausted the Greek public, the uncertainty caused by the imminent television license auction⁴ and the unwillingness, or inability of its owners to support their biggest media brand and asset - the TV station that launched the era of private television in Greece would not survive. It suffered a slow and painful death, while its unpaid employers kept it running: programming, scheduling and directing flow, making trailers and graphics, performing quality control, selling advertising time, maintaining administrative, technical and technological systems, holding the fort on a shoestring, under grave frustration and soul-crushing anxiety. Still hoping, nevertheless, that a solution would be reached: that either the existing or new shareholders would recapitalize the company and invest in a TV license. From 2016 to 2018, until DIGEA⁵ dropped its transmission, MEGA continued broadcasting reruns and earning advertising revenue that would go straight into its frozen bank accounts, servicing the loans that kept them frozen in the first place. Ironically, the ratings were quite competitive considering this was a wholly non-original flow of programming; soothing hits of the past competing and sometimes winning over new shows, proving the worth of MEGA's fiction catalog and causing considerable discontent among its competitors.

Meanwhile, its employees started protesting more vocally, outside of the smoky newsroom we would caucus in, trying to decide the best course of action. We went on strikes (meaning that no advertising airtime was sold and allotted), we protested outside the shareholders' business headquarters, outside the banks that refused to reopen payroll accounts, and outside the Parliament building. We elected delegates to meet with shareholders, bankers, and members of the government. They all

⁴ In 2015 the SYRIZA government set out to tackle the unregulated status of private television in Greece. Since 1989 all private channels had been operating under temporary licenses as no government ever decided to establish a clear legislative and operational context for privately owned media. As per Kitsantonis (2016), the Greek government commissioned a study that concluded that only 4 licenses could be supported by the local market, which would thus be auctioned. At the time 10 channels were broadcasting nationally, so inevitably the auctioning prices would soar and some of the stations would be driven to closure. As a result, the bill in question was received extremely negatively among television industry professionals.

⁵ DIGEA is the network operator that provides and controls the digital, terrestrial television system in Greece. The fact that at some point it would drop MEGA's transmission, since the station had not been paying dues and did not acquire a TV license was inevitable and dreaded.

assured our colleagues that they were doing their best: the road to hell is paved with good intentions.

The last hope for MEGA was finally crushed when despite all indications, expectations, and preparations there was no bid when a new auction, for seven licenses this time, took place in January 2018. Until that final blow the few remaining program consultants were still searching in their notes, reports, hearts, and imagination for the few good shows, and who could know, maybe even a *MEGA Hit* that would drive the long-hoped-for relaunch that never came. For better, or worse, I was not among them. And on October 28th 2018, the dreaded night (or early morning) that MEGA died, broadcasting the beloved sitcom *Oi Aparadektoi* (kudos!) I wasn't even able to access real time Greek television to enable myself to live through the pain and the loss that many, most of all the people who made MEGA what it was and stood for – its staff, creators, actors and viewers – experienced when that last frame froze on the screens. Some co-workers, exhausted by the waiting game and the lack of means, had moved on, getting jobs in other channels; others, not less exhausted or less in financial need, were still waiting in the hopes of a rebirth, or other favorable outcome.⁶ Neither choice was bearable to me – in December of 2016 I left Greece to follow my family in the US; in retrospect, the move seemed like an easy way to get away from the loss.

But the loss is still there, the wound is still there and sometimes I think that a loss experienced from afar leaves a deeper wound. It's the loss of an identity; the loss of a creative professional freedom and joy that sparked even under the pressure of

⁶ A few days after I finished writing this manuscript, on November 1st of 2019, MEGA's assets (including its coveted catalog and its on-air identity) were sold to the highest bidder: businessman Evangelos Marinakis, for €34.000.000. Poignantly, Marinakis – a shipping magnate and football club owner, who had sought for years to establish himself in mainstream media ownership –, was among the shareholders at the time of MEGA's demise. Now he, alone, carries the weight of the station's holdings. Obviously, the scenario of MEGA's assets concentrated under a single entity was a favorable one for those who hope for a reboot/restart/rebirth of MEGA. The opposite would have meant that MEGA's legacy would be picked apart by several agents. It remains to be seen how this legacy will fare under the new status quo; if MEGA's legacy lies in its catalog and on-air identity; if the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. The fact that key figures from MEGA's original corporate leadership are attached to the new entity, most notably Petros Boutos, the former and longest-running programme director of MEGA, is telling and promising. The age of innocence (if it ever existed) in Greek television culture is long gone however, even if MEGA's saga continues.

power structures, high ratings and low standards; the loss of the camaraderie and togetherness (because the friendships are always there) that characterized and painted our work with bright, memorable colors. I do suspect, and in some cases know, that most, if not all, of my MEGA friends share the same feelings, even if they're content with other ventures now. And sometimes, when I come across articles, or social media texts that refer to MEGA series and programs with nostalgia and affection, sincere or ironic, I know and hope that MEGA *mou* will always be MEGA *mas* (*our MEGA*).

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- Sto Para Pente/In the Nick of Time* (2005 – 2007) MEGA.
- To Nisi/The Island* (2010 – 2011) MEGA.

Treis Harites (1990 – 1992) MEGA.