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SUBJECT: HOW TO READ THE GREEK PRESS: A GUIDE FOR THE UNINITIATED

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1. (SBU) SUMMARY. At first glance, the Greek media may resemble the media in the U.S., with a mixture of broadsheets and tabloids, national and local television and radio stations, and constitutional guarantees guarding the freedom of the press. Closer inspection reveals a Greek media industry controlled by business tycoons whose other successful businesses enable them to subsidize their loss-making media operations. These media operations in turn enable them to exercise political and economic influence. The result is that the media often provides an image of national and international events that is almost uniform but for its division along party

lines. Similarly, a uniform anti-Americanism is injected into nearly every issue, but has little effect on the bilateral relationship. END SUMMARY.

The History of the Greek Media, from Homer to the Home Page

2. Homer reported on the Trojan War a few hundred years after it happened, and used the facts of the war to create a poetic tale of battles among gods, with men as pawns. Current Greek media uses the same blend of fact and fiction, with an equally judicious dose of deus ex machina (outside forces) that controls events. The first modern day Greek-language newspapers were established in Vienna and Paris in the 18th century and were an important factor in the Greek fight for independence from the Ottomans. With the founding of the modern Greek state, the tradition was established of blaming an outside power (first the Great Powers and then the U.S.) for all ills that befell Greece.

3. Greece currently has about 160 newspapers, 180 television stations, 800 radio stations, 3,500 magazines, and just 10 million people. (Portugal, with the same population, has 35 newspapers, 62 television stations, and 221 radio stations, according to the "World Factbook" of 2004). How can all these media outlets operate profitably? They don't. They are subsidized by their owners who, while they would welcome any income from media sales, use the media primarily to exercise political and economic influence, and therefore care marginally less about turning a profit from their media operations. Because there are no subscriptions or home deliveries in Greece, newspapers have to sell themselves from newsstands by grabbing the attention of the casual passerby. This means that even the occasional calm and partially accurate story will have a misleading or untrue headline that often has nothing to do with the story. Still, the media utilize sensationalist headlines and stories to capture readers and the all-important television ratings that determine the distribution of advertising revenue. Newspapers also use such tools as DVD and book giveaways.

4. The same media companies that own newspapers and broadcasting stations have established internet news portals, but they have not taken off. The most popular, in.gr, has abolished its news desk and just runs articles from its parent company's newspapers. There are no "Salons" or "Drudge Reports."

Who Watches/Reads What?

5. Greeks get most of their information from television, but newspapers are the main source of analysis. Morning "news" shows consist of an oral recitation of those same, deliberately sensationalist newspaper headlines. Athens media dominate

nationally, with 80 percent of the nation's viewership and readership, and with provincial radio stations rebroadcasting Athens radio programs. The state-owned radio and television stations have a smaller audience than their private counterparts. Only 6 percent of Greeks get their news from the internet. While the public's trust in the media has been steadily falling over the last two decades, it's still quite common to hear "but I read it in the paper" or "I saw it on television" when we try to correct false news stories. An October 2005 poll showed that 71 percent of Greeks consider the media too sensationalist, yet the sensationalist newspapers generally sell the most copies.

6. A Greek political columnist described the situation as a moussaka with many layers baked together. The Greek public, he said, doesn't pay attention to the media. The public opinion polls, however, reflect high levels of anti-Americanism (or, as he pointed out, anti-government or anti-establishment or anti-anything sentiments), because people like to vent their frustrations. Once you dig little deeper into the moussaka, he continued, you will find that the public is generally content with the decisions the government makes, even those where Greece and the U.S. are allied.

Trends in Media Content

7. The Greek media increasingly devote more column inches and minutes to the daily problems of the average Greek, the private lives of politicians, entertainment, and sports than to foreign

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issues. Greece's membership in the U.N. Security Council has received limited coverage, while analysis of European Union decisions is scarce. Major international events get extensive coverage but only via international networks and wire services. The reasons for the sparse coverage of major global developments include Greek ethnocentricity, the unwillingness of media owners to promote the current government's achievements, and the lack of robust Greek leadership in the international arena.

Who are the Media?

8. The private media outlets in Athens are owned by a small group of people who have made or inherited fortunes in shipping, banking, telecommunications, sports, oil, insurance, etc. and who are or have been related by blood, marriage, or adultery to political and government officials and/or other media and business magnates. For example, ship-owner and Mega Channel investor Vardis Vardinogiannis is the best friend of Christos Lambrakis, publisher of "To Vima,"

"Ta Nea," "Athens News," and the "in.gr" news portal, and Lambrakis has government construction contracts. Vardinoyannis's two children married into the Goulandris and Nomikos ship-owning families. His sister Eleni is married to ND MP Yannis Kefaloyannis who serves as special advisor to PM Karamanlis.

9. The Greek term "interwoven interests" refers specifically and exclusively to the web of relationships among the media, business, and government. The current Minister of the Merchant Marine commented recently that the government is a puppet that performs at the whim of the interwoven interests. (His comment amused neither the press magnates nor the Prime Minister, but he has somehow held onto his job.) The relationships are more complicated and incestuous than those among the gods, the demigods, and the human beings of Greek myth. (Note: post can email a simplified one-page chart on the media and their ownership to anyone who would like to have it.)

10. As for the journalists themselves, they are an underpaid bunch usually holding multiple jobs in order to pay their bills. It's not unusual for a journalist to work in a ministry press office, even while covering the beat that includes that ministry. They're very conscious of their multiple masters. One long-time Mega Channel reporter says she only recalls one instance where any of Mega's five owners was criticized on that station. It's also acceptable for journalists to take gifts or even money from those on whom they report. The 2004 Olympics organizing committee was notorious for paying journalists for favorable stories.

What does this mean for the U.S.?

11. Strong anti-Americanism ebbs and flows, not with the tides but with the national "obsession du jour." Even in the absence of stories directly involving the U.S. - such as the alleged eavesdropping on Greek politicians - there is always an undercurrent of anti-Americanism. Headlines such as "Souda Base: Camp of Death" or "New American Provocation" are common. Ordinary bilateral discussions are regularly presented as the U.S. applying "asphyxiating pressure" on Greece to do something. Even the relatively balanced English-language "Athens News" recently ran four pages of stories on Iran with reporting from Athens and Tehran and comments about the U.S. planning military strikes from Souda against Iran, without any reference to the actual U.S. position. ("Athens News" is part of the Lambrakis empire.)

12. There are many reasons given for the anti-Americanism among the public and journalists, including the perception of: interference of the U.S. in the Greek civil war in the 1940's, American support for the 1967-74 junta, and American acquiescence in the Turkish invasion of Cyprus in 1974, not to mention asserted American

"war-mongering" in Serbia and the Middle East. The U.S.-E.U. relationship is also a factor, with the media concentrating on trans-Atlantic disagreements rather than cooperation. (This played out with the purchase of 30 F-16's and subsequent decision not to buy an additional 10 F-16's being portrayed as Greece snubbing, but then subsequently embracing the E.U., rather than getting the best planes for their bucks.)

13. In addition, many media owners and public opinion shapers have traditionally looked to the former Soviet Union for their ideological beliefs. Some of the media owners have oil ties to the Middle East. Some have ideological or financial reasons for putting the brakes on globalization, fearing that it will harm their own wide-ranging international financial interests. Finally, Greek public opinion thrives today, as it did in 800 B.C., on myths, scapegoats, and conspiracy theories, with the U.S. portrayed as the "Planetary Ruler" who is to blame for Greece's domestic troubles and for its lack of stature in the international arena. The U.S. is also regularly portrayed as favoring Greece's neighbors in the international political scene (Turkey, Macedonia, etc.) at the expense of Greek national interests.

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14. The bottom line, though, is that the bilateral relationship is a healthy, productive one, despite the characterizations by the media. The U.S. and Greece cooperate regularly and well on a number of issues. On the other hand, the media's own brand of pressure contributes to the tendency of the GoG to downplay its cooperation with the U.S. at times.

A Case Study: The Rice Visit

15. The Embassy considers the April 25 visit of Secretary Rice to Athens as very successful. The Foreign Ministry said it was positive and useful. Yet, private television stations that day interspersed video of her meetings with footage of U.S. aircraft dropping bombs and Greeks rioting in the streets. Following the visit, pro-opposition media used glaring headlines to present the Government of Greece as giving into the Secretary's "unreasonable demands," while only a few pro-government papers saw the visit as enhancing Greece's international stature. Government contacts and journalists themselves have commented to us that the visit went far better than the media let on. This dichotomy also underlined the media's obsession with the U.S. Papers do not rush to characterize as a "success" or "failure" the routine, virtually weekly visits to Athens of one European foreign minister or another.

Upcoming Changes:

16. All private television and most radio stations have been operating without licenses until now as there has been no framework for licensing. A new media law is expected to require licenses and sharply limit the number of stations in operation. Concurrent with the need to impose order in the media is the expressed but, so far, unproven desire of New Democracy to break the web of interwoven interests. Previous governments, trying to get good publicity, turned a blind eye to the media's illegal maneuvers in various areas and even gave them tax breaks.

How We Deal with the Media:

17. The majority of the media put an anti-Bush and/or anti-U.S. spin on any story with international dimensions, including GMO's, poverty, the environment, and control of the internet. We have succeeded in placing interviews, locally produced op-eds, and IIP products on key foreign policy concerns, and we are attempting to counter factual errors and omissions with telephone calls, letters to the editor, and regular meetings with journalists, editors, and publishers. We are also putting more resources into our dealings with media schools and students, hoping that the next generation of journalists may be freer of the prejudices that have characterized the current and previous generations. Our interlocutors at the media schools tell us that this is indeed the case, although they also fear that changes in the media industry mean that their students will not actually find many jobs in journalism once they graduate.

Where will this all lead?

18. Even if the GoG implements a new media law, some are skeptical whether the GoG can put the chaotic media situation in order because it would involve a showdown with media owners. Should the media ownership radically change and/or efforts pay off with media students, we should see a gradual reduction in the knee-jerk anti-Americanism that colors the media and a shift to more objective and more factual reporting. The good news is that our relationship with the GoG remains strong, despite the efforts of the media, and the Greek public is comfortable venting against U.S. foreign policy while admiring many aspects of U.S. culture.

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