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### ***TRAUMA* podcast: 24 years, seven tragedies: The experience of survivors and the collective trauma of an entire country**

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#### **Abstract**

In *TRAUMA*, we meet survivors and relatives of victims who are tracing seven disastrous events and fatal accidents that have afflicted Greece in the twenty-four years from 1999 to the present. The testimonies reveal a pattern: a lack of trust in the State and a sense of impunity of the Greek politicians in charge. The podcast explores a difficult piece of modern Greek history and moves the lens of the narration to the people that were involved either as survivors, experts in the field or relatives of the victims. *TRAUMA* audio documentary uncovers a crucial question: how trauma has been built into the national identity of a country like Greece? The present review explores the diverse answers to this question that come out of the podcast.

#### **Keywords**

Trauma, investigative journalism, Greece, collective trauma, national identity.

#### **Recommended Citation**

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*TRAUMA* is a Greek audio documentary, part of a larger series of podcasts by iMEDD, a non profit journalism organisation founded in 2018 and funded by the Stavros Niarchos Foundation (SNF). The main aim of iMEDD is to tell stories that reassess the role of journalism and they intend to highlight 'best practices' for the journalism community (iMEDDa). *TRAUMA* is produced by iMedD Lab, a content production division that publishes original investigative, interactive and data driven stories (iMEDDb).

The documentary is structured in three parts, featuring seven significant disasters and accidents that happened in Greece, spanning from 1999 to 2023, from The Mount Parnitha earthquake (1999) to the forest fires in Ilia (2007), the Mandra floods (2017) and the Tempis train crash (2023). The first section focuses on the lived experience of the survivors of the disasters; the next section moves on to consider the individual/collective trauma both with experts from the field and testimonies from survivors and relatives of victims.<sup>1</sup> Finally the episode moves on to the present day and examines both the individual and collective trauma as they have shaped the lives of the Greek people today. The audio documentary uses narration of the disasters, short audio extracts of news reporting of the events and expert opinion on the events and the trauma response. These are mainly mental health experts, such as a psychologist specialising in firefighting and a psychiatrist, but also there are also a medical examiner, a lawyer and a professor of surgery.

This isn't just another podcast about human tragedies, but is a key moment that illuminates Greek national memory in two ways. Firstly it sheds light, from the perspective of the most vulnerable people involved, on seven major tragedies that have deeply hurt the Greek people in the last two decades. Secondly it reinvents the relationship with and trust in the journalistic profession, as the listener is invited into an authentic soundscape and discourse of the survivors and the relatives of the victims. In Greek media this is usually done to provoke sensationalism and melodrama whereas in this case we have a podcast of investigative journalism that makes an effort to bring forth the actual facts from the survivors and the experts' perspective and to voice the thoughts, attitudes,

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this review, survivor is used to refer to people that survived the tragedies, and victims to those who lost their lives.

feelings and relationship to the traumatic events from both groups. The podcast is quite rare in this way.

The 'voyeurism lure' (Theodosiadou & Ristani 2024) is mindfully addressed as *TRAUMA* hosts have accompanied their podcast with a journalist's code of trauma coverage, addressing issues related to 'privacy, legislation, and journalist ethics' (Voutsina et. al, 2023). Research has shown a loose interpretation of the existing codes of ethics proves to be a common practice among Greek journalists, especially during the period following the 2008 economic crisis (Papathanassopoulos et al 2021). On top of that investigative journalism was always rare in Greece but has become even more rare in the last few years as freedom of speech in the country has undergone a sustained decline: during the pandemic with the increased attacks on journalists covering health related protests, after the election of the right wing party of New Democracy in 2019 and amidst the murder in broad daylight of a crime reporter, Giorgos Karaivaz in April 2021 (International Press Institute 2024). The European Parliament passed a damning resolution in February 2024 regarding the rule of law and freedom of the media in the country that highlights concerns about serious threats to democracy, the rule of law and fundamental rights in Greece (Oikonomikos Taxidromos 2024). The resolution also highlighted a lack of media pluralism in Greece and denounced the fact that journalists faced physical threats and verbal attacks, breaches of their privacy through surveillance software (European Parliament 2024). In this context therefore, *TRAUMA* is welcome as a piece of serious journalism that is not afraid to directly address issues of injustice, corruption and violations of human rights that have become part of the lived reality of many Greek people in recent years, not only journalists. It is to be hoped that *TRAUMA* opens a new trend in podcasting by reclaiming the power of investigative journalism and at the same time by daring to voice the experiences of ordinary people.

*TRAUMA* gives a chance to the listener to identify with the victims and the horrific moments that the families went through when the accidents happened. It starts with the most tragic and the most recent of all, the accident at Tempi where mostly young people died immediately when two trains crashed in a head-on collision. The audio documentary argues there is a national collective trauma, basing this argument on the testimonies that give very detailed descriptions of the accidents and the feelings (sorrow, grief, anxiety, depression, the permanence of the pain) that torture the relatives of the victims, and at the same

time the expert opinions that make an effort to expand the argument and place it in a wider context. According to this contextualisation, the trauma has touched the collective subconscious, giving rise to a lack of trust in the state and the weakened democracy that is present in everyday life in Greece<sup>2</sup>. This draws a line between personal trauma and the collective trauma and this is the originality of this documentary: the weaving of the personal to the collective, showing how the pain is very much the same in both cases and how the pain intertwines and interrelates.

The structure is conventional. Each episode starts with a brief description of the date and the number of victims of the tragic event and moves on to the testimonies and the expert opinions, combined with further voice over narration of the identification of the audio testimonies and experts that talk. Testimonies mainly focus on the absence of any help from the state at the moment of crisis and the indifference of the Greek state towards the disastrous events. One testimony of a relative of a victim of the fire in Ilia on 2007 is exceptional as it clearly illustrates the complete absence of the Greek state in the fires and the absolute exasperation that provoked among ordinary citizens. One woman recounts the way she found out that her brother, working as a firefighter, was burned alive when his fire fighting truck caught fire. She explains on the podcast the devastating feeling of having to find out for herself, as she didn't have any official update from the Fire Department informing her about what had happened. The testimonies but also the rest of the audio documentary are an honest, almost raw account of what happened during these catastrophes.

The originality of *TRAUMA* lies in the fact that the issues of trauma and national identity are not discussed openly in audio media and even where that happens in few cases, is still not holistically analyzed and illuminated from the perspectives of victims and specialists. This is one of the few times that we hear people who work on such catastrophes share their secondary trauma and try to make sense out of it. A very vivid example is Ioannis Androutsakos, Firefighter–Psychologist in the Department of Psychosocial Care of the Fire Brigade, who says:

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<sup>2</sup> Zahariadis et al. (2023) argue that in Greece there is instrumental mistrust in the government's ability to do its job. According to Eurobarometer in December 2019, only 26 percent of Greeks trusted their national government, relative to 23 percent trusting public administration and 27 percent trusting regional/local authorities. The numbers were among the lowest in Europe .

Personally, what I have experienced is that in situations like this, particularly in the aftermath of the Tempi train crash, the impact stays with you, even if you don't have specific memories of it. This holds true for all my colleagues as well. [...] Well, I distinctly remember that after returning from the incident, I had a strong aversion to social contact for several days. Trauma does not simply heal or fade away, it remains with us, much like grief. Over time, we learn to adapt and live with these experiences. (translation from Greek by author)

This podcast touches upon the ways collective trauma is built into the national identity of Modern Greek people. The fiscal crisis that hit Greece in 2010 and the following social, political and later global health crisis of the 2020 pandemic have led Greek citizens to have higher levels of dissatisfaction and lack of trust in the state and public institutions (Maris & Flouros 2022). According to Siomos (2023) the lives of Greek citizens during the decade 2010 – 2020 were dominated by poverty, immigration, brain drain, national depression and suicidal ideation accompanied by the 'humanitarian crisis', hunger and deprivation. The podcast is appealing as there is a deep listening to the grief, the pain and the feeling of futility that is fully present in the Modern Greek society of the last two decades.

*TRAUMA* weaves together the past and the present to tell a recent history of the modern Greek state that should not be forgotten. Opening old wounds can be liberating even if it is tremendously painful. But life is always optimistic, because the two young people that were almost drowned in the Samina shipwreck finally got married and this is a highlight that the host chooses to close the podcast as a reminder that life always wins.

This is a short historical record of the raw and powerful experience of disaster and a way for families of the victims to feel justified and heard, to feel that they have a voice, a chance to reconsider how an audio-based narration of trauma might re-structure 'the given distribution of the heard' and restore acoustic justice (LaBelle 2020). This notion of acoustic justice is significant and valuable to the Greek people and through this podcast it feels like Greek people that suffered from all these tragedies these last decades are being heard and this makes their trauma easier to process. It also suggests a common ground, a united stand for people that went through traumatic events and an acknowledgement that they are not alone. As a concluding remark *TRAUMA* reminds listeners of their vulnerability and at the same time strengthens their human bond because of this vulnerability and therefore uplifts their common consciousness as citizens.

*TRAUMA* podcast: 24 years, seven tragedies

*TRAUMA*, podcast. Duration: 35'.41. Published 3 July 2023, iMedD Lab. Available at <https://lab.imedd.org/en/trauma/> Investigation by Kostas Koukoumakas, Nicholas Aronis, Phoebe Fronista, Katerina Voutsina, Giorgos Schinas. Written and presented by Kostas Koukoumakas.

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