

Traditional Failings versus Non-Traditional Prospects of the Armenian Media

By Arpine Porsughyan, Yerevan

Abstract

Despite the large number of media outlets in Armenia, traditional media remains homogenous in its message. This is especially troublesome in an environment where the majority of the population are passive receivers and do not seek alternative sources of information. With the absolute dominance of government-friendly broadcast media, what are the implications for reporting on the political behavior of Armenians and can new and social media provide a ground for non-elite voices?

The Media Landscape in Armenia

On December 16, 2010, the National Commission on Television and Radio of Armenia announced the results of the broadcast license tender. A1+, one of the few independent media outlets, was denied a broadcast license for the thirteenth time despite calls from the international community prior to the voting for offering broadcast licenses to new outlets to liberalize the media in Armenia. Freedom House Executive Director David J. Kramer remarked that “A thirteenth denial of A1+’s lawful request for a license would be a slap in the face to advocates of free media everywhere.”¹ A1+ was denied a broadcast license in 2002 and has been off the air since. Media experts described it as a major setback for media freedom in Armenia.

Despite the relatively high number of traditional media outlets, both state and private, that exist in Armenia—48 television stations including the local ones, 36 newspapers and 17 radio stations—, media in Armenia suffers from a lack of pluralism, openness and professionalism.² Freedom House classifies the media in Armenia as *not free* and the IREX Media Sustainability Index reports no changes in the low score over the last year.³

The state-run Armenian Public Television and the Armenian Public Radio are two of the few stations that reach a nationwide audience. Many of the private television stations are owned by government-friendly business elites and these broadcasters employ a high degree

of self-censorship to avoid losing their licenses.⁴ While newspapers provide alternative political views, their circulation is limited—5,000 copies for the most popular newspaper. Radio stations generally focus on entertainment with the only exception being Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty.

Traditional Media and the Population

What are the viewing habits of the population of Armenia and how much is the population dependent on broadcast and print media? The Caucasus Research Resource Centers’ Caucasus Barometer 2009 (CRRC CB), a nation-wide survey conducted annually in the South Caucasus asked Armenians about their media preferences and perceptions. According to the survey data, which are documented in the Opinion Poll Section of this issue, television is the most popular medium in Armenia. The overwhelming majority of the population receives at least one local language television channel and 90 percent of the population claims to watch at least one television news program a day. In contrast, only 34 percent of the population read a newspaper/news magazine at least once a week. The amount of newspaper readership varies between the big cities and the outlying areas—44 percent of capital inhabitants claim to read a newspaper/newsmagazine at least once a week versus 26 percent of rural inhabitants who do the same.

With the dominating popularity of television, it is not surprising that television is the main source of information about current events in the country for 90 percent of the population. Neighbors and friends together are the second main source of information on current events for around half of the population.

However, viewing preferences do not always translate into satisfaction with the quality of the information. In particular, those in the capital with access to alternative sources of information claim that the television channels in Armenia do not present different perspective on

1 Freedom House (December 14, 2010). *Freedom House Calls on Armenia to Liberalize its Broadcast Media*. Retrieved January 17, 2011 from <http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=70&release=1293>.

2 IREX (2010). *Media Sustainability Index 2010 Armenia*. Retrieved January 3, 2011, from <http://www.irex.org/project/media-sustainability-index-msi>.

3 Freedom House (2010). *Freedom of the press*. Retrieved December 23, 2010, from <http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=16&year=2010> (see Documentation Section in this issue). IREX (2010). *Media Sustainability Index 2010 Armenia*. Retrieved January 3, 2011 from <http://www.irex.org/project/media-sustainability-index-msi>.

4 Ibid.

the news in the country (34 percent in the capital versus 22 percent in rural areas). Focus groups conducted by CRRC in 2008 with media consumers in Yerevan also showed general dissatisfaction with the way news is presented on local television channels.

"I don't trust TV because it doesn't correspond to reality at all. There are cases when you witness something and they report something totally different." (Female, 18–40, Armenia)⁵

However, a rather large percent of the population falls into the category of passive receivers of information who do not have a strong opinion about the quality of reporting or the accuracy of news on local media channels. Thus, in response to the question "How well do you think TV journalists in Armenia inform the population about what is actually going on in the country," over 60 percent of the respondents took a neutral position or did not know.

Literature on the topic suggests that media influence is especially strong in the environments where the number of alternative sources of information is limited.⁶ The population in Armenia also recognizes the influence of broadcast media on the formation of opinion; over 40 percent of Armenians either agree or completely agree that television defines what people think.⁷ How then is media interacting with the political behavior of the population?

Traditional Media and Elections

The presidential election of February 2008 and its immediate aftermath delivered yet another blow to the media in Armenia. The favorable coverage of then Prime Minister Serzh Sargsyan, when compared to the completely negative coverage of the main opponent, Levon Terpetrosyan, played a significant role in increasing the level of tensions surrounding the elections. According to the OSCE/ODHIR Election Observation Mission report, the state-owned *HI* did not treat the candidates equally despite allocating comparable airtime to their campaigns in its news coverage. Moreover, the majority of coverage on Ter-Petrosian was negative even though he was the main opposition candidate and was given the most airtime. Public radio adopted a similar approach while the state-owned *Hayastani Hanrapetutyun* newspaper gave clear preferential and generally positive cov-

erage to Sargsyan in some 45 percent of its print space devoted to the elections.⁸

In the aftermath of the contested elections of 2008, the government declared a 20-day state of emergency and imposed tight control on the media. Almost all newspapers in Armenia suspended publication during that time. Most other media outlets followed the stipulations of the state of emergency, broadcasting or printing only official news.

While the international community urges the Armenian government to liberalize its media before the 2012 parliamentary elections, new processes, such as the switch from analog to digital broadcasting which may last until 2015, is creating new obstacles preventing new broadcasters from entering the market.

Traditional Media and Reporting on the "Other"

What is the role of media in shaping public opinion about the countries that have tense relationships with Armenia?

Research shows that reporting both on Azerbaijan and Turkey is generally driven by the state's official positions. Monitoring results of media sources in Armenia and Azerbaijan document how inaccuracies in articles published by the leading newspapers in Armenia and Azerbaijan "don't add any new or necessary information, but rather [they] set a negative context in the public consciousness, which hinders dialogue and mutual understanding."⁹ A more recent media monitoring effort of Armenian and Azerbaijani media shows that:¹⁰

Still, the journalists very rarely acknowledge their responsibility in enhancing existing alienations and, mildly put, mutual hostility between the people of the two counties. Or, while acknowledging it, they continue supporting and often encouraging politicians, academicians, public figures, providing them with the newspaper space and airtime to increase the confrontation. They play a significant role in keeping alive the old stereotypes and stimulating new ones, they distort the reality, complicated as it is, thus impeding mutual understanding and the establishment of trust between neighbors, rendering the advancement of peace impossible.

5 Caucasus Research Resource Centers (2008). Armenian and Azerbaijani International News Coverage—Empirical Findings and Recommendations for Improvement. Retrieved March 5, 2009, from http://epfound.am/index.php?article_id=260&clang=0.
6 Mughan, A. eds (2002). *Democracy and the Media: A Comparative Perspective*, New York: Cambridge University Press.
7 Caucasus Research Resource Centers (2009). *Caucasus Barometer*. Available from www.crrccenters.org.

8 OSCE/ODHIR Election Observation Mission (May 30, 2008). *Republic of Armenia Presidential Elections 19 February, 2008*. Warsaw. Retrieved 23 September, 2008, from http://www.osce.org/documents/odihr/2008/05/31397_en.pdf.

9 Yerevan Press Club, Yeni Nesil Journalists Union of Azerbaijan & Black Sea Press Association (2005). *What Can a Word Do?: Materials of Armenian, Azerbaijani and Georgian Press Analysis*. Retrieved September 20, 2008, from <http://www.ypc.am/eng/?go=act/studies>.

10 "Yeni Nesil" Journalists Union, Yerevan Press Club (2010). *Armenian-Azerbaijani relations in media of Armenia and Azerbaijan*.

Focus groups conducted in Yerevan in 2008 also showed the influence of media on the perceptions of participants about the other side in the conflict.¹¹ While most of the participants of the focus groups considered media in Armenia biased, they tended to trust official news sources reporting on Azerbaijan or Nagorno Karabakh.

"I may trust independent sources, but when we receive official information we have to trust it. As a resident of this state I should trust official information." (Male, 18–40, Armenia)

The reporting on Turkey is also generally driven by the government position. A recent media monitoring project in Armenia and Turkey revealed that in the majority of cases media follow an "official" agenda in covering Armenian–Turkish relations.¹² Most coverage focuses on special events targeted at the media, official visits or public speeches by officials.

Prospects and Non-Traditional Media

With access to the internet growing, social media is coming to fill some of the gaps in the traditional media, giv-

ing space to alternative voices. Over the last two years Armenia saw unprecedented levels of on-line activism. Facebook groups such as "SAVE Cinema Moscow Open-Air Hall" or "Stop changes in maternity leave law" have resulted in real-life social activism. Social media has also encouraged projects on Armenian and Azerbaijani collaboration with blogs and online projects that provide grounds for mutual understanding. In the fall of 2010 two videos on YouTube, one on the humiliation of soldiers in the Armenian Army¹³ and a second one about student abuse at one of Yerevan's public schools¹⁴, resulted in official investigations in the Army and the school, respectively.

Non-traditional media is a dynamically changing environment and has the potential for bringing change. Currently only 11 percent of Armenians claim to use the internet on a daily basis,¹⁵ but expanding access to the internet could create a serious alternative to traditional media.

About the Author:

Arpine Porsughyan currently holds a Heinrich Böll Foundation scholarship.

11 Caucasus Research Resource Centers (2008). Armenian and Azerbaijani International News Coverage—Empirical Findings and Recommendations for Improvement. Retrieved March 5, 2009, from http://epfound.am/index.php?article_id=260&clang=0.

12 Eurasia Partnership Foundation, Global Political Trends Center (2010). A Survey on Turkish–Armenian Relations in Armenian and Turkish Media 2006–2009. Retrieved from http://epfound.am/files/media_bias_joint_report_1.pdf.

13 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fOTt2znY51c&has_verified=1. Retrieved January 10, 2011.

14 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mZQAZOjSv8>. Retrieved January 10, 2011.

15 Caucasus Research Resource Centers (2009). Caucasus Barometer. Available from www.crrccenters.org.

Media in Azerbaijan: The Ruling Family Dominates TV, the Opposition Has Some Papers

By Arifa Kazimova, Baku

Abstract

The family of Azerbaijani President Aliiev maintains tight control over the country's TV stations. Mostly the opposition is limited to a small number of low-circulation newspapers. The opposition papers have no access to official news and frequently resort to publishing unverified information. Only BP and major telecoms are willing to advertise in the opposition press. The situation with the media reflects overall political conditions in the country.

Strict Controls on Television

In Azerbaijan, the ruling family controls almost all television channels. However, the opposition owns a few

papers and some web-sites.

There are nine TV channels—the Azerbaijan Television (AzTV), Azad Azerbaijan Television (ATV),