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Media and Democracy in Armenia

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Mass media serves different purposes in different societies. In Armenia the role of the media is not defined yet. This is rather good news for a post-Soviet society, meaning that possibilities remain for reform and progress. In the last decade the limits of media freedom were remarkably broadened, and new technologies have introduced new potential and possibilities. Yet lack of professionalism and professional standards, fall of general educational level, and the weakness of a market-based media are the obstacles on the way of media development in Armenia.

A decade of Freedoms

Over a short decade, the media sector has gone through revolutionary changes in post Soviet Armenia. The lifting of censorship, the return of Diasporan party-press to Armenia, the mushrooming of non-state owned newspapers (around 8 daily papers are currently published) and a multitude of private TV stations have added to media diversity unseen in the past. Add to that the proliferation of digital technology and distribution of news through web sites and e-mail lists.

Yet not all actors of the society have a clear notion of what is the mass media, and what we need it for. Diverging opinions exist concerning the role of the media not only between journalists, the political elite, economic circles, and the citizens of the republic, but also among each of those groups. The media is incapable of reporting and discussing the most burning issues of the society, expressing the interests and opinions of various social forces, and forming a "public opinion" that could either put pressure on the administration, or bring changes through elections.

The repressive role of the state against media freedoms is not a major threat, although ruling elites do continue to try to "tame" the media. For example, the repression of the ARF (Dashnaksutyun) - leaning press under former president Ter-Petrosian in December 1994 was in force only for three years and a half, up to 1998. Even in this period, ARF succeeded in creating alternative news sources, such as "Yerevan Press Service", "Hayots Ashkhar" (daily) etc.¹ The enemy of the press today is the underdevelopment of the media sector itself.

Current Problems of the Press

The weakness of the print press is a major factor for the limited capacity of the media to generate a general debate in the society. Although electronic media has a more mass appeal, yet the print press is the place for thorough debate and possibility of using as

¹ Similar trends exist in the whole of South Caucasus. For example in Azerbaijan censorship was re-imposed in 1993 under the presidency of Abulfaz Elchibey. But in 1998 Heydar Aliiev had to cancel it under international pressure and continuous resistance of Azeri journalists.

reference². Even the chief editor of "Azg", Hagop Avedikian, thinks that the mass media has stopped from shaping public opinion³.

Daily newspapers in Armenia are usually 8-paged, 3-5 thousand copy enterprises⁴. In other words, newspapers serve hardly a small politicized elite in downtown Yerevan. One reason for this poor performance could be the structure of the ownership of the print media. Most Armenian papers are owned by either an open sponsor (a political party), or a hidden sponsor (a political party, or a business tycoon with political ambitions). The result is that the newspaper management and direction is not motivated in satisfying its readership to increase circulation and therefore income, but in satisfying one person or a small group of like-minded people.

The sponsor-dependent syndrome is very present in the print-media, and somewhat less in the television sector and news-agencies. What concerns the print media, the result is unattractive publications from graphic and layout point of view, with heavy stress on political part and very thin section for social, economic and cultural news. Similarly advertisement is underdeveloped, partly because print media depends on the "sponsor" for balancing its budget, and partly because advertising in 3-5 thousand volume papers does not make much sense.

The penetration of the print press is low even in the regional context. For example, the Georgian daily "Rezonansi" comes out in colours and has a circulation fluctuating between 15-24 thousand. In Azerbaijan "Yeni Musavat" has a circulation of 20,000, and comes out seven days a week.

The second problem is the lack of professional standards. Like most post-Soviet media in Armenian press there is little distinction between facts and opinion, between journalistic styles such as feature or commentary, and little effort is done to persuade the reader. The personality of the journalist often occupies too much space, where the prognostics of the "author" remains a central value. News coverage is often done in an aggressive, polarized way, and little care is paid to present balanced, documented arguments to convince the public. Personal loyalties (often mistaken with political ones) dictate the orientation of the journalist.

Education System and its Impact on the Media

The erosion of the education level, even decrease in general interest in books and reading, has left its fingerprints over the level of the media. In three studies carried out for CIMERA, chief editors and directors of media institutions in Armenia, as well as Azerbaijan and Georgia, have expressed their dissatisfaction with graduates from journalistic faculties⁵. Not only they lacked practical skills (how to run an interview, how to check facts, etc.) but also their general knowledge, or even capacity to write in their mother tongue was dissatisfactory.

Journalism in the Soviet period was totally a different profession (to explain the people the higher knowledge of the Party and not looking for facts in reality out there). The university structures - hungry for resources - have not been able to reform from past practices. As a result, students of journalism is offered a mixture of past ideology and whatever new courses is possible to offer. The books and references suffer from the same fate.

² A 30 minutes evening news could be printed over a one-page of an average sized newspaper.

³ "Hayots Ashkhar", Yerevan, 4 May 2001.

⁴ According to data from earlier this year, the "biggest" daily paper in Yerevan is "Aravot" with a circulation of 5,000, while "Azg", considered as the most serious, has a circulation of 3,000. Daily papers are printed 5 times a week, and do not appear on Sundays and Mondays.

⁵ The studies will be soon available on: <http://www.cimera.org>

What is the most dramatic, no coherent body of reference books or archives exists that is accessible to local journalists, starting from the most key events around them. As a result it is very difficult to offer solid, factual articles, since research time needed for such a work is too long, and often resources exist only in Russian or English.

The Diaspora

In the early nineties the Diaspora brought in huge change to the media in Armenia. "Azg", belonging to the Ramgavar Party, introduced a new language of journalism and a conception of how to present a newspaper. "Yerkir" (daily) and "Azadamard" (weekly) of ARF had huge impact, "Yerkir" being the most popular paper in Armenia at the time with print volume of 54,000 in 1993.

But this far the Diaspora has failed to become a market that could make a difference for the Armenian media sector, either from the point of view of buying news products, or influencing the advertisement sector. Nor could the Diaspora provide a network of journalists and correspondents - which in theory should be easy to organize - thus bringing the media in Armenia out of its provincial character.

The reason here is the lack of professionalism among the Diasporan media structures. Most of them are political organs, and not functions on profit basis. Yet the positive development of the Armenian media could have its impact on the media based in the Diaspora itself.

Curiously, up to now the Diaspora has shown little interest in directly investing in the media sector in Armenia, looking at it not as a political work, but as an economic investment. But the future development of the media there will depend very much on this factor: whether business circles are ready to invest their money and work hard enough to make it profitable.

Conclusion: Media and Democracy

In case we define democracy as "government by the people", then Armenia needs to develop instruments capable to serve this purpose. And the media is one of them. The mass media in Armenia is unable today to inform the citizens of the country what is happening around them, what basic choices are they confronted with, and to make those information and debates accessible to the majority of the population in economic manner.

Development of the media in the future will depend on several factors. One will depend on the professionalism of journalists, sub-editors, chief-editors, and media managers themselves. It will depend from their capacity to inform their audience in an interesting and pleasant way, it will depend on their capacity to attract new audience, and therefore sell real advertisement (not the hidden or black advertisement of today).

But the development of the media will also depend on various other factors. The development of the economy is an obvious one, although its importance is too much emphasized, I think. The re-valorization of education is one, to make reading seen not a retrograde activity, but a worthy effort. Only by taking a mass character the media could serve its goal (hence mass media). Only by reaching an important portion of the population the media could form a public opinion, which in its turn could influence politicians. It is an exercise worth investing in.