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Armenian Diaspora Media and Prospects for Cooperation

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The Armenian media in the Diaspora has played an important role in the collective life of Armenians living around the world. Indeed, the first ever Armenian newspaper was published in the Diaspora.

In the last few decades the Diaspora media has seen its share of challenges caused by socio-economic, political, cultural and demographic changes in the make up of the Diaspora, spread in some 85 countries. However, Armenia's independence a decade ago had a significant impact on the media in the Diaspora, especially in the ideological and structural spheres.

While these changes continue to shape the media, the most challenging factor is their financial viability. In general, the overwhelming majority of Armenian newspapers in the Diaspora are kept afloat through the financial and human resources of the political parties each represents or a small group of "independent" individuals. Today, their survival hinges on the willingness of a given political party or a group to preserve the "legacy" of their "founding fathers." More than a forum for discourse, Diaspora newspapers have become a litmus test of survival in a changing political, social and cultural environment in the Diaspora.

Moreover, the future of the Armenian-language media in the Diaspora depends as much on socio-economic variables that are beyond the control of the community as it does on the determination and dedication of a handful of publishers, editors and writers.

There are three major and perennial problems that Diaspora newspapers face, which also provide comparative issues to contemplate in the context of the media in Armenia:

1. Decline of Readers

There is a steady and alarming decline of readers in the Armenian language in particular, and decline of readership in general. While general readership decline is not unique to Armenian newspapers, it presents its own sets of problems to the Armenian print media. Even in Lebanon, once considered the "Mother of Diasporas", Arabic and English have become the preferred languages among the youth. True, that in Los Angeles the number of readers in Armenian continues to be quite sizeable (due to immigration in the last decade), but this has not translated into increase in circulation.

2. Financial limitations

Virtually all Diaspora newspapers operate on a bare-bones budget and rely heavily on volunteers and dedicated "freelance" contributions. For example, all six main papers in the Middle East are subsidized either by their political parties or through individual sponsors. None of them are financially self-sufficient.

Indeed, most of the small pool of writers in Armenian newspapers hold several other jobs to make ends meet because their newspapers cannot afford paying them "normal" salaries. But, there are some interesting exceptions; the Egyptian writers who

contribute to Arev's monthly Arabic supplement are paid three times more than the Armenian contributors to the same Arabic edition.

3. Organizational infrastructure

As consequence of declining readership and limited financial resources, Diaspora newspapers do not have a sophisticated or advanced organization for gathering, writing and publishing information and news. For example, one staff writer at Armenian Revolutionary Federation's (ARF) Aztag in Beirut explains: "With the limited number of staff, it takes us two days to work on a story and that's already late for a daily newspaper."

The overwhelming majority of the newspapers in the Diaspora, other than the editors, do not full-time correspondents who cover community events, regional or international developments. At best, they have a few freelance or part-time writers who voluntarily contribute reports or articles, some receiving small honoraria.

4. Format

Diaspora newspapers range from 4 to 12 pages (with some exceptions) with a "conventional" newspaper format. In recent decades, bilingual publications (even trilingual, e.g., Abaka in Montreal) have become an inevitable trend, which aim at catering to increasing number of Armenians who do not read Armenian.

While the number of printed and distributed copies of each newspaper is either a "party secret" or very hesitantly revealed by the publishers, the overall range is 500-3000 copies (exceptions are the weeklies published in the US).

5. Content

The overwhelming percentage of newspaper content in the Diaspora is simply the print version or "reproduction" of what comes out of Armenia via the Internet or what appears on, for example, the Groong news network. The rest is uncritical, at times unedited, reprints of news releases sent by community organizations and individuals. Other than the occasional editorials and opinion columns, there is no original or serious reporting.

Thanks to the Internet, Armenian language publications, too, benefit from the new technologies. Several Internet-based agencies such as Armenpress, Noyan Tapan (Armenia), Asbarez, Horizon, Massis (Los Angeles), Gamk (Paris) and Marmara (Istanbul) provide ready-to-print articles and news daily, most of it for free, to anyone who has a computer. These Internet services have made life easier for editors of Armenian newspapers in the Diaspora.

The majority of these articles are on Armenia. Writer-intellectual Bebo Simonian points out that "The independence of Armenia caused an ideological crisis in the Diaspora." The political changes in Armenia in the late 1980s and the internal upheavals of the mid-1990s have had a lasting impact on the relatively stable internal life of the Diaspora and continue to shape the "national agenda."

However, even as editors agree that Armenia and Karabakh remain the focal point of Armenian national life around the world today, news on Armenia is not in great demand as it was just a few years ago, and today Armenia news is moved to the inside pages, unless it is major news.

Also, since the end of the Cold War, political party newspapers, especially in the Middle East, tend to be "less ideological and more informational." On the other hand, virtually all papers practice political correctness when it comes to local Armenian community affairs. "Respect" for individual and organizational sensibilities, especially if the individual is a leader, takes precedence over the collective interests of the community. As for skirmishes between the political parties, Aztag's (ARF) acting editor explains: "It is our policy that we neither write about them nor answer their criticism about us." Such a 'gentlemanly' approach leaves little room for dialogue.

6. Comments by Editors in the Middle East

Today, publishing Armenian newspapers in the Middle East is no more than "a national obligation, passed from one generation to another."

--Mardiros Balayan, publisher of Chahagir (Hnchag)

"I would say the typical reader [of our paper] is a middle aged person, with limited education, but who reads and writes Armenian -- a person who generally does not read Arabic or foreign papers because of lack of knowledge of other languages, so they read Aztag to get both national and international news. These are our most loyal readers."

--Dikran Jimbashian, acting editor Aztag (ARF)

"It is the older generation that reads the paper; perhaps only 20 percent of the new generation simply flips through the pages. At best, they look at the sports section or the announcements. Probably, the copies we send to other countries are more thoroughly read than the ones we distribute here in Egypt."

--Garbis Yazjian, chief executive of Arev (ADL)

"Aztag's biggest problem right now is that there are not enough writers. We don't have intellectuals who are capable of writing, analyzing and presenting local, regional and international issues in Armenian. Sadly, this pertains to all professions, not only to the media."

--Dikran Jimbashian, acting editor Aztag (ARF)

"Large number of Armenians in Lebanon go to non-Armenian schools. Even the so-called community leaders do not send their kids to Armenian schools. There is a whole generation of Armenians who do not speak Armenian... I have difficulty seeing who will replace me as editor or writer," he says. "We don't pay well to attract new writers. Sometimes we teach in several schools to make a living and that certainly does not provide an attractive career choice for the new generation. The new generation is much more successful in mainstream Lebanese society than in the Armenian community."

Baruyr Aghbashian, editor of Zartok (ADL)

"Today, the editors and publishers of the Armenian print media, instead of commissioning original articles to those who are capable of writing, prefer the scissors -- they simply cut out and use already printed material from other publications. [His observation holds true for almost all newspapers in the Diaspora.] Today, our newspapers are generally reprints of news and articles published elsewhere -- basically a mission of recycling," says Simonian. Worse, "Articles are reprinted in several papers without regard to copyright or honorarium to the author."

--Bebo Simonian, writer-intellectual, contributor to Nairi

In Egypt, the lack of readers and writers is not the only problem. There is also a lack of Armenian typesetters. The typesetting of both Chahagir and Arev is done by Egyptians whose mother tongue is Arabic. Chahagir's 55-year-old office boy cum typesetter has been preparing the newspaper for publication for 28 years by character recognition. He has even learned the rules of hyphenation of the Armenian language without ever learning to speak, write or read Armenian. Nowadays he has also learned to typeset on a computer by learning an Armenian keyboard.

7. Prospects of Cooperation

The media in Armenia and the Diaspora have many commonalities, especially in terms of financial limitations, structural difficulties and content. While some in Armenia have a "romantic" view of the resources and operational mechanisms of the media in the Diaspora, the situation of the media in the Diaspora, in some respects, is far worse than in Armenia.

Any project aimed at establishing cooperative mechanism between the media in Armenia and the Diaspora should have a clear understanding of realities in both places.

In the context of the current picture of Armenian media, the most obvious assistance Armenia could provide Diaspora publications is CONTENT. Contrary to expectations, the Diaspora media has little resources to assist Armenia in a substantial way. What the Diaspora media is capable of providing to Armenia is its distribution networks and decades-long experience of operating within "multi-cultural" communities.

An Armenia-Diaspora media network could provide resources and build bridges between Armenia and Diaspora and various other international media-related organizations and resources. It could provide programs for cost-effective methodologies and create multi-lateral networks among media groups. Most important, it could establish an environment in which a healthy, free and creative discourse on national issues could take place.

Some of the premises that should constitute the bases of an Armenia-Diaspora media network are the following:

1. provide accurate information to the Armenian public about the political, economic, social and other developments in Armenia and the Diaspora;
2. encourage the viability and further development of free, independent, and responsible media in Armenia and the Diaspora, by providing informed, useful and accurate assessment of issues and problems that affect the collective interests of Armenians;
3. Highlight the development (and potential) of Armenia's economy by providing extensive economic coverage and analysis and by featuring investment opportunities;
4. provide readers, professionals and policy makers reliable news and information upon which they can formulate their opinions and independent evaluations;
5. provide the international community dependable and factually useful news and information about Armenia and Armenians, so that more informed and comparative assessments are made about Armenia and Armenians.