



YEREVAN PRESS CLUB

**DOMINANT TRENDS IN
THE MASS MEDIA IN ARMENIA IN 2011-2012**

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**9th South Caucasus Media Conference,
“From Traditional to Online Media: Best Practices and Perspectives”,
Organized by the Office of the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the
Media, October 11-12, 2012, Tbilisi, Georgia**

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CHANGES IN THE MEDIA are lately occurring so rapidly and dynamically that a depiction of the static situation as it looks today provides little in terms of understanding the problems. Especially because changes in one dimension, for example, technology, inevitably leave their mark on others - the legislative, political and professional dimensions. Therefore, in my presentation I will try not so much to state the realities at the moment when we Armenian participants left Yerevan for Tbilisi, so much as to describe basic trends, and to bring correctives into the media field even in the hours that we are here meeting and which will define the development of the information space of Armenia in the near term. The determination of trends is like a forecast; it cannot be 100-percent accurate, so certain of my judgments could be debatable.

Since our country is in between election campaigns - parliamentary and presidential - and Georgia is also living with just finished elections, I will start with this topic then. After the spring parliamentary elections in Armenia, the statement “who owns television will win the elections” seems entirely dubious. During the official election campaign, the owners of Armenian television controlled by the authorities (and the concentration of property here has reached an unprecedented level), essentially rejected the practice of unequal allocation of airtime to candidates and political forces. For the first time in the history of national elections in Armenia, both the YPC monitoring conducted with the support of the OSCE and the European Commission, as well as international observers and even the Armenian opposition testified that during the period of election campaigning, broadcasters largely provided equal opportunities for campaigns.

Of course, it would be a great exaggeration to attribute this phenomenon by the authorities' good will, although it was their political decision that influenced the television channels' behavior. Particular significance was given by the international community, above all the European Union, to the quality of these elections, and the importance of evaluations from outside for the political leadership of the Republic of Armenia; hence, the interest of the latter in respectable monitoring results does not fully reveal the reasons for the metamorphosis. A significant factor was the awareness that television had lost its monopoly on the formation of public opinion, and the continuation of ruthless exploitation of this resource for the achievement of desired results in elections could be a futile exercise.

To be sure, during the period between elections, control over television content remains for the authorities a fairly important component of the management of political processes and public sentiments. In the absence of the attention of international organizations, a one-sided and selective coverage of events and opinions, and a deficit of discussion of public-interest problems, are, as before, characteristic traits of Armenian television.

Yet the topic of biased mass media broadcasting nevertheless is gradually losing its urgency. It is possible that this South Caucasus conference will be the last where we will speak of the domination of television as the chief source of information for citizens.

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Already today, the audience for Armenian Internet news sites is comparable in size to the audience for news programs on Armenian television channels. And the situation is radically changing in favor of the former literally every six months.

In this sense, we need to look at the broadcasting legislation from a somewhat different angle. For a long time, this legislation was the number-one topic in the context of securing freedom and pluralism for Armenian mass media. From the moment the Law on Television and Radio was passed in 2000, it needed a conceptual re-working. But despite numerous discussions, alternative draft laws proposed by journalists' organizations, including the Yerevan Press Club and Internews Media Support NGO, PACE resolutions and expert conclusions from OSCE and the Council of Europe, the Law, if it was amended, in fact went in the opposite direction from what was recommended.

A key problem all this time has remained the bodies intended to regulate and manage broadcasting - the National Commission on Television and Radio (NCTR) and the Council for Public Television and Radio Company (PTRC). Precisely their exceptional dependency on the government became a factor leading to the political monopolization of the airwaves. Several options were proposed to obtain at least relative independence for these bodies. In particular, the possibility was studied of forming them on the basis of independent civic institutions (on the example of councils of public broadcasters in a number of European countries) - with labor unions, industrial associations, organizations representing various social groups, religious communities and so on. This option could have been seen as the most acceptable, but unfortunately, such institutions in Armenia are either not independent (by virtue of the control over them by the government) or not sustainable (by virtue of the lack of stable sources of existence).

An orientation toward political pluralism in the composition of national regulators could serve as an alternative. Balancing participation in these bodies of representatives of rival parties (50% from the ruling coalition and 50% from the opposition) would create a definitive basis for making decisions in the interests of the whole society. This model, in some respects similar to what was adopted in Georgia, is possible but has a number of flaws - international experience indicates the undesirability of politicizing bodies that regulate broadcasting and manage public TV and radio. There is no doubt, however that with such a model, Armenian broadcasting media would not be so far from the real and diverse information needs of the society as it is now. And when we acknowledge the rapidly growing role of the Internet in informing the population of Armenia, we have to admit that a significant portion of this audience is television viewers' discontent with the quality of news and discussion on the airwaves.

However, today, it is evidently already too late to speak about the possibility of a certain independence of the regulators by reflecting among them the pluralism of the Armenian political arena. The opposition in Armenia is so weakened by the lack of resources that it has to survive by attaching themselves to two oligarchic parties. And restoration of real political pluralism now must be tied to the prospects of economic pluralism, when business circles have free resources that are so independent from the government that they can permit themselves the financial support of opposition. But that is a completely different topic and an entirely cloudy prospect.

In other words, thinking about legislative guarantees for an independent broadcasting industry in Armenia today is a big luxury. It remains only to rely on the famous "political will" about which so many speak, like the Abominable Snowman, but which no one believes has ever been seen. Nevertheless, reform of broadcasting legislation, despite the

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reduction of its strictly political relevance, remains a priority for the media community. For an effective development of this industry in the period of transition to digital broadcasting, civilized procedures and an informed strategy are needed. Meanwhile, since 2006, there has been talk of a conception for digitalization, but no one has ever seen a serious document that first, justifies the selection of standards; second contains a calculation of resources and technological decisions for a national digital broadcasting network; third, forecasts the long-term expenditures of television companies to use this network; and fourth, proposes a model for subsidies. To be sure, a few years ago, the Ministry of Economics of the Republic of Armenia, which at that period for some reason was involved in broadcasting issues, happily informed the public that Italian specialists, including some from the company Mediaset, would help us in resolving all television problems. These specialists then managed to do some things, but in light of subsequent events around this company, I think no commentary is needed regarding their contribution to the development of the Armenian media industry...

Reforming legislation, when the conceptual issues remain undecided regarding the transition to digital broadcasting is a very complicated task. And nevertheless, these journalists' associations, together with their partners and with the substantial expert support of the OSCE and Council of Europe, proposed in parliament draft amendments to the Law "On Television and Radio". In particular, it provided for a whole number of procedures which are now absent, but which would have acquired particular importance from the first days of digitalization - the licensing of private multiplex operators, the distribution of channels for these multiplexes, taking into account the public interest in the process of developing the industry, and so on. In connection with the traditional political sensitivity regarding everything that concerns television, there is no reason to expect that the draft will be reviewed in the coming months, as the preparation for the presidential elections is under way. But we do have certain expectations regarding the spring session of the National Assembly.

A SPECIAL TOPIC is the Public Broadcaster. In the above-mentioned draft law, there is an article providing for more precise regulation of the activity and accountability of the PTRC, which remains as a unique state institution that does not answer to anyone under the law! Meanwhile, as sad as it is to admit, Public Television in Armenia, never having been established, is now leaving the scene as a significant institution. It was stated above that in the current civic and political realities, legislative guarantees for the independent management of PTRC are practically impossible. Accordingly, the chance that it can propose to its audience in the foreseeable future a diverse and high-quality coverage of current problems is approximately zero. The authorities, for which the so-called state, and then the so-called public television was one of its chief instruments for guaranteeing its self-reproduction is now successfully resolving this problem through controlled private channels. If until recently, PTRC, enjoying the blessings from above, was an aggressive player in the advertising market and implemented commercial projects with no less effectiveness than the leading private television companies, then today ruling circles are interested in removing it in general from the ranks of business rivals.

It can be supposed that Public Television, no longer needed, will be left to go fallow with what in the Soviet era were called "the creative intelligentsia" that is loyal representatives of culture, literature and art. Under market conditions, they feel themselves deprived not only of material assistance but of attention and honors. For several years now, the representatives of the "creative intelligentsia" have publicly complained of the "coercion of bad taste", "the undermining of the moral foundations of the nation", and "insufficient propagation of spiritual values" on Armenian television, and have written letters to the

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President as well. Their claims are largely founded, but the methods which they propose to correct the situation have the scent of mothballs about them with Soviet-era concepts like “Glavlit” (the Soviet Chief Directorate for Protection of State Secrets in the Press, or censor), “Khudsoviet” (Arts Council) and so on. The Public Council under the Armenian President took hold of this topic “seriously”. Naturally, private channels that earn money for their owners precisely due to all these “depraved phenomena”, and also extinguish the civic activism of society and its interest in real problems, can hold their own. But, evidently, the upper echelons of government are not opposed to present public television to this still influential sector of the electorate, thus pledging guaranteed support for a certain time. Without advertising, it can fill the airwaves with low-cost broadcasts on just the state budget alone - concerts and shows without commercial pretensions, endlessly long interviews about national culture, domestic films the rights for which do not require the payment of large fees. It does not matter if the broadcasts will have a small audience or that the last modern-thinking professionals will leave PTRC; meanwhile, there will be no worries about the political loyalty of the public channels and their new old heroes.

I WILL DELIBERATELY NOT DWELL IN DETAIL on the most traditional of traditional mass media, the paper press in Armenia. Unlike television, it was always if not independent at least pluralistic and reflected the basic contrasts of domestic political life. But numerous economic problems dictated by poor local market and world trends hardly favorable to print media were aggravated in our country by the awful state policy regarding them in the course of 20 years of independence. As originally a journalist, with most of my experience in newspapers, it pains me to have to admit that there are no prospects even in the near future for the Armenian print press. The only salvation for them is to go on to the Internet and create convergent editorial offices.

Thus, the dominating role of alternative, convergent media in the Armenian information market is inevitable and it will move from the category of forecasts to the category of reality faster than many of us could have imagined at last year’s meeting here in Tbilisi. But that is the topic for another speech, by Manana Aslamazyan, director of the “Alternative Resources in Media” project. I will just briefly touch upon one aspect of social networks (or social media). Their growing role in the life of Armenian society astounds the imagination. It is a question above all of the development by means of social media of “web” civic activism. Environmental protection, urban planning, elections, corruption - this is an incomplete list of the areas where “web” activism has managed to demonstrate itself fully. If you count the most vivid examples of recent months, when the activism of society has brought a specific result, then it is the achievements of “web” activism that prevail, and not the traditional institutionalized segment of civil society which has developed and been nurtured in Armenia for almost two decades.

MEANWHILE, THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIAL NETWORKS as a resource for information for civic activism contains serious risks. There is too little time between signal and action in order to fully evaluate a situation, its background, and its accompanying factors in order to make an accurate decision. Roughly speaking, all the networks activists have “at their disposal” can be drawn upon effectively to save a tree that is going to be cut down, but meanwhile somewhere else an entire forest can be destroyed. I will deliberately cite an example from an area where “web” activism has been the most organized, concentrated around a few competent informal leaders who cannot be so easily disoriented. But even here, and all the more in other spheres where the planting of disinformation, a provocative signal, an initiative of a manipulative nature are all quite possible. Contemporary PR and political technologies are penetrating further into social media, making “web” activism vulnerable, and in recent months in Armenia the attempts to

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exploit “honest, sincere enthusiasm” for unseemly ends have grown more frequent.

These challenges require a more active participation of professional, responsible players in the information field (journalists, experts, independent representatives of institutionalized civil society) in social media. Their knowledge and ability to analyze and verify signals in combination with the motivations aimed at operational reaction of “web” activists reduce the likelihood of the prevalence of “bad” content and the manipulation of social media. The advancement of such cooperation is a new and promising direction for the activity of media organizations.

The rapidity of the receipt and reaction to information is becoming a new factor in social segmentation. If “web” activists - mainly young people of student age and also a new type of professionals not strictly stuck to their workplace - manage to achieve in this sense incredible speeds and advantages then the representatives of many traditional professions are disadvantaged. I recently had repairs done in my apartment and involuntarily entered into the situation of fairly highly-qualified specialists in their field, for example, plumbers who, although they wish to stay abreast of events and in the thick of public life are falling far behind its pace. The majority of participants of our conferences not only listen to speeches but without stopping, continue in parallel to follow what is happening far from this room thanks to laptops, iPhones and so on. Thus, we and other categories of society for whom “web” activism is accessible conduct ourselves at work, in the student lecture hall even on public transportation. But unlike you, the hands of the plumber are constantly busy during work hours; his gaze is constantly directed at concrete objects; he does not have time for an iPhone... Even a few years ago, a person could calmly, without thinking about anything else, work for eight hours, come home, have dinner and only later, when he had laid down on the couch, take the remote control of the television in hand or the newspaper. Such a regimen would not mean a significant information delay for him. Today, it would undoubtedly mean this.

AND NO MATTER HOW PRIMITIVE THIS SOUNDS, THE SOLUTION FOR MEDIA, which I recently characterized as almost lost for the Armenian news industry, is radio. At that time, it seemed that radio had finally receded to the musical and entertainment niche. Today, more and more Armenian radio stations broadcast news and talk about serious topics. “ArmRadio FM 107” is the main talking media, although only a year ago, only jazz could be heard on this frequency 24 hours a day. I and many others who love to listen to good music in the car regret this “re-branding”, but the plumber and representatives of dozens of other professions, without distracting from their jobs, obtain the opportunity to listen to news and opinion in a wide spectrum of civic and political topics. Public radio of Armenia has been speaking a great deal. “Yerevan FM” (102.0) successfully combines quality music with quality news, for which it received the Yerevan Press Club prize this year. Moreover, in rebroadcasting the Radio “Liberty”, “Yerevan FM” is focused on the high bar of the latter and in its own news shows.

By the way, the return of Armenian radio channels to formats offering civic and political information is largely stipulated precisely by “Radio Liberty” broadcasting. For many years, the Armenian authorities thought up various methods to artificially frustrate the access of this radio station to an Armenian audience. Thank God, this did not work. They had to resort to more civilized forms of attracting radio listeners and stimulate competition to Radio Liberty. Whatever notions were behind this, the audience only gains.

IN CLOSING, I WOULD LIKE TO CITE ONE MORE even more convincing “success story” from the life of Armenian media. It is connected to the decriminalization of libel and insult

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in 2010, which at first was conceived by some of our circles close to the government as a “clever joke”. On the one hand, liability for defamation was moved from criminal to civil law, enabling the praise of international organizations, but on the other hand, it became a “club” for opposition and critical media which saw criminal prosecution as the lesser evil than paying compensation for moral damages. The second half of the concept seemed at first to work - judges began to churn out the maximum amounts of compensation for moral harm to litigators, a selection representing the political and business elite, and several publications were threatened with bankruptcy. But the first part of the plot against disobedient media did not work out - Armenian journalists’ organizations, the press itself, and then after them, the international community began quickly to call things as they in fact were. Cases in the European Court for Human Rights loomed ahead, and all calculations indicated that the “clever joke” had not justified itself. The authorities had to extricate themselves from the unpleasant situation they themselves had created.

In May 2011, at the initiative of the Human Rights Defender of the Republic of Armenia, the Information Disputes Council¹ (IDC) was formed, and both of those from Armenia giving a talk today became members. The expert conclusions of the IDC on defamation cases in the courts began to really influence law-enforcement practice, and the assistance of the OSCE enabled the establishment of the IDC on a regular basis. Already by 2012, it could be confidently stated that citizens pursuing the goal not of rehabilitating their name, but only punishing journalists through the pocket ceased to obtain what they wished from the courts. The statute in the Civil Code of the Republic of Armenia on libel and insult did not become a “club” against the media. The number of cases began to drop sharply and the chances of regulation information disputes through extrajudicial means rose, in particular, through appeals to the self-regulation body, Media Ethics Observatory² (MEO).

The main problem of this structure, created in 2007 by the media outlets themselves on a voluntary basis at the suggestion of the YPC was and remains the lack of awareness and understanding of the principles of operation of the MEO on the part of citizens. But the most effective form of solving that problem is the televised versions of the review of specific disputes and conflicts of ethics. The production of this show, named “Press Club”, has attracted the attention of a fairly wide audience and raised the interest in the activity of the Media Ethics Observatory and increased the number of complains to it as alternatives to appeals to the court. Today, the Armenian media community is contemplating how to extend to maximum effect the action of the mechanisms of self-regulation to the Internet, especially since there already is a precedent for review by a court of a lawsuit for insult and dignity on Facebook.

THE TRENDS ANALYZED IN THIS REPORT bear witness to the fact that objective processes in the information sphere of Armenia force the authorities to lose their appetites for restricting freedom of speech. Meanwhile, the effort of the political elite to control the mass media is capable of causing serious damage to the development of certain branches of the media industry as occurred in its day with the print media and is now happening with television. Therefore, consistent and coordinated efforts from the journalist community and international organizations are required to advance progressive approaches in this sphere.

¹ <http://www.ypc.am/expert/ln/en>

² http://www.ypc.am/self_regul/ln/en