

USE OF OPEN EDITORIALS/COMMENTARY ARTICLES IN THE ARMENIAN MEDIA

INTRODUCTION

Within the framework of “Competing Narratives” project, the Yerevan Press Club, commissioned by Media Initiatives Center, conducted a study on the use of op-eds/commentaries in the Armenian media as analytical, educational materials.

The study was conducted by using a methodology developed on the basis of two components: a one-month (February 2024) monitoring of textual publications of five selected media (“Aravot”, “Hraparak”, “Zhoghovurd”, “Civilnet”, “Aliq Media”), as well as in-depth interviews with three editors-in-chief (Aram Abrahamyan, “Aravot”; Knar Manukyan, “Zhoghovurd”, Ara Tadevosyan, “Mediamax”).

The media outlets and editors were selected for the study through expert advice and pilot observations, taking into account, first of all, the frequency of using the corresponding genres in the respective outlets. And, as it can be obviously seen from the choice of subjects, editorials/opinion columns are most prevalent in the media outlets that have an oppositional, critical or neutral attitude towards the political authorities.

Although the studies focused on the specific characteristics of the genre, due attention was also paid to the coverage of regional developments and internal politics of Armenia in the corresponding media outlets. Based on the findings, recommendations were made for the media outlets.

SUMMARY OF MONITORING RESULTS

Currently, the genre of open editorials/commentary articles is quite a rare one in the Armenian media. For this reason, the use of a wide spectrum of "related" genres was also studied: editorials in a classical sense, editor's columns, opinion columns of both "internal" and "external" authors.

The rareness of the genre called "op-ed" in the traditional sense is caused by a number of circumstances. The main one is related to the financial problems of the media, which do not provide an opportunity to pay proper royalties to sought-after and qualified "external" authors. Although there are examples when these authors have motives for cooperation, other than the financial interest, this cannot be a stable factor for the development of the genre. Other significant reasons: the media audience demonstrates less interest in textual materials, and potential authors have various other opportunities for self-expression – social media posts, independent blogs, including "vlogs", and, finally, the dominance of television interviews, podcasts and other video products, involving opinion-makers on regional and domestic political issues. Also, we cannot

ignore the fact that frequent manifestation of opinions in a on sensitive issues "written" form, especially in a rapidly changing social/political context and in the atmosphere of polarization of positions, can create risks that the readers, disliking certain public figures, will manipulate the content and conduct an unscrupulous "comparison" between the previously expressed and current viewpoints. Such a threat of getting discredited can also discourage potential authors from regularly running column.

The monitoring of five media outlets was conducted based on thematic (domestic politics, foreign/international politics, Artsakh/Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict, issues related to the RA Constitution, social/economic issues, culture/sports) publications, the attitude they express (positive or negative messages), as well as based on the authors and genre-related characteristic features of the materials.

In February, 2024, 77 publications of the explored genres were found in the monitored media outlets. In terms of content, almost half of those publications (37) chose domestic politics as the main topic, the second most covered one being foreign policy (19), and the third one - Artsakh/Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict (9). These numbers confirm preliminary observations that the Armenian media more actively cover the confrontation between domestic political camps, although, according to sociological surveys, the public is more concerned about social and security issues. The topics related to foreign/international policy, Artsakh/conflict, which are directly related to security issues, received certain attention (28 references in total), whereas social/economic issues, as well as the "hot" issue of the possible adoption of the new Constitution became the main topic only four times. Here, it should be emphasized that the coverage of the topic of the Constitution in the considered publications did not as much emphasize the legal aspect, as it focused on its relation to the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict, thus also being possibly perceived in the context of security.

As a characteristic result of the monitoring, it should be highlighted that only four of the 77 publications of the studied genres contained a positive message, and three of them covered culture/sports. The other 73 publications expressed shades of criticism, dissatisfaction and anxiety. These findings are explained not so much by the political orientation of the media outlet selected for the study, but by the moods of the public, which in turn are determined by the results of the 44-day war in 2020, the ethnic cleansing in Artsakh and the post-war crisis related to internal politics and security.

The overwhelming majority of publications dedicated to domestic politics were formed mainly by "**Aravot**" (16) and "**Hraparak**" (14). About 80 percent of editorials/columns on domestic political issues were published in those two media outlets studied.

"**Zhoghvurd**" was the only one of the studied media outlets where the social/economic topics received the same attention as domestic politics (in three publications).

In "**Aliq Media**", several other topics - foreign/international policy, Artsakh/Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict and issues related to the Constitution - exceeded the number of publications dedicated to domestic politics. In "**Civilnet**", the topics of

foreign/international politics and Artsakh/Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict, in terms of quantity, also exceeded the publications related to domestic politics, whereas culture received as much attention as domestic politics.

At the same time, it is noteworthy that even in the majority of publications dedicated to foreign/international politics, issues somehow related to Armenia prevail. This is another proof of the fact that, regardless of genres, the national media outlets` main focus is on Armenia, and they have a rather limited interest in important events happening in other parts of the world. In particular, the publications subjected to monitoring demonstrate almost no reference to the Gaza Strip, Ukraine, the elections in the Russian Federation, the USA, the EU, as well as a number of other topics that are in the center of attention of the international media.

As for purely genre-related characteristic features, "**Zhoghovurd**" daily (Armlur.am website) is closer, in the classical sense, to the practices of editorial articles. Here, the audience can regularly read unsigned articles (seven respective materials were published during February), containing elements typical to columns (opinion, attitude, emotion), which can be found in the space usually allocated to editorials.

"**Hraparak**" posted 21 editorial columns during February, all signed by the editor-in-chief Armine Ohanyan. As in "**Zhoghovurd**", there were no publications of other "related" genres.

Aram Abrahamyan's "Editor's Column" stands out in "**Aravot**" (20 publications during February). Seven of the articles included in the "Analysis" section of this media outlet have "column-related elements" and all are signed by either Aram Abrahamyan or Emma Gabrielyan (foreign/international political topics).

During February, "**Alik Media**" published 13 signed materials related to the subject of research. They are written by the editor-in-chief Tigran Paskevichyan, as well as other (including "external") "conventional" columnists. This media outlet continues to highlight the genre, equivalent to op-eds, periodically publishing columns by guest authors who are free from the obligation to follow the editorial vector.

"**Civilnet**" has the section "Opinion", where 9 materials containing "column-related elements" on various topics, signed by different authors (both "staff writers" and "guests") were published during February.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEWS WITH THE EDITORS

The following questionnaire was offered to the three selected editors-in-chief.

1. What is more critical? To have a firm point of view on the subject /event under scrutiny or to get to the point prior to delivering an open editorial?
2. Please share Do's and Don'ts to which the author tries to adhere while writing an op-ed. To what extent you're balancing between your own and corporate requirements if any?

3. Is it critical to have a specific audience in mind while writing? Or you tailor it to an unintended audience while editing?
4. What comes after the full stop? How long does it take to edit yourself? Do you take a break after the opinion has been typed? And why is it critical?
5. How are opinion pieces perceived by the audience and how important are they for the media you are working for? Do you have your own indicators of a 'success'?
6. The global / regional volatility affects the balance of coverage, any journalistic genre. How to keep up the pace and quality? What has changed in foreign / analysis (professionally, ethically, humanly) for the last few years taking into account the developments taking place in the world?
7. Is it true that quality op-eds are delivered by experienced, in some sense "savvy" journalists in a certain sage? Is this still applicable, in your opinion?
8. Do you also have guest columnists? Do you consider commentary articles to be important? Do they have to be in line with your editorial opinion?

One of the goals of our study was to find out to what extent the chiefs of the media outlets participating in the survey value the presentation of opinions on urgent public issues, be it through editorials or columns of other journalists, as well as guest authors.

Three well-known Armenian media managers answered our questionnaire about the rules of editorial writing, the issue of balancing the author's opinion and the media's corporate requirements, audience perception and "success" indicators:

- **Aram Abrahamyan**, editor-in-chief of "Aravot" daily,
- **Ara Tadevosyan**, co-founder, director of "Mediamax" news agency,
- **Knar Manukyan**, editor-in-chief of "Zhoghovurd" daily.

Among the media outlets that participated in the survey, only "Aravot" has a 30-year tradition of "editorials" in the classical sense, although in this case it may be more about an editor's column. The newspaper has always paid importance to that genre and presented the editor's opinion to its audience. In the first years of the newspaper's establishment, the editorials were being written by one of the experienced journalists, Genofia Martirosyan, whereas the chief editor Aram Abrahamyan has been writing them since 2001. The articles express the author's personal opinion, which is also defined by the "Aravot" code of ethics. "The comment printed on the first page is the personal opinion of the author, it does not express any collective point of view of the editorial staff and does not affect the "vector" of the rest of the materials in any way." Abrahamyan considers that the editor's column is "exactly for you to express your own position", while the classic editorial implies a collective position of the editorial staff or editorial board.

"Mediamax" director Ara Tadevosyan separates political and non-political topics in the principles of writing his column. "When writing about politics, I always try to give a little time for the topic to settle, I try to be more reserved." Then he adds, "Sometimes there are extraordinary things, about which I can write on the same day."

In the case of "Zhoghovurd" daily, the "editorial" has changed its previous approach of being an "author's opinion" in the last two years and, in fact, has started expressing the opinion of the editorial staff. During the 12 years of its existence, the newspaper has always made a "collective" decision regarding the editorial material, but previously they were being written by the founding editor of the newspaper Taguhi Tovmasyan.

The current editor-in-chief Knar Manukyan says that the change is due to the fact that Taguhi Tovmasyan became a deputy of the RA National Assembly and after some time left the "Civil Agreement" faction. "We've been "hit" a lot... No matter who wrote the columns, people claimed that it was Taguhi. We had to switch to unsigned editorials." They are similar to the "front-page articles" that represented the "political vector" of some foreign media outlets, as well as the media of Soviet years. Moreover, when we say "collective opinion", it is not an abstract description, but a practically fixed form of work. Manukyan says that the editorial board meets for a mandatory meeting in the morning, during which the topic of the article published on the front page is discussed and the potential author is assigned.

Knar Manukyan considers that understanding the essence of the topic is the number one task when writing an editorial, and this also determines the replacement of authors. "Now, the editorial can be written by one of our journalists, although the topic may be different: legal, political, social or breaking-news-related. It is simply put on the front page of the newspaper and is unsigned."

To our question about how the media tries to balance between the editorial opinion and corporate requirements, if there are any, the editors of "Aravot", "Mediamax", and "Zhoghovurd" gave the same answer: there are no corporate requirements, they are not constrained by such requirements. By the way, the editor of "Aravot" also added, "There are no corporate requirements, there never have been, and, as we say, that's why people agree to work for low and sometimes delayed wages."

Ara Tadevosyan emphasized, "The essence of the columns is that the reader understands that this is the opinion of a certain person. In case of guest authors, there is always a disclaimer below that this is their personal opinion and may not correspond to our viewpoint. In my case and in case of editor Davit Alaverdyan, it would be irrelevant to put such a disclaimer, because we work here. But it seems to me that people also understand that, when Davit and I write our editorials, we express our own opinions."

Ara Tadevosyan noted that he never tried to adapt his opinion to the demands of his audience. "Whatever has been published in Mediamax is not ever removed or edited. Especially, in case of columns. If, for example, we produce a material about some problematic things, we always follow the golden rules of journalism: present several opinions, check the information, etc. But now, if, say, X has said something that I strongly disagree with, I present my point of view. There is no problem with presenting a

second opinion here." Tadevosyan also spoke about the monthly articles on music included in his column, noting: "How much can we talk about politics, especially since we don't have politics as such?"

"Mediamax" is the only media outlet from our survey that has about ten columnists, including the guest authors. Ara Tadevosyan attaches great importance to the presence of editorials and columns in their media outlet and considers them one of the "Mediamax" hallmarks. "In the case of this non-stop newsfeed that pours on people's heads, the column or the opinion is the genre that, I think, people miss. They miss analysis, they want to hear the speech of a normal person, the opinion of a normal person..."

When answering the question about the audience, Aram Abrahamyan emphasizes that he has his own "niche" - he writes for thinking people who are capable of listening to a point of view that is different from their own and, conventionally speaking, he does not wish to adapt his speech to the audience of "Dog" (blogger Vardan Ghukasyan).

Knar Manukyan commented differently on the issue of adapting the words of the editors with the expectations of the audience. According to the editor, there are topics that need to be carefully covered, to keep the reader in mind. "For example, when covering the topic of prisoners of war, one should always realize that, on the other side are the parents, family members, and one should not hurt them, and that our publication may negatively affect the condition of those in captivity. That's why all our journalists take that circumstance into account."

Aram Abrahamyan has a special "technique" for editorial writing - first, he writes on paper, then types and makes some edits, takes a break, makes sure that a second journalist has a look at what he has written, and then sends it for proofreading.

Ara Tadevosyan, in general, does not see the need for taking a break. "The material is gone; it lives its own life."

"Zhoghovurd" also considers the "break" to be important, but they have a specific "time limit": starting from the meeting at 10:00 until 21:30 of any given day, when the newspaper is to be sent to the printing house.

"Success indicators" for editorials are different for editors. For Aram Abrahamyan, it is his personal perception: if he likes what he has written on the previous day, then he considers it a success.

"Zhoghovurd" considers readers' calls and comments to be a sign of appreciation.

The success indicator for "Mediamax" is relative. "The most important thing for me is the topic. There might be a topic that is important for a thousand people, and when those thousand people read it, I am very satisfied. Ara Tadevosyan has one more criterion, "When a celebrated foreigner writes a column for us, it is an indicator of success for me. It is evidence of trust in our editorial staff."

Our research has also targeted the problems of maintaining professional ethics and high-quality journalism in editorials or analytical materials, in the context of global and regional instability.

"Mediamax" refers to the professional principles that they adopted 25 years ago, since the foundation day, emphasizing the importance of the authors' experience. "I think that editorials and columns can be written by people with certain experience and certain "baggage". Roughly speaking, you should have that right. It's clear, you don't give lessons to the audience, but, all the same, that's what a person should do after going a certain way."

"Zhoghovurd" considers the "outbursts" of people in the atmosphere of instability and public tension to be understandable. "Journalists cannot help expressing their emotions in their stories. However, we are talking about specific facts, it's not about "empty" outburst." If we take into account that, according to Knar Manukyan, 99 percent of their editorials are on political issues, it is clear that the expression of personal attitude is inevitable. "Let's say, Nikol Pashinyan made a statement. Our attitude has the following manifestation: we find what he said previously, put it next to what he has said today, and publish it in a special page called "Nikol Pashinyan's lies".

The editor of "Aravot" is in favor of reacting in a balanced way to the situation in the country and the geopolitical events, "I no longer do what I did in late 90s and 2000s, when I used some cynical jokes in my articles. Of course, I criticize, but, in general, my style has become more restrained." By the way, the only columnist of Aravot is the editor-in-chief himself. Aram Abrahamyan explains the reason with one interrogative sentence: "Whom should I trust?"

In general, that's how Ara Tadevosyan formulates the problem of presenting an OPINION in the media: "Presenting an opinion is very important, and I think that we have that big problem in Armenia. Even if we forget about the columns for a moment and just talk about the articles. We have large media outlets, but you cannot say that, for example, this person represents them. There are no names. Moreover, there are media outlets, with a history of 25+ years, that have no personalities. Journalism is a profession that should be personalized. There are media outlets that are very successful and have a large audience, but if you want to single out a name in the feed of their publications, you will hardly be able to do it. I think, it is one of the fundamental problems of our media landscape, that's why journalism does not have a good reputation. What can you expect from a faceless, collective author?"

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summarizing and analyzing the results of monitoring and in-depth interviews with editors-in-chief of media outlets, conducted within the framework of research dedicated to the use of open editorials/commentary articles as analytical and educational materials,

Yerevan Press Club presents the following conclusions and recommendations:

- Media outlets should keep in mind that despite the increase of social networks and video information in the formation of public opinion, the audience remains interested in traditional, text-based journalistic materials. Their

attractiveness is more and more determined by the factor of an authors' personality, by the expression of their non-standard points of view - individual and conventionally collective (in the case of editorial articles). In this sense, the recognition and popularity of the media outlet is largely determined by the practice of publishing signed and unsigned opinion columns.

- Taking into account the variety of thematic preferences of the audience, the wide range of contemporary life and retrospective analysis, which are offered through editorials and commentary articles, we can record that they contribute to the formation of readers' attachment to a certain media outlet.
- In this sense, the practice of the Armenian mass media outlets that focus their attention mostly on internal political issues, can be considered problematic. Especially when this concentration is accompanied by the pursuit of narrow political interests. This practice limits the range of readers, dividing the potential audience into "camps" with certain political sympathies and biased preferences.
- The above-mentioned circumstances are particularly important in informing the public about the regional and global events, processes and trends. Without appropriate knowledge and understanding, it is extremely difficult for the Armenian audience to find their way in the issue of national priorities that are related to overcoming conflicts and security threats, as well as creating opportunities for the country's development in various areas. Due to the objective factors that do not allow the local media to obtain and disseminate timely international news pieces through their own network of correspondents, the analytical content that summarizes regional and global processes through editorials and opinion columns, presenting their comprehensive picture, becomes extremely important.
- The need to overcome the political, informational and cognitive polarization of modern Armenian society dictates the task of expanding and strengthening the segment of high-quality media and increasing the trust in them. In this regard, one of the recommendations based on the results of this research is to publish op-eds and commentary articles more frequently and consistently, which should become an important way of honest and trustful communication with the audience.
- Considering the certain gap (revealed through this and a number of other studies) that exists between the main interests and concerns of the Armenian population (according to sociological surveys) and the thematic coverage of the media outlets, including the opinions expressed in op-eds and commentary articles, there is a need for the authors to expand the range of covered issues. In particular, with minor exceptions, there is a lack of attention to social problems, including the consequences of Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict and the problems faced by the strata of the society most affected by it.

- In order to present a wide range of views on key topics to the audience, including security issues, the establishment of peace and stability in the South Caucasus region, the media are advised to invite "guest authors" to run their columns, which can diversify the search for optimal solutions offered to the public. Finding resources and opportunities for this should be the task for the entire professional media ecosystem of Armenia.
- Based on the above, we suggest that donor organizations operating in Armenia, whose priorities include support for media development and quality journalism, consider incentive mechanisms, especially for the genres of editorial and opinion columns. Proactive approaches aimed at attracting potentially highly qualified authors can contribute to overcoming the crisis of the genre recorded by the research findings.

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