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EXPERT OPINION OF MEDIA ETHICS OBSERVATORY

Regarding “FreeNews” TV Company’s “Free Talk with Gnel Sargsyan” program

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On August 9, 2024, MEO issued its [Judgment](#) regarding the complaint by the Commission on Television and Radio against controversial remarks made during “FreeNews” TV Company’s “Free Talk with Gnel Sargsyan” program. The Judgment indicated that after discussing a number of informal, verbal concerns, complaints and indignation shared with MEO members about the program and its host, MEO (by random selection) reviewed several issues of “Free Talk with Gnel Sargsyan” program, on which MEO planned to release a special public statement.

In accordance with sub-points C and D of paragraph 2.6 of MEO [Regulations](#), several MEO members have reviewed 15 issues of the program from May 2024, providing evaluations on matters concerning journalistic ethics and standards.

MEO members unanimously agree that the program host is exploiting his right to publicly express an opinion as a means of seeking “revenge on air” against figures and individuals he disapproves of. This approach can in no way be considered a manifestation of freedom of speech. This is arbitrariness exercised on air or within media space, which contradicts journalistic standards as it undermines the very idea of political and other forms of pluralism and dissent in public.

The Judgment highlighted that although there was no formal violation of the provisions of the [Code](#) of Ethics of Armenian Media and Journalists by the host in the segments highlighted by the CTR, his pretentious image, intolerance and aggressive conduct on air brought him dangerously close to crossing that line.

In MEO members’ view, the host’s speech is full of threatening expressions and calls, which, although often generalized and not directly targeted, are inferred from the context of the issue to be directed at specific individuals holding oppositional views. Examples include statements like: *“You will be kicked out of the church, because our church must be cleansed of you”; “who are you to...?”; “they were doing it through benefactors, and they funneled part of that money to their own family home. But now that state is in control, they cannot pocket cash. But they can’t just go out and say ‘we can’t pocket any cash, let’s start a rally,’ can they?...”; “These are the saviors, and meanwhile, that foul pedophile who remains in his American bunker—I’d rather not say his name—has allied with this one and is carrying out a holy struggle.”*

For example, in the May 24 issue, in violation of paragraphs 1.4, 1.5 of the Regulations, the host presents his personal views about a certain political and state figure as a fact: *"He wants to provoke bloodshed at any cost."* In the same issue, the host addresses a specific individual, threatening to expel him from a religious institution: *"We are specifically targeting you, and it's not mere targeting. Very soon, every one of you will be kicked out of the church, you will be kicked out... You will be expelled from the church."*

In the May 6 issue, in violation of paragraphs 1.4, 1.5, 4.7, 5.2, 6.1 of the Code, the host directly addresses the political and state figure he hates, declaring: *"Criminal ..., a criminal whose crime was only terminated by the statute of limitations. It wasn't proven that no crime occurred. It's a crime... you're a criminal!"* In the same issue, the hosts spreads information that is evidently false: *"... During the 44-day war and after it, in that hostile atmosphere, he has been as silent as a whisper in the wind."*

The host, with a disdainful expression on his face, aggressive gesticulations and preceptorial tone, openly expresses his contempt for those figures whose political views differ from his own. The host targets some non-pro-government figures, blending his personal opinion and value judgments about them (which are acceptable) with language that discredits their personality, actions and ideas—behavior that is inconsistent with media values. Through his overall behavior, the host displays aggression towards those who do not have the opportunity to respond within the same program, given the rules of that TV format (television monologue).

The host's speaking style is bullying and aggressive, the intonation is dismissive and intolerant, the facial expression and mimicry are filled with hatred, and his voice, nearly shouting, carries a sense of warning and is charged with disgust towards those he disapproves of. When sharing his views and evaluations, the host communicates his ideas in a manner that is inconsistent with the standards of journalism: he uses uncivil vocabulary, incorporates elements characteristic of criminal subculture, and makes derogatory remarks about those he dislikes.

Such behavior from a host on the air, widespread particularly in post-Soviet Russian TV, and labeled by terms like 'media killer' or 'telekiller', was characteristic of aggressive propaganda platforms. This is the worst example of what is known as 'opinion journalism.'

The "FREE TALK WITH GNEL SARGSYAN" issues, published on FreeNews Armenia YouTube channel, are accompanied by numerous comments inciting hatred, intolerance, enmity within society. These reactions generate disgust, disdain, repugnance and insults towards the individuals targeted by the host, yet they are not moderated, violating paragraph 3.5.6 of the Code. The comments section of this social media is filled with posts from fake accounts that aim to create a specific impression. All of these comments have one thing in common: they actively praise the host, the government, and ruthlessly criticize, curse, and insult the opposition figures targeted by the host. Such an uncontrollable surge of manifestations of hatred and intolerance piling up under the issues of the same program is degrading the Armenian-language social network environment and is fraught with unpredictable social consequences. Channeling the lower instincts of an enraged mass towards a very specific and small group of people through propaganda methods may grow into a wave of elemental street violence. The apparent indifference of the administrators of the given YouTube channel towards

this ugly, manipulative and dangerous phenomenon suggests that tens, hundreds and thousands of aggressive reactions might be either permitted or silently approved by them.

All this is at odds with media values and standards, especially since it occurs on “FreeNews”, an audiovisual media operating a public multiplex. The introductory section of the Code of Ethics of Armenian Media and Journalists lays out high ideas for media, which should serve as guiding principles: “... Emphasizing the duty of the media to inform; recognizing the necessity of following the rules of professional and ethical standards and the need for consolidation around them; pointing out the necessity of safeguarding editorial independence and not restraining journalists by any private interests, contradicting public interests; recognizing that the media and journalists are accountable to their audience and to each other.” The spirit of these very media values is distorted and misrepresented in numerous issues of “Free Talk with Gnel Sargsyan” program.

We call on media entities, platforms, outlets, editorial offices, journalists, hosts, social media users and content creators, both in Armenia and those publishing in Armenian:

- to base their public texts and style of speech, contacts and engagement with the public on mutual respect, norms of civil coexistence, politeness and tolerance;
- not to disseminate hate speech, even when it appears as a broad hint;
- not to humiliate figures, individuals, structures expressing different viewpoints;
- not to use profanity, expressions characteristic of criminal subculture in relations with political opponents;
- not to generate lowbrow speech and aggressive conduct;
- not to create an informational and propaganda environment leading to the suppression of ideological minorities.

We call on the journalistic community to maintain high professional standards, be willing to acknowledge and apologize for their mistakes and make voluntary corrections.

MEO urges media owners, managers, journalists who have joined the Self-Regulation Initiative, along with media organizations that have not joined the Initiative, journalistic and non-governmental organizations, public figures, renowned personalities and influencers with a significant number of followers on social media to engage actively, comprehensively and with genuine interest in discussions on social networks and media platforms regarding the controversial, condemnable phenomena (highlighted in this Expert Opinion) that create communication gaps and public hostility.

We are confident that we can solve even the most complex issues through an open, honest and respectful dialogue.

***Adopted on August 30, 2024
by the following MEO composition:***

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Media Ethics Observatory was established by the media, joining the self-regulation initiative, which make 82 as of today. In its judgments MEO is guided by the Code of Ethics of Armenian Media and Journalists, adopted on March 10, 2007 and revised at the May 18, 2024 general meeting of the media that joined the self-regulation initiative.