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# ARMENIA

The extra day in 2016, a leap year, afforded more opportunity for the situation in Armenia in general—and that facing Armenian media and journalists in particular—to worsen. Most of the panelists felt the state of journalism declined significantly and that free speech was dealt dramatic setbacks compared with previous years, especially given the deplorable treatment of journalists during protests. The previously modest, although palpable, progress reported in recent years has eroded: four of five objective scores and the overall score all lost about a quarter point or more in this year's study.

On July 29, a demonstration coalesced in support of a group of armed gunmen who seized a police station in Yerevan. The group, called "Sasna Tsrer" ("Daredevils of Sassoun," named after an Armenian epic poem), demanded the release of an opposition figure, Zhirayr Sefilian, arrested in mid-June for alleged illegal acquisition and possession of weapons, and the resignation of Armenia's president, Serzh Sargsyan. After describing their actions as "the beginning of an armed coup" aimed at "eradicating corruption and restoring justice," the standoff ended when the gunmen surrendered on July 31. Two policemen were killed and several members of the armed group were wounded in the siege.

Sargsyan later addressed journalists assaulted during the events, apologizing and urging them to "forget" the occurrences. While the state has not clearly admitted that police were behind the assaults, local and international journalism advocates including Reporters Sans Frontières (RSF), Human Rights House Network, and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe condemned the excessive force against peaceful protesters and journalists. "During both last year's Electric Yerevan and this year's protest, free speech was shattered," said Avetik Ishkhanyan, the Helsinki Committee of Armenia president. Police deliberately targeted clearly identified journalists carrying cameras. Johann Bühr, head of the RSF Eastern Europe and Central Asia desk said, "We urge the authorities to end the impunity for police violence against journalists and to give the police clear instructions not to do it again."

The U.S. Embassy reacted as well, noting in a statement, "The U.S. Embassy is deeply concerned by the shocking images and credible reports of violence and excessive use of force by the police to disperse protestors during the night of July 29–30. We are just as concerned by credible reports that journalists were specifically targeted by the police during these operations in what appear to be clear violations of the freedom of the press."

Upcoming parliamentary elections in April 2017 will mark the first elections following constitutional reforms that made the prime minister the head of the country. This has brought about legislative changes some panelists consider a setback to media freedom. After the finalization of digitalization on November 26, 2016, 12 stations are left in the lurch without digital broadcast licenses until a private multiplexer emerges. The station owners express concern that because people—and advertisers—have mostly switched to digital, audiences will ignore their broadcasts and they could go bankrupt.

# ARMENIA at a glance

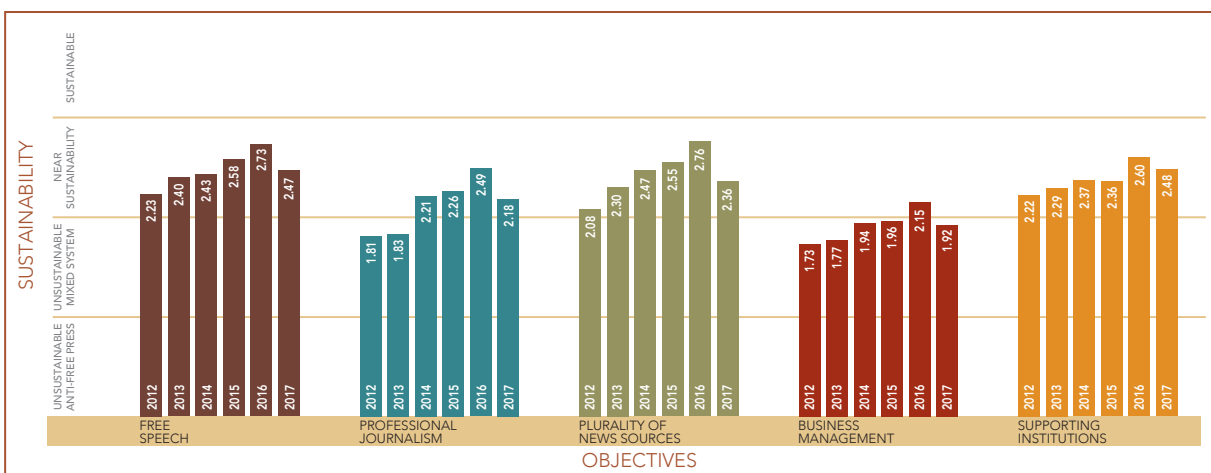
## GENERAL

- > **Population:** 3,051,250 (July 2016 est. *CIA World Factbook*)
- > **Capital city:** Yerevan
- > **Ethnic groups (% of population):** Armenian 98.1%, Yezidi (Kurd) 1.1%, Russian 0.5%, other 0.3% (*CIA World Factbook*, 2011 est.)
- > **Religions (% of population):** Armenian Apostolic 92.6%, Evangelical 1%, other 2.4%, none 1.1%, unspecified 2.9% (*CIA World Factbook*, 2011 est.)
- > **Languages (% of population):** Armenian (official) 97.9%, Kurdish (spoken by Yezidi minority) 1%, other 1% (*CIA World Factbook*, 2011 est.)
- > **GNI (2015-Atlas):** \$11.72 billion (World Bank Development Indicators, 2017)
- > **GNI per capita (2015-PPP):** \$8,770 (World Bank Development Indicators, 2017)
- > **Literacy rate:** 99.6% (*CIA World Factbook*, 2015 est.)
- > **President or top authority:** President Serzh Sargsyan (since April 9, 2008)

## MEDIA-SPECIFIC

- > **Number of active media outlets:** Print: over 36; Radio Stations: 20; Television Stations: 7 channels with nationwide coverage, 9 local stations in Yerevan, 22 regional stations (including 12 still broadcasting on analog); Internet news portals: over 200
- > **Newspaper circulation statistics:** Average reported circulation is between 1,000–3,000
- > **Broadcast ratings:** Most popular television stations are H1 (public), Shant TV (private), Armenia TV (private), A TV (assessed by the panelists)
- > **News agencies:** ARKA, Armenpress, Arminfo, MediaMax, Photolur
- > **Annual advertising revenue in media sector:** \$40–50 million, estimated by panelists
- > **Internet Users:** 1.78 million (2016 est., *CIA World Factbook*)

## MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX: ARMENIA



## MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX 2017: OVERALL AVERAGE SCORES



### CHANGE SINCE 2016

▲ (increase greater than .10) □ (little or no change) ▼ (decrease greater than .10)

**Unsustainable, Anti-Free Press (0–1):** Country does not meet or only minimally meets objectives. Government and laws actively hinder free media development, professionalism is low, and media-industry activity is minimal.

**Unsustainable Mixed System (1–2):** Country minimally meets objectives, with segments of the legal system and government opposed to a free media system. Evident progress in free-press advocacy, increased professionalism, and new media businesses may be too recent to judge sustainability.

**Near Sustainability (2–3):** Country has progressed in meeting multiple objectives, with legal norms, professionalism, and the business environment supportive of independent media. Advances have survived changes in government and have been codified in law and practice. However, more time may be needed to ensure that change is enduring and that increased professionalism and the media business environment are sustainable.

**Sustainable (3–4):** Country has progressed in meeting multiple objectives, with legal norms, professionalism, and the business environment supportive of independent media. Advances have survived changes in government, economic fluctuations, and changes in public opinion or social conventions.

Scores for all years may be found online at <https://www.irex.org/msi>

## OBJECTIVE 1: FREEDOM OF SPEECH

Armenia Objective Score: 2.47

Over the years, panelists have agreed that constitutional provisions in general guarantee free speech. However, enforcement is very poor, and the disturbing events of 2016 targeting media professionals covering public protests—which resulted in many injuries and damaged media equipment—made it vividly clear once again how easily constitutional protections of free speech can be set aside during public unrests and emergency situations. “The majority [of people] do not consider [protection of free speech] a priority; their vital problems are different; their major area of discontent is still socioeconomic issues,” observed Edgar Vardanyan, a freelance journalist and political analyst. Gegham Baghdasaryan, a freelance journalist, compared the situation to the Soviet era, when “pre-agreed, preapproved” criticism was allowed, yet any real criticism outside of that system elicited lamentable consequences. “This façade, these decorations are among the cunning guiles of recent years,” he said.

From a legislative viewpoint, the panelists singled out two recent changes as setbacks. One change is an addition to the criminal code (subclause 8 was added to article 154: false filing of claims about double-voting—a situation where a voter finds out that someone else has already voted for him) was deemed by panelists as a potential way to subdue reporters who might think twice before reporting on double-voting to avoid potential penalties of AMD 200,000 to AMD 800,000

### LEGAL AND SOCIAL NORMS PROTECT AND PROMOTE FREE SPEECH AND ACCESS TO PUBLIC INFORMATION.

#### FREE-SPEECH INDICATORS:

- > Legal and social protections of free speech exist and are enforced.
- > Licensing of broadcast media is fair, competitive, and apolitical.
- > Market entry and tax structure for media are fair and comparable to other industries.
- > Crimes against journalists or media outlets are prosecuted vigorously, but occurrences of such crimes are rare.
- > State or public media do not receive preferential legal treatment, and law guarantees editorial independence.
- > Libel is a civil law issue; public officials are held to higher standards, and offended parties must prove falsity and malice.
- > Public information is easily accessible; right of access to information is equally enforced for all media and journalists.
- > Media outlets have unrestricted access to information; this is equally enforced for all media and journalists.
- > Entry into the journalism profession is free, and government imposes no licensing, restrictions, or special rights for journalists.

“Let’s just state that we do not have public media,” G. Baghdasaryan said. Martirosyan added, “And the public has put up with that; they no longer demand [public media].”

(\$413–\$1,650), or even a sentence of up to two years in prison (if it turns out that double-voting did not take place). The other change involves new electoral code provisions (article 65.7) that limits the number of media professionals and observers who are allowed at polling stations at the same time.

Armenian society places a high value on free speech, but while people react to violations and crimes against media professionals with indignation and outrage, they are not prepared to get heavily involved in the fight against these violations; they are simply too preoccupied with social and economic problems. The panelists also pointed to the politicization and political bias of the journalists/outlets as yet another reason for the public’s inertness. Samvel Martirosyan, blogger and IT security expert, suggested that it is also due to the low social status of journalists in Armenia, unlike in other countries where their status is comparable to that of political figures. “During my trainings, I always ask ‘Can you name me some journalists?’ And other than those who appear on television, they cannot,” he said.

Again, this year, all the panelists agreed that the courts are not independent, and even if the media wins occasional cases, these are either because of external pressures from the international community or for some internal far-reaching reasons, or a combination of both. “In a rule of law country, this [external pressures from the international community] should not be necessary, and the courts should be able to rule independently,” Ishkhanyan said. There have been no cases of imprisonment for withholding sources used in reporting; although such attempts took place during previous MSI reporting years, so far, these cases have not led to any prison terms.

As in previous years, the panelists agreed that licensing (needed only for broadcast outlets) is neither fair nor apolitical and that the licensing body, the National Commission on Television and Radio, is and has always been under factual control of the government and can in no manner be considered independent. Those in power unofficially approve officials, or the decisions they make, within the licensing institution. Speaking in terms of legislative deficiency, Vardanyan said, “The current legislation for licensing might be functioning perfectly in Sweden, but for Armenia it is deficient.” G. Baghdasaryan agreed with him: “In Sweden, it [the licensing institution] might even be a state agency, but any bias or unfair treatment would be out of the question; it’s just a matter of different cultures.”

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Aside from licensing, market entry and tax structure for media are comparable to other industries, with no additional conditions for becoming a media outlet. Print media, although courting the brink of extinction, still enjoy value-added tax exemption for distribution.

As mentioned earlier, 2016 saw dramatic free speech setbacks because of unprecedented crimes against journalists and media professionals who were targeted even more severely and ferociously than during the previous year's "Electric Yerevan" protests against electricity hikes. While dispersing protests in Yerevan on July 29, men in plainclothes, who appeared to be police officers armed with batons and steel bars, attacked journalists and camera operators. A number of media professionals were assaulted and/or injured by smoke and stun grenades fired by the police, including three Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) Armenian service reporters—clearly identified with badges—who were recording/live streaming the events and reporters and camera operators from A1+, CivilNet, 1in.am, Panorama.am, Lragir.am, Life.ru, and Armenia TV. Some journalists, including Hovhannes Movsisian of RFE/RL, continued to be chased and beaten even after promising to stop recording. One of the assaulters punched Movsisian, smashed his camera, and tore off his badge. Several journalists were hospitalized with burns and other injuries.

Those assaulted filed cases; however, none of the panelists expressed optimism about any real verdicts or punishments, assuming that, per usual, the perpetrators would go unpunished.

Describing what it is like to work under the constant threat of physical harm, Melik Baghdasaryan, the owner of Photolur photo news outlet, said that this would not keep them from covering such events in the future. "Quite the contrary. It seasons and tempers them," he said.

As during all previous years, the panelists expressed no doubts about appointments in public media. As is the case with licensing of broadcast media, the authorities tightly control public media management and decision making, and the public media can in no way be considered apolitical and/or independent and serving the true public interests. In short, it does not belong to the public. "Let's just state that we do not have public media," G. Baghdasaryan said. Martirosyan added, "And the public has put up with that; they no longer demand [public media]."

Libel is a civil issue in Armenia. Last year's MSI covered the case of *Aravot*, which was sued for libel. The plaintiff demanded AMD 3 million (\$6,230). To recap, the article published in *Aravot* in August of 2014 implied that a nightclub in one of Yerevan's underground passages was a strip club. This year, the court ruled in favor of *Aravot* and obliged the plaintiff to pay AMD 50,000 (\$104) to cover the defense attorney's fees.

Over the years, the panelists have noted an improvement (albeit with some reservations) in terms of access to public information: "Now there is even a positive 'competition' as to who [of state agencies/officials] will be more open and swift in answering queries over Facebook," Martirosyan said. Pap Hayrapetyan, editor-in-chief of *Sevan*, noted that the situation is different in marzes (regional administrative units, provinces), where it is very difficult to extract information.

However, this indicator is expected to suffer in the coming year, as the panelists consider the new amendment to the "Law on State Procurement," which is a legislative setback in terms of access to public information. The amendment, passed in the National Assembly on December 13, 2016, and set to take effect in 2017, made the protocol-related expenditures of the top-three officials (president, prime minister, and National Assembly speaker) a state secret. The authors cited national security to justify the amendment.

The law does not restrict media access to and use of local and international news and news sources. Language barriers, however, serve as a natural restriction, forcing many outlets to lean heavily on Russian news sources. The majority of Armenians understand Russian, and as a result, journalists cover many events through the Russian prism.

There are no restrictions for entry into the journalism profession. There are certain restrictions for covering parliamentary sessions; journalists must be accredited, and, according to accreditation terms, they must represent a certain media outlet(s), signaling challenges for freelance journalists. Additionally, print outlets must maintain a circulation of 1,500 copies for dailies and 1,000 for weeklies and magazines, while online outlets are expected to draw at least 2,000 daily visits.

## OBJECTIVE 2: PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM

Armenia Objective Score: 2.18

Little has changed recently in terms of the quality of journalism. Again this year, the panelists said that although there are a few professional journalists and media outlets, the broader outlook is quite gloomy. The race to be the first to "break the news" overrules any fact-checking impulses. Often, the online outlets cannot resist posting sensationalist news pieces, which are a boon for ratings. The "click" and "like" race turns many outlets to yellow journalism.

G. Baghdasaryan maintained that the recent plague of fake news has thwarted the true flow of facts: "Information, little by little, cedes its place to opinions. Opinions, little by little, become information, opinion devalues information, rendering it meaningless, and opinion pieces are very tempting—you don't have to fact-check; there is no responsibility whatsoever,

and they are easier to control,” he said. *Aravot* reporter Nelli Babayan concurred, stating if an editor pushes for tens of stories per day, which robs reporters of time to consult a wide variety of sources and to conduct background research, it turns them into “collectors of opinions and comments.” Ishkhanyan also agreed: “A month ago I was conducting a seminar on religious tolerance that also had a component for journalists and, during the practical exercises, all of the reporters told me that they can’t afford to verify sources, find more than one source, or get different sides to a story because the editor demands a ‘quick’ story—and if they don’t come up with one, [competing outlets] will have published it.” Babayan said, however, that *Aravot* always tries to verify sources regardless of the urgency.

Media outlets usually present different viewpoints, however, often not within the same article. Sometimes they cannot track down the other side of a story and rush to post the arguments of the first side before they hear back from the opposing side.

“The election years of 2013–2014 brought in a huge quantity of low-quality outlets and journalists, which later dispersed, but with the 2017 upcoming elections, another spike is expected,” Martirosyan said, adding, “The competition is not between different outlets, but between yellow and quality journalism, and the sad thing is that the yellow journalism influences and deteriorates the high-quality journalism, rather than vice versa.”

Many journalists do not conduct professional interviews; frequently, interviews entail a set of prewritten questions, and the interviewers are often ill informed. “They don’t ask follow-up questions, which could reveal inconsistencies [in theory] and/or contribute to their preset hidden ‘agenda,’ but they just don’t do that,” Vardanyan said.

There are some ethical journalists, but according to the panelists, most journalists lack the slightest idea about ethical standards. Journalistic organizations have developed ethical standards, which mostly align with those of international professional journalist associations, but these are not widely followed. Several media outlets have developed their own ethical conduct codes as well; however, these are mostly implied and not written, and there were violations of these standards this year, according to the panelists.

“In the UK, you shouldn’t be able to determine a journalist’s political views from his Facebook profile, posts, comments, and even ‘likes’; if you are able to, that journalist could be fired,” Martirosyan said. However, in Armenia, many reporters explicitly share their views and opinions, and many do not even suspect that this could be a matter of ethical standards. Other violations include failing to blur photos of crime victims or posting their names.

“Sometimes, there are no agreed upon conventions on what is ethical and not, even among the members of the journalistic

community,” Martirosyan said. G. Baghdasaryan added, however, that any discussions or debates related to ethics could be taken as a sign of progress.

Plagiarism cases were not rare this year either, despite some signs of improvement. Gayane Saribekyan, a *news.am* reporter, recalled her own case when another online outlet posted her video story. When confronted, the plagiarist not only refused to own up, apologize, and remove the content but also insisted that other reporters made the video—but Saribekyan was the only reporter present.

Another outlet, Saribekyan said, stole one of her stories, copying it entirely, down to some typos carried over from the original. This time, the outlet apologized and removed the content. For that progress, she credited a 635-member-strong Facebook public group called “For Fair Journalism,” which includes acting journalists, media professionals, legal experts, media experts, and journalism students. The group serves as a shame board, where any journalist can post information about plagiarized content and demand either reference to the original story or removal.

M. Baghdasaryan shared that his photos are often lifted without permission, as well. Additionally, most media fail to distinguish clearly between news reporting and unmarked “advertorial” placements.

Nothing has changed dramatically in terms of ever-present self-censorship, which afflicts reporters, editors, and owners alike. As stated, for many years now, political figures, state officials, members of parliament, etc., have indeed owned (informally) many media outlets. “How can there not be self-censorship if the majority of outlets depend on a certain party or oligarch?” Ishkhanyan asked rhetorically. “There is an [informal] line, and the journalists self-censor themselves

## JOURNALISM MEETS PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS OF QUALITY.

### PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM INDICATORS:

- > Reporting is fair, objective, and well sourced.
- > Journalists follow recognized and accepted ethical standards.
- > Journalists and editors do not practice self-censorship.
- > Journalists cover key events and issues.
- > Pay levels for journalists and other media professionals are sufficiently high to discourage corruption.
- > Entertainment programming does not eclipse news and information programming.
- > Technical facilities and equipment for gathering, producing, and distributing news are modern and efficient.
- > Quality niche reporting and programming exists (investigative, economics/business, local, political).

**“Self-censorship has achieved a systematic, institutional level whereby there’s no need to tell [the reporters] what to say,” agreed Gayane Abrahamyan, reporter and moderator for eurasianet.org and Yerkir Media TV.**

accordingly,” Ishkhanyan added. “Self-censorship has achieved a systematic, institutional level whereby there’s no need to tell [the reporters] what to say,” agreed Gayane Abrahamyan, reporter and moderator for eurasianet.org and Yerkir Media TV.

Different types of media cover almost all key events and issues. Events once taboo for television now appear on screens as well, although often from a different angle. The difference lies in the manner in which an event is covered online as opposed to broadcast media: its prominence in the news block, the length, the bulk, and the depth of coverage. Abrahamyan noticed, for example, that a recent draft bill (later adopted by the National Assembly) was covered differently in online and broadcast media; it was mostly criticized online and mostly embraced on television.

The broadcast outlets also differ with their “delayed” coverage. If urgent issues are covered online in a prompt manner, it takes the television broadcasters some time to chime in. Aside from the slower nature of television production, broadcast outlets sometimes wait for further developments and probably directions (from “above”) on how to (or at all) cover a given event.

Returning to the Yerevan police station siege in July 2016, the panelists noted that television stations took hours to begin covering the incident. “The siege exposed the degree and level of [government] control of media outlets—not only television but some online outlets too,” said one panelist, who wished to remain anonymous. “Silence is the default reaction [for broadcast outlets]...possible instructions, directions come later,” Suren Deheryan, chair of Journalists for the Future, a nongovernmental organization (NGO), observed

Regarding pay levels, G. Baghdasaryan suggested that a distinction should be made between editors and reporters; if editors are better off, then ordinary reporters are poorly remunerated, with rare exceptions. Most reporters work or cooperate with multiple outlets to make ends meet. The high turnover rate also indicates low pay levels, and Vardanyan believes that low pay levels deter many highly intelligent people from venturing into journalism.

On the whole, however, the pay levels in the media are comparable to those of most other professions in Armenia, and Saribekyan maintained that no matter how low a salary, a journalist with a high degree of integrity would never engage in corruption.

Entertainment programming does eclipse news, more and more. Abrahamyan brought her own example: a station bumped her social-political show out of its primetime slot, replacing it with a soap opera. “I believe it’s a special tactic designed by smart people,” G. Baghdasaryan claimed, adding that some news and information programming has morphed into entertainment—rendered ridiculous by the issues elevated to news and the (unserious) manner in which they are covered.

Facilities and equipment for gathering, producing, and distributing news are sufficient. However, while it is not considered a major obstacle at this point, the digitalization process has troubled some broadcast outlets that already air digitally but lack the up-to-date equipment they need to air (or produce) in high definition.

Quality niche reporting exists, and there seems to be slight improvement with this indicator, but the general picture is still not reassuring. Martirosyan said there are no specialized reporters to cover parliament and IT topics, for example. “I often get contacted for expert interviews, and these reporters don’t have a clue about their questions or my answers,” he observed. “Often, they aren’t even listening to the answers...I jump ahead, and anticipating their questions, I answer those as well, but they don’t realize this and ask those questions again,” he added.

“The information should also be presented in a popular and easily digestible way, and there are very few professional niche reporters capable of this. Especially lamentable is the situation with sports reporting, where the commenters are not only unprofessional in terms of sports terminology and knowledge but also possess poor [native] language skills,” Ishkhanyan said. The same is true of reporters specializing in politics. “Just by reading the name of the reporter, I know who he will blame for an earthquake in New Zealand—the Russians or the Americans,” Ishkhanyan said.

### OBJECTIVE 3: PLURALITY OF NEWS

Armenia Objective Score: 2.36

As in previous years, a multitude of private news sources exists, but this does not necessarily translate into a diversity of viewpoints. G. Baghdasaryan said, “Multiple sources haven’t grown into alternative sources. This multitude [of news sources] is turned into a sea through which more savvy readers, professionals from this field, can navigate, but for an ordinary consumer, it is practically impossible,” he observed. “If you try

hard, research thoroughly, you can find different viewpoints in different outlets, sources—you can do that. I can do that, but a regular consumer can't. I think this is also by design," he added.

People's trust in online outlets has increased significantly, swapping places with television. For some layers of the population, information presented online is perceived as absolute truth. "If previously people considered television the most credible source, now they say, 'It's true, because the Internet says so.' This, however, is a different extreme, because now the government manipulates the minds of people through the Internet, flooding the Internet with information to serve their ends," Abrahamyan said. "The Internet is no longer the alternative [source of information] it used to be, because those in power have swiftly and successfully penetrated it," G. Baghdasaryan lamented.

Digitalization, which happened at last after many previous unsuccessful attempts and procrastinating, posed a problem to citizens' access to domestic and or international media. Although some digital converters were distributed to socially vulnerable groups, some people still do not possess these converters (which can be bought for as low as AMD 7,000 (\$15)), let alone new generation digital television sets. From November 2016, the parallel analog broadcast was shut down in the capital and in some regions. The analog broadcast of most channels in regions will be kept until the next licensing competition in the region, according to the National Commission on Television and Radio website. These stations were not included in the state digital broadcast network (a multiplex) and are at risk of extinction unless private multiplexes come into play, but it is not yet clear when and how, if at all, these are going to emerge.

There are no restrictions of any kind on foreign media. CNN and two Russian channels, Channel One and Russia-K (Kultura),

#### MULTIPLE NEWS SOURCES PROVIDE CITIZENS WITH RELIABLE AND OBJECTIVE NEWS.

##### PLURALITY OF NEWS SOURCES INDICATORS:

- > A plurality of affordable public and private news sources (e.g., print, broadcast, Internet) exists.
- > Citizens' access to domestic or international media is not restricted.
- > State or public media reflect the views of the entire political spectrum, are nonpartisan, and serve the public interest.
- > Independent news agencies gather and distribute news for print and broadcast media.
- > Independent broadcast media produce their own news programs.
- > Transparency of media ownership allows consumers to judge objectivity of news; media ownership is not concentrated in a few conglomerates.
- > A broad spectrum of social interests are reflected and represented in the media, including minority-language information sources.

"If previously people considered television the most credible source, now they say, 'It's true, because the Internet says so.' This, however, is a different extreme, because now the government manipulates the minds of people through the Internet, flooding the Internet with information to serve their ends," Abrahamyan said.

are freely broadcast and available in Yerevan, while one more Russian channel (RTR Planeta) is available countrywide. According to panelists, people turn to Russian news sources more than Western sources, out of habit and because of the language barrier.

As reiterated by panelists for many years, public media cannot be considered independent of the state or ruling party, and it does not follow a traditional public-service model. Moreover, if there has been some improvement during recent years, and public media is now more open to alternative views and comments than before, there is still a "blacklist" with people forbidden from public broadcasting, according to some panelists. "Maybe it shrinks sometimes, maybe it is modified, but it exists," G. Baghdasaryan said. Vardanyan suggested that there is no proof that it exists, but a simple logical analysis suggests that if during key events that shake the society we do not see on public television knowledgeable people with differing views as we see on Facebook and online media, we can conclude that there *is* a list, at least during "emergencies." If the public television service has a need to block the opposing views completely, at trying times, or if they feel that a public or political figure could influence mass opinion unfavorably, the limitation will be imposed. If they feel that a person is dangerous in general, but does not pose any specific threats, they might allow that person to go on the air. "But during state of emergencies, a political decision will be made immediately to shut out those people and start counterpropaganda," Vardanyan said. "In contrast with years ago, today, oppositional figures are invited to appear on public television more often, and the criticism of opposition [on public television] has also diminished," he added.

While news agencies may be considered extinct and/or obsolete, at least for the internal market, they have been rendered meaningless, and those that remain work on rare orders from clients abroad. Photolur is an exception; it sells original photographs both to local and international clients.



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Most of the private media, predominantly television, produce their own news programming; the quality varies, but the content is mostly the same.

The public and regular viewers are largely in the dark when it comes to outlet ownership. They might make guesses or assume the ownership of television outlets, but online media ownership is more mystery than fact. Only a very small segment of society has at least a slight idea about who controls blogs or other online media, but average citizens do not. “Even we don’t know the ownership of many online outlets,” Vardanyan said. Ownership sometimes can be guessed from the content, but this has also changed: the presence of critical content does not rule out the possibility that it belongs to pro-government circles.

The media freely reports on ethnic minorities; no artificial obstacles are imposed. Public radio broadcasts programs in 14 minority languages, including Kurdish, Assyrian, Greek, Ukrainian, and Russian. Russian, Ukrainian, Kurdish, and Yezidi minorities also have their own newspapers in those languages.

“In my opinion, for the most part, television stations avoid covering [sexuality, gender, and religion] minority issues, and when they do, there’s no diversity, and alternative views are not presented—just a one-sided cut of press conferences,” Ishkhanyan said. “There’s no public discourse on these types of issues,” he added. According to Ishkhanyan, the reasons behind this lie both in the government’s and society’s mentality. Compared with previous years, the situation has improved, especially in print and online media. “A lot has changed in print media after our persistent work with them [referring to the organization chaired by Ishkhanyan, the Helsinki Committee of Armenia], after our seminars, which resulted in many stories printed in participating newspapers,” Ishkhanyan said. “The [majority of] reporters haven’t overcome intolerance toward religious and sexual minorities; so how can they provide balanced coverage on this?” Saribekyan asked.

Citizens are able to get news and information about their hometowns and national issues, and sometimes also about other regions of the country. There are local television stations (at least one for each region), and some regions also have print outlets and provide news and information about local developments. The news flow from regions to the capital is still underdeveloped. Anahit Nahapetyan, the editor-in-chief of *Tufashkharhi Arorya*, offered the example of a flood in Artik caused by faulty drainpipes, which was very poorly covered in the capital and the national mainstream media, with almost no follow-ups on the disaster; eventually, the story sank into oblivion.

International developments, of course, are also covered, but with delays deriving from the nature of producing international news in Armenia. For the most part, they are just translations of international news pieces from Western or Russian sources.

Readers/viewers who know foreign languages prefer to watch international news on international channels, because the delayed coverage is at best the same, and at worst, some of the meaning is lost in translation or altered by the interpretation of the person preparing the international section. “I hardly know any outlet that produces its own news programming about international events,” Vardanyan said. The panelists assumed that this is because mostly translators, rather than journalists, cover the international news. “That is why, when we have trainings abroad on covering international news, we don’t know who to select [to attend],” Deheryan said. Very few outlets post correspondents abroad (and in very few locations), and those that have them cannot afford the luxury of covering every key international event. These events, as a general rule, must pertain to developments concerning Armenia/Armenians. Overall, although they show some improvements in their international sections, a majority of outlets, especially television, still depend heavily on Russian news sources.

#### OBJECTIVE 4: BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

Armenia Objective Score: 1.92

The panelists agreed that there are very few, if any, self-sustaining media outlets. The situation has worsened alongside the general economic decline and the resulting drop in advertising revenue. On top of that, perhaps advertisers are coming to realize that traditional television advertisements are becoming less and less effective—especially as Internet Protocol television (IPTV) providers allow viewers to fast-forward past advertisements during commercial breaks, and viewers can also bypass advertisements by watching shows on the Internet. This has forced advertisers to seek product placements within the shows instead. Many broadcasters deny the fact that their viewership has plummeted, but the more sophisticated advertisers have identified the problem.

Media outlets receive revenue mostly from one or two sources: advertising and/or owner support. As noted by panelists over the years, most media outlets, at the very stage of inception, are neither meant to become self-sustainable nor designed to serve as commercial, profit-generating, and competing entities, but rather to service various political forces, figures, or oligarchs, and therefore their sources of future revenue are set from the very start. “Some outlets even manage to receive funds from different political/business circles,” said one panelist.

“The main source of revenue for outlets is the advertising. If there is a normal [healthy] advertising market in a country, the key cornerstone for independent media is guaranteed. However, as we know, our [advertising] market is politicized... In these conditions, an independent media outlet cannot be self-sustainable or independent at all,” G. Baghdasaryan said.

Sources of revenue from advertising clearly influence editorial policies, management, and content of media outlets. They not only avoid negative coverage about their advertisers but also coverage that could potentially affect their advertisers, their sales, or their reputations unfavorably. One panelist admitted, on condition of anonymity, that they typically would not cover a complaint from customers about one of their advertisers.

Public media has an adequate, guaranteed source of revenue from the state budget, but according to the panelists, this has never been a factor in guaranteeing immunity from political interference or government control.

The number of advertisers has also decreased in broadcast media. This is, in part, due to the aforementioned decline in the number of traditional, live-broadcast television viewers, who have switched to alternative sources to watch television shows off the air, such as podcasts. Most probably, these are predominantly employed people with higher purchasing power, who view their favorite shows not when they are first aired but at their convenience thanks to the Internet and IPTV providers (which also offer the “catch-up” function, which, in turn, lets viewers fast-forward through advertising). “A lot of advertising has ‘migrated’ to Facebook,” said Deheryan. “Even billboards have suffered from this; years ago, we could see a lot of outdoor advertising on billboards, now many are just empty and are just preoccupied with elections.” Facebook advertising is more affordable and a lot more targeted, thus allowing for higher efficiency. “When a television manager or ad agency presents me with data about their audiences, demographics, statistics, I highly doubt them, because it’s just their words. Here [on Facebook] I see real people ‘liking’ the [advertising] posts, real engagement, and real results,” Deheryan said.

### INDEPENDENT MEDIA ARE WELL-MANAGED BUSINESSES, ALLOWING EDITORIAL INDEPENDENCE.

#### BUSINESS MANAGEMENT INDICATORS:

- > Media outlets and supporting firms operate as efficient, professional, and profit-generating businesses.
- > Media receive revenue from a multitude of sources.
- > Advertising agencies and related industries support an advertising market.
- > Advertising revenue as a percentage of total revenue is in line with accepted standards at commercial outlets.
- > Independent media do not receive government subsidies.
- > Market research is used to formulate strategic plans, enhance advertising revenue, and tailor products to the needs and interests of audiences.
- > Broadcast ratings and circulation figures are reliably and independently produced.

“However, as we know, our [advertising] market is politicized... In these conditions, an independent media outlet cannot be self-sustainable or independent at all,” G. Baghdasaryan said.

The main advertisers are banks, telecommunications providers, dairy producers, and mineral water and wine manufacturers. According to the panelists, the market has been monopolized with the advent of a few players that, although self-proclaimed as independent entities, have ties to the big names. These players are the only media sales house in Armenia, Media International Service (which has the exclusive right to advertising inventory with five Armenian television channels that are also considered to have the highest ratings—Armenia TV, ArmNews, A TV, Shant TV, and Yerkir Media); the only television audience measurement organization—Admosphere Armenia; and the advertising agency PanArmenian Media House. The sales house and advertising agency for the online outlets is a relatively new player, DG Sales, which owns exclusive rights for advertising space in online outlets with a high number of visits (tert.am, news.am, panarmenian.net, lragir.am, etc.).

Advertising is poorly developed outside of the capital. Aside from the two next largest cities—Gyumri and Vanadzor—it is close to nonexistent. Instead of local buys, advertisers funnel the advertising through channels with national coverage, and that often means excessive use of product placement-style advertising—sometimes in a ridiculously blatant manner. Quite often, whole parts of the scripts (e.g., in sitcoms) are written and/or modified to embed the advertised products, which degrades the overall quality of the shows.

Advertising has started taking up less broadcast programming time; the average advertising block now is two to four minutes instead of the previously outrageous lengths of up to 25–30 minutes. However, not all panelists remain content with the overall bulk of advertising on television. “Three-minute advertising blocks within 40 minutes are still excessive,” complained Abrahamyan.

Pages for the highest visited online media are heavily plastered with all sorts of advertising—directly placed advertisements from advertising networks such as Yandex Direct (the Russian version of Google AdSense), Google AdSense, content discovery platforms, etc.

In addition to advertising, many media outlets also try to receive grants from international donors and organizations; according to Deheryan, sometimes the outlets even overcome the fear of

running the “wrong” (risky) content. *Tufashkharhi Arorya* has found success with grant projects on gender issues, Nahapetyan said, thus enabling the paper to increase the circulation through inserts.

Taking a different strategy, Arevhat Amiryan, editor-in-chief of *Vorotan*, said *Vorotan*’s revenue is now solely from subscriptions.

Government subsidies, governed by law, are provided to independent regional and/or minority-language print outlets. The amounts are insignificant, around AMD 500,000 (\$1,030), and have remained steady over the years.

Few outlets use market research widely and consistently. When used, typically, it is conducted by the media outlet itself rather than a third-party professional research company, primarily because of financial constraints. There are not many outside market research companies, and they are costly and not highly trusted by the outlets. Furthermore, many media managers claim that they know the market needs without research, having seen that the more horrible the news and the more scandalous the headlines, the higher the number of visits and viewers.

The only television audience measurement organization—Admosphere Armenia—currently produces broadcast ratings. This is a new organization in the market, but essentially carries over the same core staff who worked for the previous organization, Telemediacontrol (which worked under the license of GFK). Telemediacontrol was measuring the analog audience, and with the digitalization switch in effect since January 2016, the company had to either invest in new equipment capable of measuring the digital network or leave the market—they chose the latter. Admosphere, partnered with the Nielsen Admosphere Czech TAM company, claims to be able to measure not only free terrestrial digital broadcast but also IPTV channels. The new company claims it will place 375 people meters in 20 cities, instead of the previous 300.

As mentioned earlier, the panelists believe that this company is an informal part of the larger group of media organizations (a sales house and an advertising agency) engaged in the monopolization of the advertising market.

Abrahamyan mentioned another factor: “U!Com (one of the IPTV providers) has set its default channel to Armenia TV (to be more exact, a different feed of Armenia TV, Armenia TV Premium, which airs without advertising and airs television series episodes one ahead of the regular Armenia TV free feed), which means that this is the default channel that appears when you turn on the service—and that can distort the ratings.”

The only more or less usable public Internet statistics for Armenian online media at present come from similarweb.com, which basically provides the same data as Google Analytics and only works if the website owner chooses for the data to be attached to similarweb.com’s public display of statistics.

## OBJECTIVE 5: SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS

Armenia Objective Score: 2.48

Although there are no legal restrictions that would prevent the registration or functioning of trade associations, still, there are no widely accepted, effective organizations known to the panelists.

Professional organizations, in contrast, work to protect journalists’ rights and promote quality journalism, and the government imposes no legal restrictions that would prevent their registration or operations. These associations, which include the Gyumri-based Asparez Journalists’ Club, the Yerevan Press Club, the Association of Investigative Journalists, the Vanadzor Press Club, and others, provide training, legal advice, journalists’ rights advocacy, etc.

Asparez Journalists’ Club, in cooperation with Transparency International and with funding from USAID, will continue implementing the five-year project “Engaged Citizenry for Responsible Governance,” which includes a component to boost citizen access to independent and reliable information by setting up online live streaming of public discussions.

There are no membership fees to join these associations, which depend heavily on international donor funding. Providing legal assistance is quite costly, and outside of grant periods, it is very difficult for these organizations to provide legal support to journalists and media professionals. Martirosyan noted that ever since Armenia joined the Russia-designed Eurasian Economic Union, international donor funding to support traditional media has diminished dramatically.

NGOs work in cooperation with the media sector to support freedom of speech and media independence. They include the

### SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS FUNCTION IN THE PROFESSIONAL INTERESTS OF INDEPENDENT MEDIA.

#### SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS INDICATORS:

- > Trade associations represent the interests of private media owners and provide member services.
- > Professional associations work to protect journalists’ rights.
- > NGOs support free speech and independent media.
- > Quality journalism degree programs that provide substantial practical experience exist.
- > Short-term training and in-service training programs allow journalists to upgrade skills or acquire new skills.
- > Sources of newsprint and printing facilities are in private hands, apolitical, and unrestricted.
- > Channels of media distribution (kiosks, transmitters, Internet) are private, apolitical, and unrestricted.

Open Society Foundation, the Eurasia Partnership Foundation Armenia (EPFA), Media Initiatives Center (MIC), and Journalists for the Future (JFF). EPFA and MIC will continue to implement USAID's five-year media project, "Media for Informed Civic Engagement," which launched in March 2015. The project aims to increase citizen access to independent and reliable sources of information about the government's policies and planned reforms as well as create a demand for public awareness as a necessary mechanism for participation and involvement through improved quality of journalism.

In addition, other NGOs in Armenia, not specifically media related, every now and then embed media components in their advocacy grants projects. Helsinki Committee of Armenia just recently completed one such project, with support from the Norwegian Helsinki Committee and Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, to advocate for human rights and monitoring of freedom of information in Armenia. The project, which aimed to encourage a tolerant attitude toward the representatives of religious organizations among representatives of civil society organizations and journalists, included trainings by experienced experts in the field. The participants were introduced to acting religious organizations in Armenia, discussed main methods of combating intolerance, and became acquainted with legislative aspects of the freedom of conscious and religion. As a practical component, the participants conducted small journalistic investigations and then prepared stories on acting religious organizations in their communities and presented true stories of people representing various religious organizations.

Another organization, JFF, translated the German Press Code into Armenian and published it within the framework of the "Cross Border Observations: Reliable Coverage of Local Elections in Lower Saxony and Armenia" project implemented by the Berlin Journalism School and JFF. The source was the full version of the German Press Code approved by the German Press Council on March 13, 2013.

There are many journalism degree programs both at private and public institutions, but according to the panelists, they are not high quality. "The programs existing at the moment in Armenia don't differ dramatically from each other. The [lecturers and instructors] might not be bad, but they cannot achieve greater results if the system is lame with poor technical equipment, imperfect curriculum, and also low pay levels," Deheryan said.

Most journalism degree programs do not provide substantial practical experience. "At the university, we have only one class per week for practical journalism, and to get something accomplished, I have to keep working after class hours through Facebook. And that's also why I encourage students to start cooperating with a media outlet as soon as they can," Deheryan said.

"Years ago, when I was teaching journalism, the students were more like philology department students rather than journalism students; they knew everything about literature but nothing outside it. Now things have improved; they show better knowledge of the discipline; however, the curriculum is not yet comprehensive or complete," Martirosyan said.

Still, although generally unsatisfactory, the situation has improved compared with previous years. "Years ago, when I was teaching journalism, the students were more like philology department students rather than journalism students; they knew everything about literature but nothing outside it. Now things have improved; they show better knowledge of the discipline; however, the curriculum is not yet comprehensive or complete," Martirosyan said.

Technical equipment, classrooms, student newsrooms, and student-run media are either nonexistent, minimal, or outdated. The quality of students has also declined, because the universities need paying students, if they see that there are not enough applicants who adhere to strict standards and high scores, "they just fill the gap with students with the next highest scores," Deheryan explained. According to Saribekyan, "Media outlets ruin, degrade college grads right after they are first hired by forcing them to perform all the grimy and petty tasks, such as press conferences, trivial interviews, daily routines that don't develop the reporter but rather stagnate their growth." Babayan agreed, "New grads are very convenient for outlets because they are obedient, and the editors can ride them with low to no salary, instead of dealing with seasoned folks who can resist covering this or that event."

Short-term trainings to upgrade skills or acquire new skills do exist; they are mostly set up by international organizations or local organizations with international funding and are free of charge. However, the problem remains the same: actively practicing journalists and media professionals find it difficult to attend these trainings because of a lack of time and editor resistance. Editors need active journalists to keep generating stories.

Abrahamyan shared a recent example: "I recently organized a training featuring Dave Bloss, Georgia's regional editor for Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project who is the author of investigative stories exposing offshore companies [associated with public officials], and this should have been

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very interesting to many practicing journalists, especially those covering economic crimes. However, I don't believe that the actual attendees of the training were among the active practicing journalists fit to cover these issues. But I don't blame them, because I know that their editors didn't let them leave work to attend. The editors don't realize that in the long run, these trainings are for their benefit too."

According to Deheryan, some types of trainings have not been offered lately. "I haven't seen classical journalism training for the last couple of years, but the demand is great indeed," he said.

Martirosyan noted that no trainings are held on conducting Internet research through Google on a bit more sophisticated and in-depth level. "It's a very essential skill, but few reporters possess it," he said.

The panelists agreed that over the years, there have been no undue restrictions on importing and/or purchasing materials needed for reporting/content production.

The switchover from analog to digital broadcasting was accomplished when the analog broadcast was almost completely shut down on November 26, 2016. Some 12 regional outlets appeared on the brink of extinction because a 2010 amendment to the Law on Television and Radio stipulated that there should be just one television station in a given region, and

the digital licensing competitions were held accordingly. Later, analog licenses of those regional outlets that did not win the digital license competitions were extended until the advent of private multiplexes, because a 2015 amendment to the Law on Television and Radio allowed the entry of a private multiplex, which would enable more digital television stations to be aired in regions. However, a competition announced by the National Commission on Television and Radio for a private multiplex yielded no results because of the absence of interested applicants. As an interim solution, the regional television stations wish to be temporarily included in the state-run multiplex before a private multiplex finally emerges.

Aside from the digitalization challenges described earlier, overall, Armenia's ICT infrastructure today more or less meets the needs of the media industry. The rural areas, and smaller towns outside of the capital, have fewer options in terms of high-quality, fiber-optics, reliable Internet. Vardanyan also noted that the cost of the Internet is still quite high as compared with Russia, to which Martirosyan answered that this is rather due to the fact that the Armenian market is a lot smaller, and to support the existing infrastructure, the companies cannot cut the prices further, because that would lead to a collapse in the future.

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## List of Panel Participants

**Gayane Abrahamyan**, reporter and moderator, eurasianet.org and Yerkir Media TV, Yerevan

**Suren Deheryan**, chair, Journalists for the Future NGO, Yerevan

**Gegham Baghdasaryan**, freelance journalist, Yerevan

**Nelli Babayan**, reporter, *Aravot*, Yerevan

**Edgar Vardanyan**, freelance journalist and political analyst, Yerevan

**Samvel Martirosyan**, blogger and IT security expert, Yerevan

**Avetik Ishkhanyan**, founder and president, Helsinki Committee of Armenia, Yerevan

**Pap Hayrapetyan**, editor-in-chief, *Sevan*, Sevan

**Gayane Saribekyan**, reporter, news.am, Yerevan

**Arevhat Amiryan**, editor-in-chief, *Vorotan*, Sisian

**Melik Baghdasaryan**, owner, Photolur, Yerevan

**Anahit Nahapetyan**, owner and editor-in-chief, *Tufashkharhi Arorya*, Artik

## Moderator & Author

**Artashes Parsadanyan**, independent media consultant, Yerevan

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