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Peculiarities of media functioning in Armenia

Introduction

Nowadays media, having a pervasive influence on various aspects of life, are undoubtedly an indicator of development of society and country in general. The presence of censorship, pluralism, diversity of media sources, open access to information, safety of journalists are all factors of democratic values and the overall development of society and the country. While researching media of a certain country, it is possible to achieve a better understanding and receive its integrated vision, to conduct interdisciplinary study, drawing a parallel with other areas of its development.

While exploring the development of media in Armenia, the attention should be drawn to the factors that have influenced their development and formation. They primarily involve the armed conflict with Azerbaijan due to predominantly Armenian-speaking Nagorno-Karabakh region. This issue is still unresolved. Also, there are long-standing disputes between Armenia and Turkey over historic events, such as, first and formost, killing of 1,5 million Armenians by the authorities of the Ottoman Empire between 1915 and 1918, which Armenia considers as a genocide but Turkey still denies this. Turkey's support of Azerbaijan in conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh region also negatively influences the relations between these countries.

The aim of this work is to study the current state and prospects of development of the media system in Armenia. The legislative framework of Armenian media consists of the following laws: "On the dissemination of mass information", "On television and radio broadcasting", "The Constitution of the Republic of Armenia", Law of Armenia "On the dissemination of mass information" (2003). The above mentioned laws regulate relations connected with the implementation of media, establish the guarantees of ensuring the right of freedom of speech in the sphere of information, principles of accreditation of journalists, the right of refutation and reply, and reasons for which the implementers of media activities are not subject to liability[1]. According to the law "On

[1] Закон РА О массовой информации -http://www.parliament.am/legislation.php?sel=show&ID=1890&lang=rus, accessed 10th December 2016.

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the dissemination of mass information", media activity is not subject to licensing or mandatory state registration. However, the law stipulates the right of the state to license radio and TV broadcasting, including on-air, cable and satellite. The right to require the licensing of broadcasting is provided by Article 10 of the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms[2]. Licensing is carried out by a complicated procedure, and broadcasting studios (TV channels) have no right to broadcast in cable broadcasting packages without a license, despite the fact that foreign channels can be included into packages. Thus, the license is the only legal way to implement TV and radio broadcasting and use a certain frequency and cable network for the purpose of broadcasting in the territory of Armenia. The license for broadcasting or rebroadcasting is given on the basis of a competition according to the list of frequencies, provided by International Telecommunication Union[3].

Fundamentals of information freedoms are laid down in Article 42 of the Constitution of the Republic of Armenia, as amended in 2015. According to the Constitution, "everyone shall have the right to freely express his or her opinion" which includes "freedom to hold own opinion, as well as to seek, receive and disseminate information and ideas through any media, without the interference of state or local self-government bodies and regardless of state frontiers"[4].

Furthermore, Article 4 of the Law "On the dissemination of mass information" refers to the guarantee of freedom of dissemination of information "media products are produced and disseminated without prior or current state registration, licensing, declaration or notice to any state body". Persons who carry out information activity and journalists operate freely based on principles of equality, rule of law, freedom of speech (expression), and pluralism. Moreover, a journalist in the process of pursuing professional activity is protected by legislation of the Republic of Armenia as a person who performs a public duty.

Since 2004, the following has been prohibited in Armenia by legislation: censorship; forcing persons who carry out information activity or a journalist to disseminate information or refrain from its dissemination; obstruction of legitimate professional activities of a journalist; discrimination in civil circulation of equipment and materials, required for information activities; restriction of the right to use any media, including those produced and distributed in other countries [3].

Similar guarantees are also stipulated by the Law "On television and radio broadcasting" of 2001 (Article 19. Guarantee for the independence of television and radio companies), adding a prohibition on interference by the public authorities, govern-

[2] Конвенция о защите прав человека и основных свобод – http://www.irs.in.ua/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=276%3A1&catid=43%3Aeu&Itemid=70&lang=ru, accessed 10th December 2016.

[3] Обзор законодательства Республики Армения: Средства массовой информации (СМИ) – https://digital.report/zakonodatelstvo-armenii-smi/, accessed 10th December 2016.

[4] Конституция РА с изменениями – http://parliament.am/law_docs5/06122015.pdf, accessed 10th December 2016.

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ment officials, political parties, public organizations and other legal entities and individuals into the activity of television and radio companies. The law defines the status of television and radio broadcasters, regulates their establishment, licensing and management, the principles of their rights and obligations, relations arising in the process of creating and implementation of activities of broadcasting companies. The Law "On television and radio broadcasting" regulates the activity of the National Commission on Television and Radio. The National Commission on Television and Radio is an independent body with the status of a state institution, whose activity is regulated by the aforementioned law, its Charter and legislation of Armenia. The activity of the National Commission relates only to the licensing of private television and radio broadcasters and control over them. The National Commission provides frequencies publicly and by competition, approves types of licenses, issues licenses etc. The activity of the National Commission is funded from the state budget, for which there is a separate line in the budget[5][6].

According to 2015 annual report of the National Commission on Television and Radio, in 2015 there were 95 TV stations in Armenia (including 40 terrestrial, and 50 cable broadcasting) and 18 radio stations. In 2015 the Commission granted 10 licenses (overall 14 applications for licensing were received, 4 of which were rejected) for cable TV and radio broadcasting channels, 3 of which are located in the capital[7].

According to the Caucasus Research Resource Center, the most important resources for receiving current news in Armenia include: television (for 79% of population), the Internet (17%), radio and newspapers – for only 1% of respondents[8]. Media can traditionally be divided into television, radio, print media and online media.

1. Television

Television was and remains the most popular medium in the country. 85 to 90% of the general population views it and believes to be the primary source of news. Some time ago, pirate movies and programs of the low quality were widely used, and absence of professional approach was noticeable. A lot has been done and improved, however, work remains to be done.

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5 Закон РА О телевидении и радио – http://www.parliament.am/legislation.php?sel=show&ID=1464&lang=rus#5, accessed 10th December 2016.

6 Регламент Национальной Комиссии по телевидению и радио – http://parliament.am/legislation.php?sel=show&ID=1630&lang=rus, accessed 11th December 2016.

7 Годовой отчет Национальной Комиссии по телевидению и радио -http://www.tvradio.am/ru/library/view/%D5%BF%D5%A1%D6%80%D5%A5%D5%AF%D5%A1%D5%B6–%D5%B0%D5%A1%D5%B7%D5%BE%D5%A5%D5%BF%D5%BE%D5%B8%D6%82%D5%A9%D5%B5%D5%B8%D6%82%D5%B6.html, accessed 11th December 2016.

8 Armenia 2013 Media Public Opinion and Preference Survey -http://www.crrc.am/hosting/file/_static_content/projects/armedia%202013/ARM_PPT_ENG.pdf, accessed 11th December 2016.

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Dozens of TV channels are registered in Armenia, around 30 – in Yerevan, and from 3 to 8 in local TV channels of each region[9].

The most popular TV channels are as follows:

– "H1" (Public television), audience share – 71%;
– Armenia TV, audience share – 76%;
– Shant TV, audience share – 77%;
– H2, audience share – 34%;
– Kentron TV, audience share – 29%;
– Rossia/RTR/RTR Planeta, audience share – 29% [8].

In January 2001, the National Television and National Radio of Armenia were transformed into Public Television of Armenia and Public Radio of Armenia. Public Television and Public Radio are funded from the state budget and receive income from advertising and sponsorship.

The following public media are functioning in Armenia: H1 (the main channel of Public Television and Radio Company), Shoghakat TV, which was created by government decree, Public Radio of Armenia, Shirak Public Television and Shirak Public Radio. Two previously mentioned companies are included into closed joint-stock company and work only in Shirak region. H1 and Public Radio are broadcast across the whole country. Shoghakat TV is also broadcast nationwide. H1 International Satellite Channel is owned by Public Television and Radio Company and is broadcast in CIS, Europe, Middle East, North Africa and North America[10].

In late October 2016, analog broadcasting was cut off across the country – now it is only possible to pick up the digital signal, and the quality is much higher. The transition of Armenia to digital broadcasting is the obligation imposed by the European Union regulations. The country officially began its transition to digital broadcasting in 2010, but officials continued to extend the deadline. First of all, the delay was due to difficulties in providing decoders for socially vulnerable families, in compliance with the legal requirements. Finally, government together with the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs and local authorities provided 100 000 decoders to vulnerable families free of charge[1112].

According to the law on the transition to digital broadcasting, a state digital broadcasting network will be created in Armenia, in particular, 18 TV channels and 12 radio stations will operate in Yerevan, and 9 TV channels and 4 radio stations – in the regions.

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[9] European Journalism Center – Armenia – http://ejc.net/media_landscapes/armenia#link_1022, accessed 11th December 2016.

[10] Mapping Digital media: Armenia – http://www.osf.am/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/OSF-Media-Report-Armenia.pdf, accessed 11th December 2016.

[11] Freedom of the Press-Armenia – https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2016/armenia, accessed 11th December 2016.

[12] Советник министра связи, транспорта и ИТ Армении: Интернетом не надо жестко управлять – http://qwerty.kg/sovetnik-ministra-svyazi-transporta-i-it-armenii-internetom-ne-nado-zhestko-upravlyat/, accessed 11th December 2016.

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2. Radio

Studies of the Caucasus Research Resource Center show that most people turn on radio in order to listen to music (80%), news (53%) and interviews (18%). Much smaller proportion prefers quizzes and other types of programs. According to this study, only 16% of the population listened to the radio over the last 12 months. As it was previously mentioned, 18 radio stations are registered in Armenia, the most popular among them are: Public radio of Armenia, Ar Radio Intercontinental, Ardzagank, Radio 107 FM, Radio Hay, Radio Van, City FM, FM 105,5, Radio Alfa, Radio Impulse, Radio aurora, Auroradio, Radio Pro, Ulis Media, Shiral, Shant, Loru Mig, FM -102.4. The public radio of Armenia is a public radio station. It is broadcast on the FM 107,7 frequency, short, middle and long waves, by satellite (Hotbird 6), and online through official website armradio.am. Public Radio in Yerevan is a component of the city cable network. It has been operating since the Soviet time and is called "tochka". In the Soviet period, cable radio was used for broadcasting as well as for civil defence and was present in every urban household. Today this network is available only by subscription.

Radio broadcasting consists of socio-political, informational, cultural, entertainment, sports and music programs. International broadcast is done by means of satellite communication as well as online. Broadcasting is done in 14 languages: English, French, Spanish, German, Russian, Georgian, Arabic, Turkish, Persian, Azerbaijani, Kurdish, Yazidi, Assyrian and Greek[13].

3. Print media

There are 10 daily newspapers in Armenia with a very low level of circulation, 2–6 thousand copies per day. Even this number cannot always be sold, and the return rate is around 10–40%. That means that newspapers do not have a major impact on the news market. Most publications use sponsorship and direct funding from the political parties or oligarchic groups as a source of income. The situation in the regions is even worse. Over the last 15 years newspapers have been published once or twice per month with a circulation of 300–500 copies. "Asparez" is the only daily regional newspaper, with a circulation of 250–300 copies.

The most popular newspapers in Armenia are "Aravot", "Hayastani" "Hanrapetutyun", "Azg", "Haykakan Zhamanak", and "Chorrord Inknishkhanutyun". Newspapers "Hayastani Hanrapetutyun" (circulation – 3 000 copies), and "Respublika Armenia" in Russian receive funds from the state budget. Newspaper "Azg" (circulation – 3 000 copies) was founded by the liberal democratic party in 1991. The newspaper is managed by politicians: Hakob Avedikian, the editor-in-chief, was elected the leader of "Ramkavar Azatakan" party.

According to the research of Freedom House, printed media are financially weak and have limited impact when compared to television. A lot of newspapers and magazines have a "sponsor" who expects certain points of view to be expressed, which leads

[13] Armradio – http://www.armradio.info/rus/, accessed 11th December 2016.

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to self-censorship. Journalists often write articles they think are going to be published in order to avoid being fired. Ordered articles and indirect advertising are a common practice.

4. Online media

The development of online media in Armenia in recent years has been caused by several factors: the drop of the Internet fees, and the increase in the number of users. In 2016, 49,9% of people had access to the Internet. This figure increases on annual basis. In 2007, the Internet penetration rate was 6%[14].

The audience of news websites has also increased due to the increasing popularity of social media where news are also published. Online news websites have become a notable phenomenon. A new type of medium with fierce internal competition has been created. Many of these websites are multilingual. For example, news.am website has versions in Armenian, Russian, English and Turkish.

In 2016, the most popular news websites were:

1. news.am – around 2,234,000 unique monthly visitors;
2. panarmenian.net – around 319,900 unique monthly visitors;
3. aravot.am – around 315,300 unique monthly visitors;
4. tert.am – around 699,500 unique monthly visitors;
5. azatutyun.am – around 420,300 unique monthly visitors;
6. lragir.am – around 348,400 unique monthly visitors;
7. shamshyan.com – around 303,000 unique monthly visitors;
8. epress.am – around 279,100 unique monthly visitors;
9. en.168.am – around 268,600 unique monthly visitors;
10. mamul.am – around 253,000 unique monthly visitors[15];

The weekly magazine "Hetq" is an online weekly investigational journal. Its articles are later published in the printed media. It was the first magazine that adopted a journalist code of ethics. In 2004, "Hetq" was recognized as Armenian branch of Transparency International for its fight against corruption. "Armenia Now" is a magazine that also publishes independent news from Armenia[16].

In Armenia there exists a term that is referred to as "citizens' journalism". Blogosphere has been expanding for several years and has formed a group of influential and popular bloggers. This is a sign of new times, because since they are not professional bloggers they still are very popular throughout the country due to regular online publications. There are special platforms for citizen journalists, for example, mynews.am, where registered citizen journalists regularly publish their materials. It is very

[14] Internet live stats, Armenia Internet users – http://www.internetlivestats.com/internet-users/armenia/, accessed 11th December 2016.

[15] Top 25 Most Popular Best Armenia News Websites-http://www.listolists.com/popular-armenia-news-websites/, accessed 12th December 2016.

[16] Armenia-Media landscape – http://www.journalismnetwork.eu/index.php/_en/country_profiles/armenia/, accessed 12th December 2016.

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important that traditional national media regularly publish materials from mynews.am, as well as the ones coming from other platforms and blogs. Other publications are also actively involved. The Internet channel "A1plus" has a column "Through your eyes", the online company panarmenian.net has a rubric "Panreport"[17].

5. Modern state of development

According to the 2016 World Press Freedom Index report that was published by the international organization Reporters Without Borders, Armenia took 74th place out of 180 countries, which is 4 points higher than last year. It is interesting that Armenia comes ahead of such countries as Israel (101st place), and some EU member states: Italy (77th place), Greece (89th place) and Cyprus (81st place).

As indicated in the report, printed media are diverse and polarized, investigative journalism prospers on the Internet, but there are still problems with pluralism. The police violence against journalism remains unpunished, though the case when Constitutional Court issued a ruling upholding the confidentiality of journalists' sources of news website Ilur.am and Hraparak newspaper is a significant achievement[18].

According to 2016 Freedom House research, the freedom of speech in Armenia is absent, it was rated 63 points out of 100, where 100 is the worst option. This information was published in 2016 Freedom of the Press report. Freedom of the Press is an annual report and media independence rating which is published by the international non-governmental organization Freedom House.

Despite the constitutional and legal protection, freedom of the press in Armenia is still affected by a number of factors. Journalists face threats, intimidation, harassment, and physical and verbal attacks while performing their duties at work. The government and media owners significantly influence editorial content, and the overall media environment encourages self-censorship. The independent media have the opportunity to use relatively open online space[11].

The OSCE report contains cases of restriction of the journalists' rights. Thus, 13 journalists and operators were injured, the professional activity of 11 journalists was hindered, memory cards of 10 journalists were intentionally broken and stolen by representatives of the police and other groups on June 23, 2015, during a protest against electricity price rise on Baghramyan Avenue in Yerevan. Another example is a mass attack on journalists and media workers by the police forces on July 17, 2016, the first day of upheaval of " Sasna Tsrer " armed group that lasted two weeks. The rights of journalists were illegally restricted as follows: restriction of the freedom of movement; restriction of the freedom of speech when they were not allowed to use their telephones; illegal detainments; beatings; hindering the professional work; using special means against

[17] От традиционных к сетевым СМИ: Передовая практика и перспективы – http://www.osce.org/ru/fom/102323?download=true, accessed 12th December 2016.

[18] 2016 World Press Freedom Index, Reporters without borders – https://rsf.org/en/ranking#, accessed 12th December 2016.

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journalists; destroying technical equipment. Consequently, now it is not possible to talk about freedom of speech and free access to journalistic work[19].

Most major media are controlled by the government officials, those who are close to the government, or political and business elites. The share of print media is low and continues to decline amidst growing availability and popularity of online sources. While most print media are privately owned, they tend to reflect the political and ideological views of their owners, who are often associated with a certain political party or have certain interests. Television is the most popular source of news. Also, dozens of private channels operate in parallel with the public broadcaster. Media in Russian and other languages are widely available.

The Armenian media are influenced by the Russian methods of soft power towards countries where Russia has a geopolitical interest. Russia's strengths in this case are aimed at creating a positive image towards Russia and the Eurasian Economic Union, in order to strengthen the role of the Russian language and culture in its zone of influence. As a result, a part of pro-Russian population should be formed in these zones of influence. This goal is achieved by non-governmental organizations, mass media, the Russian language and cultural centers and universities financed by the government or its inner circles. The examples are as follows: federal agency "Rossotrudnichestvo" under Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC), Public Diplomacy Fund after Gorchakov, "Russian world" Foundation and other active participants of creation of positive image of Russian language and culture[20].

Therefore, despite the development of mass media in Armenia, there are certain constraints, such as censorship, persecution of journalists, hindering the free work of media representatives during mass protests. Also, given the fact that most media are owned by government or business officials, much of the content is a reflection of their desired views. It is important to prevent violation of law in cases of censorship, hindering the legal professional journalistic activities, use of force against media workers. It is essential to develop a clear strategy of combating the informational influence of other countries, with subsequent adoption of regulations.

Abstract: The article analyzes the mass media in Armenia, their legal framework (the Laws "On the dissemination of mass information", "On television and radio broadcasting", "The Constitution of the Republic of Armenia") and peculiarities of their functioning. In particular, printed media, online media,

[19] OSCE HDIM Report – http://www.osce.org/odihr/266671?download=true, accessed 12th December 2016.

[20] Russia's Policy in Armenia and its Impact Tools – http://www.lragir.am/index/eng/0/politics/view/35054, accessed 12th December 2016.

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radio and television were studied. Key sources of Armenian mass media were analyzed in order to identify the ones that are the most popular among the population. In addition, the review was conducted of the way international organizations (Freedom House, Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, Reporters without Borders) perceive the level of media freedom in the country by analyzing official reports, ratings and statistics. The study revealed the existence of frequent violations of legal framework, according to which censorship and obstruction of journalists are banned; official reports of international organizations contain information on limiting freedom of expression of journalists and media workers, illegal detention, beating, obstruction of professional activity, destruction of technical equipment and many more. There is also a certain Russian interference in information space of Armenia by means of the use of soft power methods. It was concluded that there is a need to comply strictly with existing legislation and develop a strategy to counter the information influence.
Key words: Armenia, media, radio, television, Internet, censorship.

Specyfika funkcjonowania mediów w Armenii

Streszczenie: W artykule dokonano analizy środków masowego przekazu w Armenii, przedstawiono akty prawne („O upowszechnianiu informacji masowych", „O telewizji i radiu", „Konstytucja Republiki Armenii") i specyfikę funkcjonowania mediów. W szczególności zbadano media drukowane, media internetowe, radio i telewizję. Dokonano również przeglądu sposobu, w jaki organizacje międzynarodowe (Freedom House, Organizacja Bezpieczeństwa i Współpracy w Europie, Reporterzy bez Granic) postrzegają poziom wolności mediów w Armenii, analizując oficjalne raporty, oceny i statystyki. Badanie wykazało istnienie częstych naruszeń aktów prawnych, zgodnie z którymi cenzura i utrudnianie pracy dziennikarzom są zakazane. Oficjalne raporty organizacji międzynarodowych zawierają informacje na temat ograniczenia wolności słowa dziennikarzy i pracowników mediów, nielegalnego przetrzymywania, bicia, utrudniania działalności zawodowej, niszczenia sprzętu technicznego i innych. Istnieje również pewna rosyjska ingerencja w przestrzeń informacyjną Armenii przy pomocy metod miękkiej siły. Stwierdzono, że istnieje potrzeba ścisłego przestrzegania istniejącego prawodawstwa i opracowania strategii przeciwdziałania naciskom na madia.
Słowa kluczowe: Armenia, media, radio, telewizja, Internet, cenzura

Специфика функционирование СМИ в Армении

Аннотация: В статье проанализированы СМИ в Армении, представлены правовые акты («О распространении массовой информации», «О телевидении и радио», «Конституция Республики Армения») и специфика функционирования медиа. В частности, были исследованы печатные СМИ, онлайн-СМИ, радио и телевидение. Проведен также обзор того, как международные организации (Freedom House, Организация по безопасности и сотрудничеству в Европе, «Репортеры без границ») воспринимают уровень свободы СМИ в Армении, анализируя официальные отчеты, оценки и статистику. В ходе исследования были выявлены частые нарушения правовых актов, согласно которым цензура и воспрепятствование работе журналистов запрещены. Официальные отчеты международных организаций содержат информацию об ограничении свободы слова журналистов и работников СМИ, незаконных задержаниях, избиениях, воспрепятствовании

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профессиональной деятельности, уничтожении технического оборудования и других нарушениях. Существует также определенное российское вмешательство в информационное пространство Армении с помощью методов мягкой силы. Было указано, что существует необходимость строго соблюдать действующее законодательство и разработать стратегию противодействия давлению на медиа.

Ключевые слова: Армения, СМИ, радио, телевидение, интернет, цензура

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Советник министра связи, транспорта и ИТ Армении: Интернетом не надо жестко управлять – http://qwerty.kg/sovetnik-ministra-svyazi-transporta-i-it-armenii-internetom-ne-nado-zhestko-upravlyat/