

Summary of the Thematic Discussion on Journalism and freedom of expression
Day 3: Policy Forum Armenia's Diaspora Forum

Hosted by Voice of America (VOA)
Washington, DC; March 2, 2010

Participants: Lilit Vardanyan, Marine Petrosyan, Edgar Martirosyan, Arsen Kharatyan, Marine Sargsyan, Artak Ayunts, Araxi Vann, and Aram Vanetsyan

Welcoming remarks by Voice of America, including a video presentation of how VOA works and what they cover internationally. Jack Payton, Assistant Managing Editor of the Central News Division, briefly described how VOA functions and the ethics of the organization. The introduction was led by Araxie Vann, Aram Vanetsyan, and other VOA staff. Short individual interview with participants were conducted.

DISCUSSION

- **VOA broadcasting in Armenia**

While Araxie Vann was talking about broadcasting in Armenia, and how their programs are integrated within the broadcasting channel "Armenia TV", a question was raised: "Reporting from a free-media country such as the US, do you come across any obstacles when you submit reports to Armenia TV?" The journalists and the broadcasters of the Armenian department pointed out that many things have changed over time. They have noticed that there is more freedom now than before. Their reports and videos are being incorporated with less complications nowadays.

- **The Government of Armenia blocks programs and signals from media sources in order to limit its citizens' access to news and information. Isn't this a fundamental problem in terms of Democratic governance?**

Participants were discussing that during politically unstable situations Armenian authorities block media signals and news reports. Indeed, those who were visiting from Armenia pointed out that not only are signals blocked, but also many stations and newspapers are shut down. Participants discussed whether the Diaspora can do anything about this. There was a consensus that the Diaspora should be more demanding in this respect, insisting on unbiased and freely obtained information regarding events taking place in Armenia.

- **"How free is the media in Armenia?"**

The question was asked by one of the young professionals. Some pointed out that corruption and intimidation remain a constant problem in this regard. Indeed, it was argued that the Diaspora does not receive accurate information and the “real stories” are heavily controlled by the authorities.

- **Diversity within the Armenian Diaspora**

Diaspora is very diverse. What is it that makes us all Armenians? Is it our history? Is it our culture? How do we associate “us” with other Armenians? Participants pointed out that there are many who consider themselves “Armenian,” but they have limited knowledge of Armenian history, and do not speak Armenian. This creates a problem of perspectives; what defines “Armenian-ness”? Indeed, one of the participants referenced to Professor Tölölyan’s proposed idea, that “You are an Armenian, as long as you feel like one.” Participants agreed that Diasporans are influenced by the cultural values, norms and laws of host countries. Therefore, there is not one specific or unique characteristic to identify as “Armenian”.

- **Promoting Armenian culture by the media in the Diaspora**

How does Armenian media—whether from Armenia or in the Diaspora—promote Armenian culture? It was argued that Armenian media lacks the capacity of capturing valuable and significant information. It also is lacking in terms of resources necessary to diversify the programs into various categories (e.g., economic, political, educational, entertainment, social, etc.). Moreover, they also carelessly broadcast shows that distort our understanding and image of Armenia and its ties with Diaspora.