

How Are Diasporans Informed About Contemporary Armenia?

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The paper's approach to this specific aspect of Armenia-Diaspora relations is based on the following premises:

1. The commitment of individual Armenians in the Diaspora to obtain information about day-to-day developments in Armenia is inevitably a time-consuming quest. It shows the dedication of those individuals to their Armenian identity.
2. It is only through acquiring all-rounded knowledge about the situation in Armenia that activists in the Diaspora can form a solid vision about their expectations from their historical homeland and hope to effect positive change there.
3. It is widely accepted that all knowledge frameworks are value-laden; they are necessarily filtered through both (a) the information sources they primarily rely on and (b) the mindsets of the recipients of that information.
4. Knowledge does not automatically translate to effective change. Activists, even if knowledgeable, cannot effect change without the prior ability to mobilize other people toward a desirable objective.

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During the Soviet era (1920-1991), two types of information – public and private – were accessible in the Armenian Diaspora:

By public information we will refer to those sources of information, which were either widely disseminated in print or were relayed orally and on the airwaves to relatively large audiences. A large chunk of this type of information emanated from Soviet state-controlled sources (Soviet and Soviet Armenian print media; radio broadcasts of Yerevan; Armenpress; visits by Soviet Armenian officials, intellectuals and artists to Diasporan communities). Other sources were outside the control of the Soviet authorities and presented a less favorable picture of the Soviet Armenian reality. These sources critical of the Soviets included the international media outside Soviet government control, as well as Soviet Armenian dissident sources, which were printed or broadcast by radio by anti-Soviet groupings (Dashnak party members and sympathizers in Soviet Armenia as long as the party was clandestinely active there until the late 1920s and early 1930s; POWs and DPs, who did not return to the Soviet Union after the Second World War and settled mostly in Western Europe and North America; and repatriates from 1946-1949, who were displeased with what they encountered in Soviet Armenia and later returned to their

sending countries, like the USA and France.) From the second half of the 1950s, impressions of Diasporan guests of the Soviet Armenian government and tourists visiting Soviet Armenia also proliferated. They became accessible through books, serialized articles in the press and public lectures. They were mostly, though not totally, sympathetic toward Soviet achievements.

However, private sources, i.e. information accumulated in the Diaspora through face-to-face contacts between Soviet Armenian citizens and Diasporan Armenians were also significant, especially after the mid-1950s. These included information provided by Diasporan college students and tourists visiting Armenia; by tourists from Soviet Armenia, who were invited by their relatives still living in Diasporan communities; and by a larger group of (mostly Middle Eastern) repatriates, predominantly from 1946-1949, who left Armenia in significant numbers from the 1970s, usually to California, but did not write down for public consumption on their experiences during their sojourn in the Soviet homeland.

Information obtained in the Diaspora regarding Soviet Armenia, both sympathetic and critical, was usually processed and later disseminated by Diasporan opinion-makers based on their respective lenses in the persisting pro- and anti-Soviet political divide. In both camps, opinion-makers preferred to restrict the dissemination of certain types of information which did not fit into their pre-set political and ideological agenda.

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The collapse of the Soviet Union and the re-emergence of an independent Armenian state have induced significant changes in the ways Diasporans are now informed about day-to-day developments in their historical homeland. Diaspora's access to information about Armenia has also widened because of radical innovations in the domains of the electronic media and the Internet. Armenia's own mass media is no longer monolithic. At least three Yerevan-based TV channels broadcast to the Diaspora via satellite. However, the news they broadcast are all controlled by the government. Printed newspapers from Yerevan rarely reach the Diaspora these days, but a large number of electronic news sites, both pro- and anti-government can now be reached by Diasporans on line. A select few Diasporan news outlets now even have their own local correspondents in Armenia. You Tube and to a lesser extent blogs have also begun to play a significant role in disseminating information about Armenia in the Diaspora. The sharp increase in exchange programs, targeting especially the youth, compared to very few similar opportunities under the Soviets, must also be noted. Under these changed conditions, visits by state officials and intellectuals from Armenia to various Diasporan communities now leave much less impact upon the shaping of Diasporan public opinion. Moreover, now that visits by Diasporans to Armenia have become frequent, very few visitors currently publish their impressions after their return.

However, there has been little qualitative change in the way this growing factual information from Armenia continues to be processed through the traditional Diasporan news outlets. Traditional political and other organizations in the Diaspora continue to

filter the information they disseminate through the respective prisms of their political stand at that particular moment vis-à-vis the administration *in situ* in Yerevan. What has changed is that the political stands of parties in the Diaspora regarding successive administrations in Yerevan are not as static as it used to be during the Soviet era. The media supporting the opposition Armenian National Congress against President Serge Sargsyan, run by emigrants from Armenia now residing in California, also appears to be extremely biased in its coverage of news from Armenia.

Under the existing conditions, described above, the level of interest among people in the (traditional) Diaspora about obtaining publicly available information on developments in Armenia on a day-to-day basis can roughly be grouped in five categories:

1. Some do their own search for information, mostly through the Internet. Among them, people who have studied or lived in Armenia constitute a considerable group. Many of these individuals are outside traditional party circles. They are more likely to be pro-opposition. However, they lack mechanisms to mobilize others in order to communicate their worries to the representatives of the Armenian government or to effect any meaningful change in Armenia.
2. A larger group relies on “traditional” sources, like mostly party-controlled Armenian newspapers, radio and television programs, which consistently filter information as mentioned above.
3. Others rely solely on the word of mouth; they do not follow any form of mass media, but are informed through their regular contacts with fellow Diasporan Armenians, who do.
 - Members of Groups 2 and 3 are more easily swayed by the traditional structures in the Diaspora and can thus make their voice heard through demonstrations and other forms of public action, *if* invited to do so by the parties, which they support.
4. In Western Europe and North America, a significant number of Armenians rely solely on what is printed and disseminated in the mass media of their host country. Members of this group do not follow Armenian-owned media outlets.
5. Still another group of Armenians remain mostly unconcerned with what is going in Armenia. They define their Armenianness within the “narrow” context of their own Diasporan community.
 - It is unlikely that members of Groups 4 and 5 will participate in any public action related to problems in Armenia.

Most of the information about Armenia disseminated through traditional Armenian-owned news outlets in the Diaspora is based on the reproduction of news items distributed by news agencies or published on Internet sites in Yerevan. Outside the hotly debated irredentist issues of the “Armenian Cause” and Karabagh, there are practically no analyses written by Diasporan journalists on other aspects of life in Armenia. Some may argue that the literature and the arts do constitute exceptions. Nevertheless, it remains extremely difficult to find Diaspora-born and based experts on Armenia’s other problems like the economy, corruption, environment, education, judicial system and so on. This is necessarily contributing to the Diaspora’s overall aloofness toward issues of good governance in Armenia.