

Media coverage of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh

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This brief is based on research conducted in the framework of a project project on *Engaging society and decision-makers in dialogue for peace over the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict* implemented by the Caucasus Institute in 2017-2018 with funding by the UK Government's Conflict, Stability and Security Fund. During the project, we conducted closed informal discussions of the *media coverage and editorial policies with regard to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict* with representatives of the media community (three discussions in Yerevan and one in Stepanakert). To put the opinions of the media professionals in context, we complemented it with data from interviews with experts and local residents in Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh conducted in the framework the same project.

Opinions expressed in this policy brief are those of the authors and may not reflect the views of the UK Government, the Caucasus Institute or any other organization.

Background

Armenia still falls short of international standards of press freedom. The best that can be said about its media is that it is pluralistic, and, by regional standards, sustainable (see Media Sustainability Index by IREX). With the growing popularity of online media as a source of information, trust towards mass media remains low, with less than a third of the population trusting media and over a third, distrusting it, according to the CRRC Caucasus Barometer data. While there is no consistent quantitative data on the media of Nagorno-Karabakh, there is anecdotal evidence, corroborated by the data of this study, that it combines the shortcomings of Armenian media with issues typical for an unrecognized entity in the midst of a half-frozen ethnopolitical conflict (self-censorship, societal pressure, international isolation, shortage of resources, poor access to education etc.).

Traditional vs. online and social media

Although it is increasingly difficult to distinguish between types of media, many respondents *considered "classical" media (television, radio and newspapers) to be more neutral sources of information about the conflict* compared to social media and even to online media (i.e. media that only operate in the Internet). As an Armenian journalist put it, *"Online media quote opinions rather than provide first-hand reports about events, whereas information coming from social networks can be completely false."* Journalists also argued that social networks fragment the media environment, *"In terms of information sharing, our society is like an archipelago. It is broken up into islands that communicate inside themselves and with those nearest to them, but never with other islands."*

This makes it *difficult for people to form opinions*; according to one of the experts, *"In Karabakh I realized that the minds of ordinary people were in confusion. The information they got from Facebook was mixed with information from TV stations and their own perceptions. As a result,*

they could believe at the same time that we are so strong that we can take Baku and that the authorities of Armenia have sold Karabakh for 2 billion dollars.”

The use of Azerbaijani sources

There are various viewpoints among Armenian journalists on how to handle information from Azerbaijani sources: can one use it or should one disregard it as potentially biased or false? Some believe that all Azerbaijani press is subject to state control and serves as a propaganda tool, and therefore cannot be used as a source of information. Others think Azerbaijani sources can be used but the data requires verifying just like information from Armenian sources, e.g. *“We want to write the truth. Azerbaijan does not always lie and Armenia does not always say the truth. We must approach each situation individually.”* Most media choose a compromise solution: while they double-check everything coming from Armenian and Azerbaijani media, they **subject data from Azerbaijani sources to especially thorough review and ask Armenian military or political officials to comment on it.** *“We maintain balance and neutrality with regard to domestic politics, but not with regard to the Karabakh conflict.”*

Self-censorship and damage control in Armenian and Karabakh media

Editorial policies concerning the coverage of the Karabakh conflict vary across media. Journalists in Armenia agreed that **the state does not directly dictate** approaches to conflict coverage, even to public media. However, many journalists pointed out that **self-censorship and editorial censorship exists** within the Armenian media community, especially in the form of selectiveness. *“I think we intuitively choose negative stories from Azerbaijan in order to prove that the situation there is worse.”* *“Last April, the press avoided criticising some things, such as the relationship between volunteers and the regular army.”* *“Many prefer not to cross red lines. Sometimes it had negative results, for example, limiting the scope of a report”.*

In Stepanakert, in addition to self-censorship mentioned by all discussants and interviewees, **journalists also engage in damage control.** There is a perceived risk that a media report *“might reveal something that could cost a soldier’s life”*. Therefore, media **coordinate their coverage with government press services** or sometimes avoid covering particular topics. *“As a stringer for an international publication, I have decided not to cover army-related issues, though the editorial office sometimes asks me to.”*

Apart from military issues, coordination with authorities for the sake of damage control can concern economic activity: journalists try to avoid publishing information that can be used by Azerbaijan to pressurize international businesses or foreign nationals active in Nagorno-Karabakh. *“The logo of a Czech company operating in Karabakh was shown in a news story. Azerbaijan sued the company for illegally operating on its territory and forced it to shut down its business in Karabakh.”*

Moreover, journalists in Nagorno-Karabakh **face public censure and social pressure when covering negative phenomena** because it might damage the image of Nagorno-Karabakh and therefore *“plays into the hands of the enemy.”* This perception creates an ideal environment for corruption. *“This is a small and tightly-woven community. When a journalist starts investigating an abuse or a corrupt practice, it immediately turns out that the corrupt official and the journalist have lots of common friends and family who beg the journalist to stop the investigation. Either you give up the investigation or all your friends and relatives stop talking to you”.*

Information policy of the state and the media

Journalists in Armenia argued that *the government did not have a consistent policy* with regard to the coverage of the conflict. *“We do not understand the essence of the ongoing information war and no one from the government has ever explained to us what the Armenian goal is.”* As a result, following the government policy can become *a guessing game*. *“I work for a media company strongly affiliated with the authorities, and I can say that we do not get to choose own editorial policy, we must reflect the approach of the state. However, during confrontations in Nagorno-Karabakh, we do not have time to coordinate the topics or at least the direction with the government, but we haven’t had any problems yet.”* Journalists from Armenia are used to reckoning with official policies; it’s the lack of clarity that troubles them, *“In my opinion, the main problem is that the government does not have a system of rapid response, including to information. Besides, it is time to reconsider the information policy of the Ministry of Defence of Karabakh.”* Some argued that information provided by the government is not always reliable, *“I do not trust any information coming from the government (of Armenia) and I always double-check it.”*

In Nagorno-Karabakh, journalists agreed with the following viewpoint, *“The Karabakh state has no information policy. The editor of each news media chooses between freedom and responsibility in each concrete situation.”* Karabakh journalists are accustomed to these pressures and admit that *“contacts with the state are often informal.”* They are much more concerned with what they call “structural difficulties”: shortage of funds, absence of competition, weak expert base, dependence on foreign and Yerevan-based news sources.

The use of place names and terms

In contrast to the media community in Yerevan, journalists from Stepanakert pay a lot of attention to the usage of terms and place names when covering the conflict. *“We do not work the way they do in Armenia, our terminology is different. For example, we use the phrase “Azerbaijani-Karabakh conflict” rather than “Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict.””*

Careful choice of terminology concerns various aspects of the conflict, e.g. *“Instead of “line of contact,” we prefer to say “frontline”, “the border between NKR and Azerbaijan”, “border villages.””* Geographical names can also present a problem, *“I use place names in quotation marks when citing someone. There is, for example, disagreement on whether to call the village “Talish” or “Talysh.””*

Common for post-soviet conflicts, the “war of names” makes it difficult for Karabakh journalists to work for international publications. *“Foreign editors usually ask us to change some expressions or names.”*

Summary

The authorities of Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh do not have clear policies on handling information about the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and do not practice direct censorship. However, for various reasons – ownership, affiliation, self-censorship, damage control – media outlets and journalists align themselves with what they perceive to be the state policy or the public good. Regularly facing the classic journalistic dilemma of objectivity vs. social responsibility, reporters and editors are forced to make ad-hoc decisions, often succumbing to societal pressures. They are accustomed to this situation and do not list it among their main concerns, an indication that this problem has persisted for quite some time.