**The Media as a Diaspora-Homeland Bridge**

1512, Venice, Italy and 1794, Madras (Chennai), India – what do these years and places, each so far apart from the other, have in common? They were both significant firsts in the Armenian world: the first published Armenian book and the first Armenian newspaper. The printing press has played a key role in keeping the Armenian identity alive around the world for centuries now, whether through Bibles or school books, *yerazahan*s (“dream dictionaries”) or active media providing information on local events and sometimes having connections with goings-on in other parts of the global Diaspora.

Unfortunately, the Diasporan Armenian media has not always had the strongest links with Armenia itself, even in this age of the internet and social media. That relationship has undergone major changes in recent years, something which became even more evident over the course of tumultuous weeks in April and May, 2018, when the country saw tremendous political developments that were very closely followed across the planet from Boston to Beijing or Buenos Aires to Beirut, whether through pixels on a screen or through ink on paper. The Diaspora-Homeland media connection has entered a new era.

As a reflection of that evolution, AGBU Armenia hosted an evening’s discussion on May 30 on the sidelines of the 9th Pan-Armenian Forum of Journalists organised by the Ministry of Diaspora. Around one hundred editors, reporters, and publishers – both local and from abroad – gathered at the AGBU Armenia headquarters in central Yerevan to exchange thoughts and ideas and to widen their networks.

In his opening remarks, Vasken Yacoubian, AGBU central board member and president of AGBU Armenia, mentioned that, when the conference had first been planned, things were quite different in the country. “This is a new Armenia. Perhaps we need a new Diaspora,” he said. The AGBU has long been known as a Diasporan organisation, but in recent years it has moved more and more towards becoming an Armenia-centred establishment with a strong Diasporan network. If there is any institution that can play the role of a Diaspora-Homeland bridge, it is the AGBU, especially in this time of great change. “There needs to be meaningful engagement of the Diaspora with Armenia – not only humanitarian donations, but through so many other means,” Yacoubian added. “We hope for serious partnerships [in the media sphere]. It is true that there must be transparency and free expression. Surely the Diaspora must discuss the shortcomings in Armenia. But the success stories need to be reported as well. The Diaspora must know about the achievements of the country, some of which go well beyond the regional level and are truly global successes.”

Among those invited to speak were local media professionals who shared their experiences on covering the recent events, representing a variety of outlets and agencies such as *CivilNet*, RFE/RL *Azatutyun*, the Associated Press, Photolure, and *EVN Report*. Members of the audience chimed in with questions and reactions of their own.

One theme that was touched upon by many speakers was the role of the youth in the latest political developments – whereas it was clear that most of the media representatives in the room belonged to the older generation. Or so it looks to be the case for the Diasporan press.

“Indeed, this is a fair observation,” Aharon Shekherdemian, the media co-ordinator for the AGBU AYA in Lebanon commented. “There does not seem to be so much room for the youth in the [Diasporan] Armenian media today. They need to be encouraged, somehow they must be drawn into that sphere.”

A bigger theme that repeatedly came up was that alongside an unprecedented level of popular engagement during the weeks of the movement led by Nikol Pashinyan, especially through social media and citizen journalism, there was also substantial attention from the global mainstream media. This scale of interest created new opportunities for collaboration with local media as producers, fixers, and providers of reporting and analysis. Hrair Tamrazian, the director of RFE/RL *Azatutyun*, discussed how it was an exceptional experience for them to provide content for major broadcasters. He hoped the media culture in the country itself would see positive changes as a result. Arshak Tovmasyan, executive director of Regional Post Caucasus, added that there were more than 200 foreign media workers in the country during the first week of May – all of them needed analysts and reporters.

It is noteworthy to have CNN, Euronews, Al Jazeera, and the BBC in Armenia, but what about Diasporan media outlets themselves? “The Diasporan press often writes about their own community, but they can also have regular correspondents in Armenia – especially for times of major developments,” Tamrazian suggested.

And it works the other way as well. Local media representatives, even from Tamrazian’s own RFE/RL *Azatutyun* and the highly active and followed *Hetq*, confessed that they had limited knowledge about and interaction with the Diasporan media. The event was a good occasion for them to become at least a little bit more familiar with that world.

Avet Demuryan, the correspondent of the Associated Press in Armenia, added a call for his part to editors of Diasporan media to engage deeply with one or two local Armenian media outlets and share content. “Publish a lot about the people in your community,” he said, “the movers and shakers, those who create the atmosphere in local life, whether war veterans, scholars, or entrepreneurs.”

Among the other speakers that day were Ara Aslanyan, the designer who came up with the “Dukhov” logo now so ubiquitous on baseball caps and t-shirts all across the country and certainly abroad. The expression *dukhov* was met with some resistance from those in the Diaspora not familiar with the Russian language or local slang in Armenia, but the term has nevertheless become a symbol of the revolution and something that, as a commercial success, might have turned into an organic brand for the country, Aslanyan suggested.

Also present was Melik Baghdasaryan who runs the Photolure photo agency with his sons Vahram and Hayk. Adding to their already positive reputation, the work by the Baghdasaryans on the recent movement was recognised by President Armen Sarkissian. As such, the role of the media lay not just in merely reporting the events of April and May but in conveying their significance to the whole country and to the world. Other noted photo journalists present that day were Eric Grigorian of *EVN Report*, Nazik Armenakyan of *4Plus*, Narek Aleksanyan of *Hetq* with his colleague, investigative reporter Seda Ghukasyan.

For Arto Vaun, an editorial board member at *EVN Report* – of which the significant English-language coverage during the recent events was particularly lauded – any kind of contact to facilitate discussions between local, Diasporan, and even non-Armenian media would be more than welcome. “These connections should go in particular toward elevating standards,” he added.

“There is immense room for dialogue between local and Diasporan media,” Talar Kazanjian, executive director of AGBU Armenia, echoed, “For Diasporan outlets, local Armenian media can serve as resources, as partners on the ground. For media in the homeland, reaching out to Diasporan media for fruitful partnerships can help set a new, elevated agenda.”

Evidently, there is much interest both for local and for Diasporan media outlets to hear from the other, but an insufficient level of engagement. The Deputy Minister of Diaspora, Babken DerGrigorian, commented for his part that, “The Diasporan media plays a crucial role as a bridge between the various Diaspora communities and Armenia. But, at the same time, there is immense room for growth, collaboration, and the exchange of ideas. We need to have more such platforms for strengthening that bridge, we need to explore even more efficient, effective, and productive ways to collaborate.”

The key question remains: how can the Diaspora engage more fully and meaningfully with the homeland and how can the homeland reach out impactfully and sustainably to the Diaspora? Establishments such as the AGBU are positioned to provide platforms for networking and sharing, as well as to assist in making long-term collaborations possible. Those deeper connections can take place across many fields, but surely the role of the media will always be central in maintaining ties throughout the global Armenian nation.

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