ALTERING THE POLITICAL LANDSCAPE:
THE IMPACT OF ELECTRONIC MEDIA ON ARMENIA’S TRANSITION TO DEMOCRACY

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Eleeza Vorperian Agopian, B.A.

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Eleeza Vorperian Agopian, B.A.

Thesis Advisor: D. Linda Garcia, PhD
Thesis Reader: Michael R. Nelson, PhD

ABSTRACT

The free flow of information is a major factor that may contribute to the spread of democracy throughout the world. Knowledge that could be broadcast in the form of cell phone videos online forced the repressive Burmese regime to reconnect the country to the Internet, Burma’s link to the outside world. It was the flow of information that instigated a society engaged and actively demanding change. As Anthony Giddens has noted, access to information gives rise to “deepening democracy” in a globalized world with access to more information.

Although information is a fundamental element of democracy, if it is to have currency it must be accessible to all. For example, in North Korea a vacuum of information continues to keep citizens in isolation from the rest of the world. Similarly, in Egypt, bloggers face threats of censorship and torture if they report on government wrongdoing or otherwise raise a critical voice. Both countries have been named to Reporters Without Borders’ list of the world’s 13 Internet enemies.
The prospects for democracy may be enhanced in the new digital environment. The impact of the Internet on the media landscape has been staggering: Television programs are broadcast online, podcasts provide content on-the-go, blogging makes anyone with access to the Internet an advocate or journalist. Participation is enhanced because accessibility and control have shifted to the news consumer. Electronic media is far more accessible to the public today than it was in the past especially in developing and semi-developing countries. Televisions are ubiquitous even in rural communities. Mobile phones are just as likely to appear in the poorest villages as they are in the wealthiest neighborhoods, as are Internet cafes and satellite dishes.

These developments raise the question of how the growing availability of information affects the political landscape. To answer this question, this thesis examines the case of Armenia. By examining a single representative case study, it will be possible to study the role of the media in relationship to other social and economic factors. Using a single case study will provide a condensed study of media’s impact on democratization in addition to a context for the general analysis.

As a semi-developed country, Armenia can provide a picture of the development threshold necessary to sustain a democracy. Armenia’s media
landscape with its plurality of information sources makes it a strong test case for examining the impact of information on democratization.

This thesis hypothesizes that Armenia is moving in the democratic direction. Reporters Without Borders ranks Armenia above all the other former Soviet republics (including Russia) in its annual press freedom index. Additionally, Freedom House in its 2008 Freedom in the World Survey, ranks Armenia as partly free, a status shared only by Kyrgyzstan and Georgia among the remaining former Soviet states. Looking at the evolution of democracy over time, one could make a case that a plurality of information will likely positively influence democratic development.
Gratitude goes first and foremost to my advisors: Drs. Garcia and Nelson, who deftly guided me through the most challenging academic endeavor of my career. To the CCT faculty and staff: Thank you for your knowledge, patience, and guidance throughout the graduate school experience. To my fellow colloquium members: Friday morning therapy wouldn’t have been the same without you. Vitak and Katy, in particular, were my thesis sponsors in this process and provided much-needed laughter, tears, comfort, and funny pictures of animals. My parents and the rest of my family have always supported me in whatever crazy scheme I’ve chosen to pursue. Without their love and encouragement, I could never have begun this odyssey. And finally, to my Vahan: Your unconditional love and consistent support – even if it meant cooking dinner while I banged away on my laptop at the kitchen table – could never be matched.

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my grandmother, Lily Vorperian, who taught me the importance of independence. And to those Armenian protesters who bravely camped out in Yerevan’s Liberty Square and with their presence demonstrated to the world the true meaning of freedom.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

The free flow of information is a major factor that has contributed to the spread of democracy throughout the world. Knowledge of a world outside their borders – via information broadcast by Radio Free Europe – helped East Germans topple the Berlin Wall. (Urban, 1997) Dissidents were able to use cell phone videos to reach the outside world despite the fact that the repressive Burmese regime had disconnected the country from the Internet. As a result, the dissidents were able to increase international pressure on the regime to reconnect the country to the Internet. In both instances, it was the flow of information that instigated a society engaged and actively demanding change. As Giddens (2000) has noted, access to information gives rise to “deepening democracy” in a globalized world with access to more information.

Information, therefore, is one of the building blocks of democracy. It provides the content around which the public and government can fruitfully engage. Both sides benefit, because it provides for greater transparency in government. The public needs information to hold government accountable. At the same time, government needs information in order to make decisions and to assess the public’s reaction to them. By taking public information into account, government can gain greater legitimacy and support for a democratic culture as well as promote even greater dialogue.
The international democracy promotion community identifies media freedom as a critical element of democratization. The United States Agency for International Development (a key U.S. funder of media assistance programs) cites the free flow of information as a strategic goal. (U.S. Agency for International Development, 1999) The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe has a designated representative on freedom of media.¹ UNESCO, the United Nation’s educational and cultural arm, names access to information as an element of its developmental goals.²

Although information is a fundamental element of democracy, if it is to have currency it must be accessible to all. For example, in North Korea a vacuum of information continues to isolate citizens and prevent them from engaging with the rest of the world. Similarly, in Egypt, bloggers face threats of censorship and torture if they report on government wrongdoing or otherwise raise a critical voice. Reporters Without Borders has listed both countries among the world’s 13 Internet enemies. (Reporters Sans Frontières, 2006)

In contrast, Iceland ranks at the top of Reporters Without Borders annual press freedom index. In Iceland, where information is most the most accessible, democracy thrives. For example, it has received top marks in Freedom House’s annual Freedom in the World survey for both political and civic rights (Freedom House, 2008), as well as

¹ See: http://www.osce.org/fom/
the distinction of being the most developed nation in the world. (United Nations Development Programme, 2007) A case could be made that democratic development may be connected to a country’s overall developmental picture.

This thesis examines the case study of Armenia, where both democratic development and Internet development scores fall in the middle of most international rankings. Although Internet penetration is low, the small community that is online has developed a vibrant presence. News, information, and ideas are exchanged and discussed. Protests are sometimes organized using digital technologies like the Internet and text messaging. In addition to news Web sites, blogs, and wikis; social networking has provided a more interconnected way to share information. Links are shared with friends, recommended, and commented upon. Investigative journalists publish their work online and subsequently in newspapers. As of 2006, 5.75 percent of the Armenian population uses the Internet. (International Telecommunications Union, 2006) Even with these positive indicators, however, the full potential of digital media awaits the extension of Internet connectivity. Its information technology sector has grown in recent years with some outside investment. (Andonian et al, 2004) The prospects for Internet and other information and communication technology development in Armenia are bright.

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3 See www.hetq.am, a Web site produced by Armenia’s Association of Investigative Journalists.
The prospects for democracy worldwide may be enhanced in the new digital environment. Electronic media are far more accessible to the public today than they were in the past, especially in developing and semi-developing countries. Televisions are ubiquitous even in rural communities. Likewise, mobile phones can be found in the poorest villages as well as in the wealthiest neighborhoods, as can Internet cafes and satellite dishes. Information is accessible from just about anywhere. Participation will likely be enhanced because accessibility and control have shifted to the news consumer due to technologies that empower citizens. (de Sola Pool, 1983)

Equally striking is the potential for collaboration. Just as citizens in a country can connect with one another across vast distances, so too can they connect with the diaspora, who may be several time zones away. Opinions are just as likely to be influenced by discussions on a message board, as they are by what appears on the evening news. For example, the diaspora of the tiny African state of Eritrea has used the Internet to participate in debates related to their country’s future. Indeed, the Internet has served as a public sphere for Eritreans in the diaspora. (Bernal, 2006)

Given the growing availability of information, one wonders how these developments will impact the political landscape in developing countries. This thesis explores the answer to this question. In particular it looks at how electronic media have influenced Armenia’s democratic development. By focusing on a single case study,
this thesis takes a holistic, cumulative approach, examining the role of the media in the context of other social and economic factors. Held’s (1995) theory of “cosmopolitan” democracies emphasizes that in analyzing the relationships between the media and democracy, equal weight must be given to both institutions. This theory will help to explain how successful democracies incorporate both formal and informal institutions to create a civic culture conducive to participation and good governance.

Armenia was selected for this case study because it provides a good example of a semi-developed state. Consequently, it may have reached a certain threshold, which – given new technologies – might allow democracy to prosper. For example, Armenia has no extenuating circumstances – such as war or famine – to undermine the prospect for democracy. Furthermore, and just as important, Armenia has a political infrastructure conducive to democracy. For example, Reporters Without Borders ranks Armenia above all the other former Soviet republics (including Russia) in its annual press freedom index. (Reporters Sans Frontieres, 2007) Additionally, Freedom House in its 2008 Freedom in the World Survey, ranks Armenia as partly free, a status shared only by Kyrgyzstan and Georgia among the remaining former Soviet states.\textsuperscript{4} Armenia’s media landscape with its plurality of information sources makes it a strong test case for examining the impact of information on democratization. Thirty print

\textsuperscript{4} Estonia and Ukraine are the only states ranked as free, while the rest are named not free. See: Freedom House, 2008.
publications, 21 radio stations, and 49 television stations inform Armenia’s 3 million people. (International Research and Exchanges Board, 2007)

Armenia’s situation reflects to a considerable degree its unique history among the former Soviet republics. It was among the first to declare independence and so developed its own media outlets and style of reporting. Like the other Soviet republics, until the early 1990s, Armenia suffered in an information vacuum. However, information eventually permeated the Iron Curtain and contributed to the dismantling of the Communist system. After independence, capitalism took hold and media organizations began to consolidate and align with ruling authorities. Newspaper readership and circulation dwindled as a result. More recently, several television stations have begun to assert their independence. Equally important, investigative journalism is alive and well online – even if its reach is relatively limited. In addition the government has successfully enacted and implemented freedom of information laws, which are changing attitudes and cultures within both journalism and government realms. At the same time, a growing civil society is taking advantage of these reforms to increase public space, and with it the potential for even greater democratic development in Armenia.

This thesis hypothesizes that given the preexisting level of an institutional infrastructure that supports democratic practices, the new digital environment will not
only sustain but, more importantly, foster democracy in Armenia. Given Armenia’s
broad institutional change, Held’s (1995) theory of “cosmopolitan” democracies,
which places equal emphasis on media and institutions, provides a useful lens through
which to examine how electronic media might support democracy. At a minimum, this
theory helps to identify the range of variables that are at work when information serves
to enhance democracy. Other things being equal, we should be able to identify a trend
in the direction of democratization. At the same time, the spread of democracy will
foster greater diffusion and access to a broader array of information and digital
technologies.

To test this hypothesis this thesis will proceed as follows: Chapter two will
review the literature related to the research question. Building upon this literature
review, the chapter will identify, define, and operationalize the key variables entailed
in the development of democracy through the diffusion of new media and access to
diverse information. Held (1995) and Diamond’s (1999) theories will be especially
useful in this regard. Based on this literature the chapter will develop a model
illustrating how the key variables are related to one another and based on that model
conclude with a hypothesis that suggests an answer to the research question. Chapter
three employs the model developed in chapter two to examine the state of media affairs
in the post-Soviet state of Armenia. Accordingly, it will briefly describe Armenia’s
political development from the waning years of communist rule to today’s burgeoning independent republic. Special emphasis will be placed on the role of media from the age of glasnost to today’s democracy. Chapter four will provide an ethnographic sketch of today’s media environment, using interviews with journalists and government officials to provide a portrait of today’s media landscape. In the final chapter, the thesis will summarize the analysis and answer the research question posed in chapter one. Chapter five will also compare the analytical results to the hypothesis laid out in chapter two. In addition, it will seek to identify and explain any gaps between the hypothesis and the thesis’ findings. Based on this analysis it shall suggest the limitations of the research and the questions that need further explanation. In concluding, the final chapter will assess the extent to which the thesis findings are generalizable and, on that basis, suggest potential policy options that might employ media technology to support democracy not only in Armenia but also in other democratizing states.
Chapter 2. Conceptualizing democracy’s framework

Introduction

To explore the question of how electronic media has influenced democratic development in Armenia, this thesis will first examine the literature available on democratic development and civic participation. In so doing, this chapter will deconstruct key theorists’ definitions of democracy, civic engagement, and participation to develop a model for measuring democratic development. These theorists will provide the basis for the thesis’ hypothesis as well as the organization of subsequent chapters. Furthermore, each definition will provide an entry point for considering the role media plays in a democracy.

Based on the theoretical literature, I will define democracy as a system of governance that is representative of its constituents, is transparent in its actions, and is accountable to its citizens. Indicators that will aid in measuring the level of democratic governance include the existence and enforceability of laws that guarantee public access to information. Additionally, the existence of a political sphere open for protest and criticism – apparent in both anecdotal evidence and legal statutes that provide for such free speech – will provide an additional measure of a vibrant democracy.

Effective democracies require civic engagement. Engagement may manifest itself as a protest, petition, or letter to the editor among other possibilities. In whatever form, civic engagement is the people’s connection to democratic society as a whole. At
its very basic level, that engagement is often measured by voting trends. However, even that most elemental act of democratic participation is influenced by something much larger: information. Participating in the political sphere requires the exchange of ideas and dialogue based on information available. Information provides the necessary tools and knowledge for informed participation in a democracy.

Independent media provide access to information in a democratic society, affording a conduit for engagement. They function as an unofficial pillar of society, guiding and shaping the relationship between the public and government. Providing access to information is a critical component of their role. Providing accurate and unfiltered news and information to society affords the polity the tools necessary to hold government accountable in a true democracy.

In today’s global information age, technology has enhanced the possibility for civic engagement by providing greater access to information. With greater access comes a greater conduit for interaction. Technologies that are widely available and – in the case of the Internet – interactive, have opened the path to a plurality of information sources and perspectives. Television can provide multiple viewpoints. Online media offer even greater choices of information. Additionally, they make each individual user both a news consumer and a news producer. This raises the question: What influence will electronic media have on democratic development?
The theory of democratic participation – while giving due consideration to cultural implications for governance and media trends – helps explain how civic engagement and access to information contribute to stronger democracies. In this capacity, it offers a theoretical framework for examining, as this thesis does, the impact of independent media on Armenia’s democratization process. This chapter argues that democratic theory provides an entry point for understanding first, why information is necessary in a democracy, and second, how media play a role in providing that information. In addition, it also considers how media’s role as a participatory tool is enhanced in the digital environment. This chapter will also consider some theories critical of democracy’s potential in the digital age, and offer arguments to counter those positions.

**Democracy through participation and the public sphere**

Democracy is elemental to a free society. It is a form of government that encourages and acknowledges the role that every member of society plays in its functioning. (Diamond, 1999) Furthermore, democracies institute relationships that make government officials work for the very people who put them in office and therefore they guarantee an equal role for all members of society. For liberal democracies – those which protect liberties and provides space for civic life (Diamond, 1999) – to flourish, institutions must be legitimated.
In a free society, the mass public plays a major role in legitimizing institutions. A mass public that values dialogue and civic action contributes to a space known as the public sphere. (Habermas, 1989) In the public sphere, the public itself gains institutional legitimacy, thereby conferring upon itself the power to legitimate more formal institutions. Furthermore, in its role as legitimator, the mass public, engaging in the public sphere, also gains a voice in the discourse of society.

As a legitimizing body, the public sphere also generates the practice of communicative action, more commonly understood as public discourse. Habermas, revisiting the idea of the public sphere 30 years after he first wrote about it, notes: “A public sphere that functions politically requires more than the institutional guarantees of the constitutional state; it also needs the supportive spirit of cultural traditions and patterns of socialization, of the political culture, of a populace accustomed to freedom.” (Habermas, 1992, p.453)

As described by Habermas, communicative action lies at the heart of effective democracy. A public sphere that plays host to communicative action and creates space for dialogue will be better equipped to operate as a democracy. (Benhabib, 1992) In turn, a democracy that has committed to dialogue will encourage the development of a public sphere.
Crafting sustainable democracy requires creating public space for every element of a society, including the informal institutions that make up a political culture. An executive, legislature, and judiciary branch are all necessary. However, they do not complete the democratic picture. In every democratic society, space exists between formal institutions and the polity. Elements of engagement fill those gaps with information and deliberation. The richer the information and discourse in those spaces, the deeper and more sustainable the democracy.

The formal and informal institutions that give rise to the public sphere are also shaped by it. Although institutional change – when it occurs -- comes incrementally, it inevitably influences the opportunities available for participation. (North, 1990) In turn, participation in the public sphere influences institutions. Both dynamics exist in democratic societies because democracies are influenced by power from both below and above. In either case, civic culture often develops in response to both formal and informal institutions.

Institutions may strengthen civic culture. Many institutions – both formal and informal – provide opportunities for civic participation. (Putnam et al, 1994) By providing opportunity for greater participation, institutions may shape societies’ cultures. For example, a society that values discourse may also be likely to value
political debates broadcast via the mass media. Civic cultures may then benefit from the increased discourse both types of institutions provide.

Informal institutions that support democracy and the public sphere are grounded in a participatory political culture. (Almond & Verba, 1965) In fact, the very notion of citizenship is associated with members of a polity who vote, consume information, engage in dialogue, and perhaps may also be engaged at the level of formal institutions. Strong civic cultures give rise to strengthened democratic institutions. Thus, when participation occurs on a large scale, a strong democratic system is likely to exist.

Democracies do not happen in a vacuum, however. Nor do citizens take action in one. Rather, a confluence of forces – including overlapping networks, autonomy, and deliberative dialogue – create “cosmopolitan” democracies. (Held, 1995) Such democracies are characterized by the existence of a conglomeration of organizations that operate independently of governing agencies, but that practice in the spirit of democratic processes. (Held, 1995, p. 278) Players act together to develop relationships and institutions that will give greater legitimacy to both formal and informal institutions.

These “cosmopolitan” democracies are stable because they include space for civic participation and engagement in the decision-making processes that govern their
lives. (Pateman, 1970) Participatory actors become more rational and informed. They set the tenor for democratic discourse as well as a model for participation. (Pateman, 1970, p. 21) For example, Held (1995, p. 223) suggests that individual rights (what he calls “empowering rights”) are critical to democracy because they provide for the individual’s role in the political system. Those rights may be manifested as free speech or elections. In both instances, such rights contribute to discourse. Moreover, discourse aids in the cultivation of political culture, which in turn is influential in democratic development. 5 (Calderón and Szmukler, 2004)

In summary, participation is at the core of any democracy. It strengthens democratic institutions and democratic practices. Moreover, both formal and informal institutions play roles in generating the overall political culture. They must work together to ensure a public sphere for dialogue and debate. As described below, news and information inform the dialogue that exists within the public sphere and encourage political engagement in a civic life.

**From information to the media: Providing the fuel for democracy**

To be sustainable, a democracy must be committed to dialogue and discourse. Discourse strongly influences and shapes democratization efforts. As Freire (2000) writes, praxis (speaking the truth) is essential to the liberation of the oppressed. To

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5 A deliberative political culture requires “an acknowledgment of the existence of political equality, equity in speech acts, and a certain reflective capability on the part of society.” (Calderón and Szmukler, 2004, 295)
arrive at praxis, there must be a culture conducive to discourse. Just as Habermas’
public sphere opens space for communicative action, so too that space provides a
conduit for Freire’s praxis to have a liberating effect. In the case of democratizing
societies, forums for dialogue in the public sphere contribute to liberating discourse.
They provide a platform for the open exchange of ideas and thought. In short,
democracies provide access to the information necessary to fuel its citizens and hold
government accountable.

Participatory models of democracy highlight access to information as a
necessity for effective discourse. There is greater incentive for democratic change
when participation is incorporated in the fabric of society and institutions. In turn, that
incentive will incite public action via the media, which can position itself as a
participatory tool for civic life. One may argue that media – in the style of Habermas’
communicative action – fill the role of supplying and communicating information that
best serves civil society.

Citizens must have access to good quality information if they are to engage in
civic participation. Freedom of information -- both to produce and consume it -- is
emblematic of a democracy. Moreover, with the knowledge necessary to hold
government to account, citizens can exercise their right to participate in the governing
process. As importantly, the more people engage, the more they make information
available to society. (Garnham, 1992, p. 364) Sources of information that are both varied and accurate are necessary for fair deliberation of ideas and perspectives.

Consequently, information sources are entrusted with a hefty responsibility: to provide transparent and varied perspectives to best equip the members of a democratic society to participate in governance. Independent media can provide a democratic society with these necessities. Such media are not government-run, nor do they take political direction from any entity. With their independence ensured, such non-affiliated media are in the best position to act in a transparent fashion.

Independent media fulfill the need for good quality information to the extent that they provide objective and informative reporting. As a source and provider of information, media serve as a conduit between the people and the government. In so doing, they become a channel for civic engagement. Although this role is unofficial, the media is a critical component of the democratic process, and hence it is often referred to as the “fourth estate.”

As an informal institution, the media – first print media and later electronic media – have played an important role in democracies throughout history. News media’s origins are in print culture. (Zaret, 2000) It was in printers’ shops that political dialogues first emerged. (Eisenstein, 1979) Newspapers and books facilitated the

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6 The term “the fourth estate” is commonly used to refer to the press. It is unclear who first coined the phrase. Most refer to Thomas Carlyle’s *On heroes and hero worship* (1841).
broader distribution of political communication. (Zaret, 2000) Indeed, by opening the forum for debate via widely distributed texts, printing transformed the nature of political thought. Commenting on these developments in the mid-17th century, political theorists placed political communication and print culture at the center of democratic politics.

Similarly, today’s independent media inform the dialogue that exists within the public sphere, and engage people in a civic life. As one of a democracy’s core institutions, media shape cultural attitudes, which -- as described above -- in turn influence and are influenced by the other institutions that govern daily life. Media also provide the most inclusive platform for encouraging participation among all levels of society. Media not only inform, influence, and engage citizens; as a common source of information, media provide a shared basis of understanding that allows citizens to communicate with one another.

As a dynamic source of information, media also present the most inclusive platform for encouraging participation among all levels of society. As a common source of information, all media have the capacity to inform, influence, and engage citizens in society. When it is accessible to all, media also become a forum for discussion, debate, and dialogue. Consequently, the most dominant media – whether newspapers, or television, or otherwise – become de facto platforms for participation.
Access alone is not enough, however. For these media to become useful platforms for participation, they must represent a broad cross-section of society. Ownership should be diversified, rather than concentrated in the hands of the powerful. The information that is accessed must be objective and present a wide array of perspectives. When this diversity occurs, the dominant media will be better equipped to inform society.

Although, traditionally, newspapers and television have been the dominant political media, today the Internet and other digital media allow not only for greater access to information, but also more interconnections to a much larger – even global – audience. (Norris, 2001) As such, the Internet has tremendous potential for communicative action and political engagement. This potential is discussed below.

**Digital democracy and the new media**

Access to information has been enhanced in the digital age. Some scholars believe this enhancement will lead to a new form of engagement: “digital democracy.” For example, Van Dijk and Hacker (2000) define digital democracies as: “The use of information and communication technology (ICT) and computer-mediated communication (CMC) in all kinds of media … for the purposes of enhancing political democracy or the participation of citizens in democratic communication.” (p. 1) Of all media tools, information and communication technologies present the greatest
democratizing potential because they provide a platform for interactive forms of media.\(^7\)

The theory of digital democracy extends its focus beyond the news media to explore how governments are influenced by interactive media technologies. Today, digital media influences government structures almost as much as news organizations and pop culture. The ubiquity of digital technologies has made them a powerful tool for accessing information. Equally important, the interactive nature of these tools has served to increase their impact.

The Internet, in particular, has significantly impacted the speed of information flow in society. With news and information made available faster than ever before, decision-making processes have also sped up both in politics and media. Whereas with traditional media – newspapers, television, and radio – a gap between an event’s occurrence and when it was published or broadcast allowed for greater control of information. The Internet’s near-instantaneous transmission of often-unfiltered news gives greater control to the user and news consumer. Consequently, using the Internet as a platform for rapid dissemination of news and information, any user can impact the governance process.

\(^7\) Some scholars disagree with this notion, most notably Cass Sunstein. These critiques will be considered in a later section.
Digital democracy may decentralize government by providing a platform accessible to all. When this occurs, digital democracy has the potential to make democratic government more representative. In the past, government institutions could only be accessed via interpersonal communications either in person or by telephone. Today, the Internet has made formal institutions, such as government agencies, broadcasters of information, as in the case of e-governance initiatives. E-governance makes public services available online or via other technology-mediated communications. It may also provide more transparent information. (Norris, 2001, p. 112) Such accessibility and interactivity are two features that together have decentralized government.

One might also argue that digital democracy has further “democratized democracy” in that it has enhanced the representative capabilities of democratic participation. The interactive features of digital technologies broaden virtual space for civic engagement. (Norris, 2001, p. 97) For example, bulletin boards, chat rooms, and e-mail listserves all provide entry points to the same platforms that government institutions use. Given a more level playing field, democratic institutions may be scrutinized better and democratic participation enhanced.

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8 For a fuller discussion of e-governance see the Council of Europe’s definition of e-governance and related democratic institution initiatives: http://www.coe.int/t/e/integrated_projects/democracy/02_Activities/01_e-governance/

To the extent that digital technology augments participatory behavior it may strengthen democratic institutions and societies. Already, we see that online outlets have created virtual spaces where citizens can meet among themselves or with their diaspora communities. These new technologies have “amplified” the voice of the people by creating the potential space for more discourse, access to more numerous and diverse sources of information, all of which is available on demand. (Grossman 1995, p. 6) In turn, that greater voice provides people with the political capital necessary to demand space in political culture. Digital democracy may then enhance not only the potential impact of information, but also the ability to access information as a tool for participation.

The concept of digital democracy is a useful paradigm for considering how democracies develop in today’s global information society. It helps account for how informal institutions may better engage in democratization processes by providing greater access to information. Consequently, models of digital democracy provide a useful prism through which to explore the impact of various media on democratic governance. These theories help to explain the rise of electronic media’s influence on democratization.

Theories of digital democracy also consider the impact of electronic technologies on freedom of communication. Keane (1993) writes: “... The new
electronic services strengthen ‘narrowcasting’ vis a vis broadcasting. They offer information on a more individualized basis: at any given moment, the ‘receiver’ is required to choose or to process the specific information he or she wants.” (p. 242) Keane dismantles the traditional notion of broadcasting as a relic of the past. He argues instead that electronic media provide for greater choice in information. In today’s information age, the narrowing of information enhances the democratizing effect. A citizen is capable of accessing just the information necessary at the moment it is requested.

Even if everyone does not always have the opportunity to participate, the democratizing potential of online activities makes them the most accessible tools for civic engagement to date. However, to realize their potential they must be accessible to everyone. (Jenkins & Thorburn, 2003) As described below, in developing countries where accessibility is limited, the experience may be very different. For example, in some developing countries violent conflict may destroy civic cultures. Semi-authoritarian regimes may exert disproportionate controls over information. And digital technologies may not have reached high rates of diffusion.

**Digital media in the context of developing democracy**

Notwithstanding these obstacles, digital media’s impact on developed countries has already had some profound effects. The ability to make available and access large
amounts of information has changed the nature of governance around the world. It is its access capability that makes digital democracy so revolutionary. In addition, the technology’s interactive nature can enhance the possibility of dialogue in countries where communication may have been limited in the past.

A major factor in obtaining access for developing countries is crossing the so-called “digital divide.” This divide serves as a barrier between the haves and the have-nots in Internet connectivity. This problem is particularly severe in underdeveloped countries, where people are less likely to be connected to the Internet. In societies where Internet penetration and usage are low, it is less clear what impact digital technologies may have. (Norris, 2001) Even in countries where Internet penetration is less than 5%, journalists are likely to be able to use the Internet to dramatically expand their access to information as well as their audiences. Consequently, the Internet has the potential to reach ordinary citizens with otherwise inaccessible information despite the high cost of access or language barriers.

Similarly, introducing new tools to a society that lacks a basic civic culture is unlikely to be effective. (Norris, 2001) In many developing countries, civic cultures are dominated by interpersonal dialogue. Information from friends, family, and the occasional newspaper dominates this dialogue. Additionally, as described above, civic
cultures may suffer as the result of civil war or ethnic conflict. Under such circumstances, digital technologies may exacerbate these conflicts.

Confounding these problems are economic obstacles. In many such instances, basic economic development must be accomplished before sweeping societal changes can be fostered through digital technologies. Improving the quality of life may encourage citizens in developing countries to become more engaged in civic culture.

Notwithstanding the potential for greater information dissemination, information control continues to be a major obstacle to achieving greater discourse via new media. While semi-authoritarian governments may resist the democratizing influence of new media, individuals may unknowingly impose upon themselves the same restrictions. Not surprisingly, critics of digital democracy theory suggest that new media may not be the silver bullet for widening access to information.

**Globalization as an influential variable**

A major factor that may ease the path toward overcoming such developmental obstacles is globalization. Digital technologies and their implications for new media may help to foster these democratizing forces. (Giddens, 2000). Such tools are necessary to affect change and foster a culture of public action in developing countries, where civic participation rates may be lower. As Giddens (2000) writes: “A deepening of democracy is required, because the old mechanisms of government don’t work in a
society where citizens live in the same information environment as those in power over them.” (p. 93) As more information is available and consumed around the world, everyone from the oppressed to the upper classes will have greater capacity to exercise their voices.

Given the liberating potential of digital media to link into the global environment, the media in developing countries may help bolster civic participation and, in turn, a stronger civic culture. (Zolo, 1993) With global access comes interaction with people from other countries and new ideas, which will serve to foster greater dialogue within developing countries. Moreover that dialogue can be opened to many more voices in countries where members of the public have previously been marginalized. Because these new forms of civic participation challenge traditional media structures, globalization can also play a role in undermining the hierarchy of media structures. In addition, by providing two-way interactive channels, the new media can alter the practices of media reporting as well as civic behavior.

To appreciate the potential impact of these technologies in developing countries, one need only consider a few examples of cases where new media have broadened the reach of information and, consequently, the potential impact of that information on democratization. Take South Korea, for example. Although this country has long functioned as a democracy, it does not have a strong tradition of civic
engagement. However, in 2002, Korean youth mobilized online largely via the citizen-journalist-run Web site OhmyNews.com to rally voters in favor of then-candidate Roh Moo-Hyun. Roh won the election and granted his first post-election interview to an OhmyNews reporter. OhmyNews’ impact may also be attributed to Korea’s high Internet penetration, which affords access to most Koreans.\(^{10}\)

In Singapore, new technologies have been employed in a somewhat different way. As in the case of South Korea, Singapore is well endowed with new technologies. However, the government censors the Internet in keeping with its culturally conservative traditions. On the other hand, the government employs e-governance initiatives to improve service delivery and communicate better with its citizens.

New media also has a transnational impact, linking virtual communities, which serve as common bases of support and dialogue. The Eritrean diaspora is a case in point. It maintains an active virtual community online. Most significant, the activities of this virtual world impact political processes in the mother country. (Bernal, 2006)

In many countries, the outcome of new technologies is mixed. This is especially true in semi-authoritarian states, where information is closely monitored. For example, although the Egyptian government is known for maintaining a tight grip on information, Egyptian bloggers are now able to broadcast information online.

Having once been considered impossible, the possibility for citizens to report on sensitive topics via non-traditional media is an encouraging step toward democracy.\textsuperscript{11} At the same time, however, some of those bloggers have been arrested and sometimes tortured. Nonetheless, the fact that information could be widely disseminated is an indication of meaningful change in the media landscape.

**Echo chambers? A critical viewpoint**

As noted above, the value of technology depends to a large extent on the context in which it is introduced or used. Arguing along these lines, some critics argue that, while ICTs have potential for democratizing effects, too often users limit their exposure to specific and self-serving viewpoints. Referring to Negroponte’s notion of “The Daily Me,”\textsuperscript{12} Cass Sunstein argues, for example, that the information experience narrows when it can be filtered to fit people’s particular interests. Sunstein’s theory suggests digital democracy may be useful under circumstances in which participation levels are high and access to information is unlimited. He acknowledges that with diverse sources of information available, a potential democratizing effect is possible.


\textsuperscript{12} There is some debate as to when Negroponte first introduced the concept of “The Daily Me.” The most concrete citation is from his 1995 book “Being Digital.” However, some have argued that the idea was first introduced in his writings from the 1970s. See Fred Hapgood’s, “The Media Lab at 10” in the November 1995 issue of *Wired* magazine.
However, he suggests that the democratizing impact is diminished when users confine themselves to familiar information or opinions.

In his analysis, Sunstein points to a human tendency to create “echo chambers,” despite the availability of choices. (2006, p. 8) His critique suggests that technology acts as virtual blinders to the plurality of information sources. He argues that “what makes for a well-functioning system of free expression must include 1) exposure to materials you wouldn’t otherwise have chosen in advance and 2) citizens should have a range of communication experiences.” (Sunstein, 2007, p. 5) These criteria in fact can be employed to create a platform amenable to democratic change.

The Internet provides a platform of expanding perspectives because users have varied experiences. In the new media environment, users can exchange ideas and offer critiques across peer groups, government hierarchies, and even borders. Users interested in ideas that may not be discussed in the traditional media may find space for sounding boards online. User choice can be virtually limitless via new media technologies. Greater choice creates opportunities for numerous and diverse experiences. Of course, greater choice also poses a problem of quality control.

Other skeptics of digital democracy emphasize that the Internet and other media have been used for both positive and negative aims. China’s censorship of Yahoo!, Burma’s shutdown of the Internet in fall 2007, and various instances of television
censorship throughout the world indicate that all media are prey to controls. Schuler (2003) warns that the future of the Internet is more akin to the nature of broadcast media. He argues government and major corporations will become the gatekeepers, leaving users in the dust.

Though such dangers exist in countries with controlled information environments, new media has greater potential than ever before. Because of its bottom-up architecture, individuals and groups are empowered to broadcast their news and ideas. Thus, in countries such as China and Burma, information that previously would have had no outlet can now be broadcast throughout the world. The complexity and decentralized architecture of the Internet serves to defy regulation. Though controls exist, rarely are those controls absolute. The one-to-many broadcast model and the potential for any one user to reach millions at the click of a mouse – makes it both difficult and very costly for governments to exert control over every domain, short of completely shutting access, as the North Koreans have. Therefore, interactive media have tremendous democratizing potential. In fact, in a globalized world, linked together via the Internet, more people are connected via shared information than ever before. It is important to remember, however that whether individuals harness this potential is a key variable in the equation, Moreover, the potential for institutions’ manipulation of new media cannot be ignored.
Conclusion: An analytic framework for exploring media’s influence on democracy

Merging elements of democratic theory, models of participatory democracy, and theories of digital democracy, this thesis argues that electronic media can play a major role in strengthening developing democracies and their democratic institutions. As noted above, media outlets have typically been acknowledged as unofficial institutions in the democratic structure. Moreover, information and participation are critical tools for generating a vibrant civic culture. By incorporating the media, and its role in supporting information exchange and political participation, into the concept of the “public sphere,” we can develop an analytical framework for exploring how, and to what extent, the new digital media might enhance democratic development. This framework is presented below.

Building on the literature discussed above, we can identify the key variables and their relationships to one another, which are entailed in determining the role of electronic media in Armenia’s democratic development. In keeping with the literature on digital democracy, the thesis treats electronic media as the independent variable in the analysis. The specific media to be considered here are television and the Internet. This thesis argues that the availability and usage of these media as well as diversity of information sources is associated with democratic outcomes. Availability will be measured based on levels of diffusion and penetration. For example, penetration rates
of Internet and media outlets will be considered high or low depending on how they compare to those in other countries, including other former Soviet republics. In this way, we can compare Armenia’s standings with other post-communist states. Television and Internet usage rates will be measured by the International Telecommunication Union’s ratings, as well as based on reports produced by intergovernmental organizations such as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. These measures will also be analyzed from a comparative perspective.

The dependent variable in the model is growth in democratic development. Given the relationship between civil society and democracy, democratic development can be measured based on the level, scope and activity of civil society. To measure this variable, the thesis will examine the number and activity level of non-governmental and other civil society organizations. Democratic change may also appear in the form of more decentralized and dispersed centers of power. For example, if government functions are spread among different institutional actors, greater democracy will be assumed. To determine the specific impact of new technologies on these variables, the thesis will show whether civil society organizations and democratic institutions are further developed than they were prior to the development of new media technologies. Civil society measures and government structures will also be compared with countries
that are widely recognized as strong democracies. This thesis will consider countries that rank high on annual democracy ratings to be strong democracies.

Other variables intervene in the relationship between electronic media and democratic development. These influential intervening variables influence outcomes on both sides of the equation. Given the literature explored above, we know that access to information is critical in a democracy. Who controls that access, therefore, influences both the impact of electronic media’s content, as well as that media’s influence on the nature of civil society. A variety of information is only available when the industry – its ownership – is diverse and not concentrated. Ownership structures influence the overall structure of a media system. Equally important, laws and regulation determine what information flows throughout media systems. Hence, media laws and regulations are often required to ensure diversity. These variables are interrelated. Media laws can encourage diversity; in turn, diversity can stimulate competition. Media laws and regulations can be measured based on how often and to what extent they are enforced. To determine their strength, these laws and regulations will be compared with similar laws in countries with relatively higher or lower levels of democracy to determine their strength.

One other important variable that deserves mention, and is becoming increasingly important, is globalization. Globalization has created a society where,
even if media laws and media ownership don’t provide complete access to information, that access can be gained via external means. For example, access to Web sites based outside of one’s country is one way to circumvent physical information controls. Globalization can be measured based on Armenia’s links with the rest of the world. For example, foreign media’s access to the Armenian media market, competition in the telecommunication market, and online content about Armenia that is not manipulated from within the countries’ borders all indicate Armenia’s global media ties.

With these variables in mind, and giving due consideration to the theories explored in this chapter, this thesis hypothesizes that greater access to electronic media – where it provides access to good quality information that comes from varying viewpoints – should result in stronger democracies. In addition, the hypothesis also proposes that globalization, communicative action, and new media influence access to diverse information and the development and diffusion of new technologies.

This analytic framework will be used to explore Armenia’s transition to democracy. As one of the few post-Soviet states to have slightly more success in the strengthening of democratic institutions than their 10 fellow former communist countries, Armenia’s experience may prove a useful example to follow. The case of Armenia is described in the following chapter.
Analytic model

Electronic media: Internet, television, availability of diverse media sources

Access to information: Legal and enabling environment with enforceable media laws, diverse ownership structures, globalization.

Democratic development: Active civil society organizations, accountable government, decentralized power
Chapter 3. A historical map of Armenia’s political and media development from glasnost to democracy

Introduction

The analytic framework constructed in chapter two informs the historical analysis conducted in this chapter. To answer the research question – How has electronic media influenced Armenia’s democratic development? – this chapter will build on the model constructed in chapter two by tracing the influence of media in Armenia’s recent history. To fully understand the impact of open access to information as Armenia plotted its path toward a representative democracy, it will explore the history of Armenia’s media landscape from the waning days of the Soviet Union to the early days of the independent Republic of Armenia. In so doing, it will also help to clarify how history has influenced the state of electronic media in Armenia today, a subject that is explored more fully in chapter four.

Armenia’s transition from a communist to democratic system is a useful case for examining the impact of electronic media on this process. Although military conflict pervaded Armenia’s early years of independence from the Soviet Union, the transition to independence itself has been largely peaceful. Not surprisingly, therefore, Armenia’s democracy rankings consistently rate higher than those of most other former Soviet states (Freedom House, 2008). Given this relatively stable political
environment, Armenia is a useful case for studying the factors that account for successes and failures in democratic development.

To understand the landscape of today’s media environment in Armenia, we must develop a baseline by first examining the history of Armenia from the waning days of communism and the introduction of glasnost. This chapter traces how political changes across the Soviet Union impacted Armenia’s transition to democracy. In turn, the chapter describes the impact of these political changes on the media landscape in the Soviet Socialist Republic of Armenia and the early days of the independent Republic of Armenia. In keeping with the framework outlined in chapter two, the analysis in this chapter will link media technologies and democratic outcomes by focusing on the following variables: the diffusion of electronic media, the structure and context of the media industry, and the development of civic culture and civic institutions. In particular, the chapter will assess whether, and to what extent, greater access to information via new technologies in the post-Soviet era led to the growth of civic participation.

**Media changes in the wake of the Soviet Union’s demise**

In the mid- 1980s the media landscape across the Soviet Union underwent revolutionary changes when Mikhail Gorbachev introduced perestroika and then glasnost. Perestroika aimed to restructure the sagging Soviet economy by liberalizing
many of its tight linkages to government, whereas glasnost was intended to open the political system to new ideas and thoughts, lifting the Iron Curtain that had so isolated the citizens of the Soviet Union. The unintended consequences of these institutional changes were to put in motion the forces that eventually led to the collapse of the communist regime. (Gibbs, 1999)

Glasnost, in particular, changed the nature of information flows across the Soviet Union. The openness and greater access to information filled a void that had long kept Soviet citizens in the dark. Taking advantage of the greater freedom that glasnost afforded, journalists began to use their own discretion in providing greater and more diverse information to their readers. (Gibbs, 1999) The result was more access to information. With this greater liberty, the Soviet Union moved closer to the dismantling of central control and followed the path toward democracy. The instantiation of glasnost, which began in the communist party’s centralized media system, eventually trickled down to the rest of society and the Soviet republics.

In Armenia, the impact of these media changes was amplified by the country’s transition to independence in 1991, three months after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. One outcome of these developments was the explosion of newspapers. For example, dozens of independent newspapers appeared in Armenia, where once only Soviet propaganda was available. (E. Baghdassaryan, personal communication, June 8,
2007) These new sources of information provided for greater debate and discourse, as Armenians began to determine their future as an independent country.

And, in fact, in the early years of independence there was considerable fuel for debate. The first decade of Armenia’s independence was marked by war, economic struggles, and political instability. The conflict over the political future of the Nagorno-Karabakh territory – a mostly ethnically Armenian territory inside Azerbaijan’s borders -- reinforced Armenia’s sense of national identity, while casting a shadow over the promise of independence. When Armenia and Azerbaijan broke away from the Soviet Union, an intra-Soviet dispute was transformed into a war between two sovereign states. Indeed, the conflict over Nagorno-Kharabakh is considered by many scholars to have played a crucial role in the break-up of the Soviet Union. (Rutland, 1994) The dispute over historical territory opened the debate on the question of ethnic identity in a state that promoted homogeneity in identity.

The conflict over Nagorno-Kharabakh was, in part, a consequence of greater openness in information. (Rutland, 1994) Glasnost provided the space for discussing ethnic identity in the Soviet Union. In turn, this conflict provided a major stimulus to generating dialogue that was of interest across the board to all Armenian people. In so doing, it contributed to the popularity of a national unity movement. (Yamskov, 1991) The expansion of the public dialogue continued even after independence. This dialogue
fueled the uncertain and unstable political and economic environment and created
turmoil during the transition.

Party media as a precursor to glasnost

Under the communist system, totalitarian power was concentrated in the upper
ranks of the central party. In like fashion, information was provided and consumed in
accordance with a top-down structure. Consequently, mass media were used as party
organs for promoting socialism. Their aim was “to organise and mobilise the masses.”
(Sparks, 1998, p. 43) With all directives coming from the party leaders, and media
operating as extensions of the party, there was no competition among media outlets.
Because newspapers -- a major source of information for much of the population --
served different audiences, such as academics or workers, they felt no pressure to
compete for the bigger story or achieve higher numbers of readership. To the contrary,
funding came from the party, and not advertising, so newspapers had an incentive to
serve only one interest – that of the central party.

The result of this structure was a lack of information diversity. Differences
among newspapers were not related to content, but rather to party structure. For
example, in the hierarchy of Soviet newspapers, Pravda and Izvestiya ranked the
highest. Beneath them were various party newspapers serving distinct party
organizations. Newspaper staffs were inevitably drawn from the party hierarchy. As a
result, party leaders had great control over what was written in newspapers and distributed via the two national news agencies: TASS and Novosti. (Murray, 1994) Given these stringent controls on information production and distribution, central authorities maintained a tight grip on ideology.

Because of these tight controls, newspapers functioned as little more than party newsletters. The press’ role was to promote the communist party’s ideology. (Murray, 1994) Each story was presented in light of the party’s perspective, and no other viewpoints were promoted. Acting in the capacity of “the teachers of the public,” “the journalist … had a duty actively to participate in the construction of the future society.” (Murray, 1994, p. 88) In keeping with this role, journalists became the propagandists and custodians for party ideology across the Soviet Union.

**Loosening the reigns**

Over time, the Soviet Union began to loosen the reigns on information production and distribution. As early as the late 1960s, some critical literature appeared in print publications. (Benn, 1996) Moreover, in Soviet Armenia and across the rest of the Eastern Bloc, Radio Yerevan became well known for its satire of the Soviet system. (Kolasky, 1972) As glasnost spread to electronic media, like radio, its impact widened. With more people hearing more critical voices, civic culture began to change.
As the possibility for criticism increased, Soviet citizens adopted a more critical attitude towards their government. Disdain for the system became a component of cultural life in the Soviet Union. It was considered to be a means of expressing a modicum of dissent. This dissent was invigorated by foreign radio and television broadcasts, whose signals spilled over from neighboring states or, as in the case of the BBC World Service and the Voice of America, broadcast worldwide via shortwave radio. At the same time, with the appearance of surreptitious satellite dishes, a variety of information sources became increasingly available to Soviet citizens. (Ganley, 1996, p. 4)

Recognizing the power of communication technologies to penetrate the Iron Curtain, Mikhail Gorbachev introduced perestroika and glasnost to the Soviet Union. As previously noted, his aim was to bring about greater economic efficiency by loosening information controls. (Gibbs, 1999) Gorbachev argued that openness would create an environment conducive to bolstering industry. Moreover, some say Gorbachev hoped to introduce an information-based economy in an effort to strengthen the country’s global economic status. (Dizard & Swensrud, 1987)

Gorbachev’s shift in ideology represented a tacit acknowledgment that communication technologies were making it increasingly difficult to regulate information within the Soviet Union’s borders. (Ganley, 1996) Voice of America,
BBC, Deutsche Welle, and Radio Liberty all deliberately broadcast into the Soviet Union. Bootlegged tapes of television programs and films from the West – often taped in Estonia from Finland TV signals – could be bought on the black market. Although such consumption of information was not explicitly permitted, the authorities’ effectively looked the other way rather than acknowledge their inability to control it.

In keeping with glasnost, the government expanded these freedoms during the mid-1980s. Given loosened controls, the growing independent media was able to expose the polity to new thoughts and ideas. After seven decades of state-run media and very little (if any) space for dissent in the official news, the sudden freedom of voice fed a public hungry for discourse. Legalizing some avenues of thought and expression also had the important consequence of allowing some criticism of Soviet governance. For example, for the first time since the Soviet Union’s formation, party squabbles were exposed in party newspapers, which previously had sought to emphasize the strength and unity of the Communist Party. Consequently, citizens were given the ammunition to criticize what, for the first time, many saw as a fallible and failing institution. (Murray, 1999, p. 48)

The impact of this more open information environment was evidenced in December 1988, after a major earthquake hit the northwest region of Soviet Armenia. Soviet media not only produced comprehensive news coverage about the natural
disaster, which killed approximately 25,000 people; some major daily newspapers, such as Izvestiya, carried reports critical of the country’s lack of preparedness for such a natural disaster. (Murray, 1994, p. 99) This was one of the first times the news media openly criticized the government. Though the reporting revolved around a humanitarian crisis, it represented an opening in political culture. The media’s coverage of the earthquake demonstrated just how far glasnost had taken them.

The process of liberalization culminated in the 1990 Soviet Press Law. Inspired in part by the requests for greater media freedom on the part of the constituent republics, the law guaranteed freedom of speech and the press, and explicitly outlawed censorship. However, tempering these freedoms, the law also required new media outlets (whose establishment was now permitted) to register with the authorities. Moreover, the law was not always evenly applied. Reports of censorship persisted after the law’s implementation. (Ganley, 1996, p. 93)

Equally important, the impacts of glasnost extended beyond the mass media. Telecommunications services of all kinds were liberalized under Gorbachev’s plan. The subsequent restructuring of service provision from the most basic level – interpersonal communication via the telephone – to digital data transmission allowed the public to access more and greater quality information. (Dizard & Swensrud, 1987) For example, after launching glasnost, Gorbachev aimed to double the capacity of the
Soviet system. However, the transition came slowly due to aged infrastructure and Soviet paranoia about security risks. Although the impact on the Soviet technology landscape was not immediate, liberalization of the telecommunication system had a significant effect, signaling that the Soviet Union was open to more communication channels.

Although Gorbachev intended glasnost to enhance the well-being of the Soviet Union, the results were otherwise. Instead of fostering prosperity, and strengthening central control, the extension of information freedoms weakened the Soviet system, and eventually led to its demise (Powell 1988). As described above, greater openness soon led to demands for more freedoms. As Ganley (1996) described it: “As with the print media, the rise of ‘independent’ electronic resources during glasnost had made resistance possible, and the glasnost-inspired determination to present news freely that had thoroughly infected both unofficial and official electronic media made resistance almost inevitable.” (p. 170) Suddenly, all forms of media were able to make a difference, so that -- notwithstanding Gorbachev’s intentions -- the media served to galvanize the democratic opposition. (Powell, 1988)

Of course, no single force can be credited with dismantling communism. Not surprisingly, just how much of a role glasnost played in undermining the Soviet Union is still subject to scholarly debate. Some argue that the shift in public attitudes and
ideology should be attributed primarily to a general disillusionment with the communist system. Others suggest that greater openness – due to *glasnost* – played a significant role promoting this shift. (Ganley 1996) However, both this historical account, as well the theoretical literature laid out in chapter two, suggests that both factors were at play; in fact, they were mutually reinforcing. More lax regulations led to increased media diversity, which enhanced the public sphere and civic engagement. This coupled with the shift in government culture opened the doors to a more liberal governing system. Both developments represented a fundamental shift away from the central tenets of the Soviet system. At the same time, the possibility of greater civic engagement stimulated and encouraged criticism of the government, which fostered a growing desire among the public for a more open civic culture.

**After the fall: Independent Armenia’s early media landscape**

The Soviet Union’s collapse resulted in the total collapse of its constituent states. Eleven countries had to be reconstituted. These included Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, and of course Armenia. Whole societies faced the resurrection of long-suppressed national cultures. After 70 years of Soviet rule, ethnic identities emerged from the monolithic expression of Soviet Russian dominance. However liberating,
these societies faced challenges in asserting their identities in newly reconstructed societies.

Left to their own devices, these former Soviet republics had to seemingly reconstitute themselves from the ground up. One major problem to be dealt with was economic collapse. In many cases, the situation deteriorated to such an extent that many pensioners expressed a longing for the days of guaranteed Communist Party support. Furthermore, with little democratic experience prior to their absorption by the Soviet system, many states had no tradition of democracy upon which to model themselves. (Lewis, 1993) Thus, many former Soviet citizens were left guessing what their emerging governments would look like, much less how they could become a part of that system. New government structures were necessary. Taxation systems and militaries had to be constructed. And people that had operated in fear for 70 years had to find their own voices. Given these formidable challenges, it should come as no surprise that democratic changes still are being introduced today, nearly 17 years after independence.

Part of the challenge of reconstruction was to change how society accessed and consumed information, and how it used that information to exercise a newfound free voice in the new media system. To do this, new political paradigms of thought were required. The repressed political culture from the communist years had resulted in a
society of sparse civic engagement. Hence, the peoples in the new republics had to relearn how to operate in a free political culture, one that allowed for exercising free voice.

As one might expect based on our understanding of democracy, the freeing up of the political order gave rise to a new media system. For example, in the wake of greater liberalization, many journalists employed Western traditions of reporting. (Murray, 1994) They made a concerted effort to appear neutral and objective. This transition is still far from complete. Notwithstanding journalistic efforts to promote greater objective reporting, sensationalism continues to characterize much of the news. However, what distinguishes today’s news reporting in both cases is the very distinct shift from the monotonous and propaganda-dominated news of the past. The case of Armenia is illustrative in this regard.

In the dark years of reconstruction that followed Armenia’s declaration of independence in September 1991, a vibrant media emerged. New newspapers appeared in droves. Likewise, television programs began to provide critical voices. “It was like being handcuffed for 70 years then suddenly finding yourself free,” said Edik Baghdassaryan, editor in chief of Hetq.am, an Armenian investigative reporting Web site. (E. Baghdassaryan, personal communication, June 8, 2007) Operating in a state of collapse was challenging. Despite this, however, the media generated new hope in its
eagerness to provide access to information as well as in its role in rallying the country around a national movement.

**The Kharabakh War and its implications for media and democracy**

*Glasnost* served not only to undermine the unity of the Soviet Union; it also instigated the birth of the nationalist movement in Armenia. The new culture of reform and openness inspired Armenians, in 1988, to rally together for a single cause: the unification of the Nagorno Kharabakh territory -- an ethnic Armenian enclave in Azerbaijan -- with Armenia. (Dudwick, 1997) As a result, protests became common in Yerevan’s Opera Square. The early activists formed the Armenian National Movement, a widely renowned movement that made Nagorno Kharabakh its central issue. Its members were neither members of the communist party nor affiliated with the government. Their formation was a significant step in the introduction of an independent voice in Armenia.

With significant support from these Armenians, the predominantly ethnic Armenian population in Nagorno-Karabakh waged a political campaign to gain succession from Azerbaijan. Citizens swarmed government buildings demanding Nagorno Kharabakh’s unification with Armenia. In several instances, these pro-unification representatives were able to gain access and voice their demands at Communist party congresses. Despite these liberties, authorities in Moscow
continually sided with Azerbaijan and tried to downplay the ethnic solidarity movement. However, the 1988 pogroms of Armenians in Sumgait, Azerbaijan forced the Soviet authorities to acknowledge the dispute, the first of its kind in the Soviet bloc. (Libaridian, 1999, p. 6) Increasingly unable to control the conflict, the Soviet authorities resorted to compelling Azeris living in Armenia to move to Azerbaijan. At the same time, Armenians in Azerbaijan relocated to Armenia, Russia, and the Central Asian republics.

Under the circumstances, however, the communist party could no longer consolidate a stable Soviet identity. In the wake of glasnost, the Soviet media would have been hard pressed to ignore these ethnic conflicts. Rather, it was forced to acknowledge the disparate cultures that were dispersed throughout the Soviet Union. (Yamskov, 1991) Hence, as the conflicts grew wider, Soviet media both within Armenia and the other republics (including Azerbaijan) reported on the cracks in the once-solid veneer of the Soviet Union. Increased media attention led to demands from members of the public for more information. In this way, the opposing sides fostered the emergence of independent voices in the Soviet Union,

Commenting on these developments, many scholars have argued that the growing issue of ethnic identity kindled the widespread movement for democracy in Soviet Armenia. Nationalist voices were stronger in Armenia than anywhere else in the
Soviet Union. These new voices, born of nationalism, provoked the country’s movement for independence. (Rutland, 1994, p. 839) Glasnost paved the way for openly expressing such nationalist feelings. And the media, utilizing its new independence, contributed to the distribution of information about the nationalist movement in a newly established political space. In this fashion, Moscow’s liberalizing media amplified glasnost’s new independent voice to promote the Armenian cause. (Rutland, 1994, p. 847)

The Soviet media’s role in fostering information exchange points to the potential for independent media to strengthen democratic institutions. The space created for dialogue and discourse in what was otherwise a closed society created an entry point for introducing other democratic ideals and values to the polity. That space even influenced and changed the language used in reporting. Stodgy and dry Soviet language was replaced with a fresh and vibrant vocabulary more reflective of the changes taking place in the constituent republics. For example, once-taboo topics like sex and social ills like alcoholism could be addressed in frank and critical language. (Murray, 1994, p. 146) Though not every Soviet media outlet adopted these changes, enough did, so as to encourage even greater changes in the Soviet system.

As the Soviet Union continued to unravel, the tumult in Armenia became less contained. In 1987, the Kharabakh conflict was militarized. Moscow, now struggling to
stabilize an imploding economy in what became the Russian Federation, was less concerned with what occurred in the regional republics, and more immediately concerned with its own future. Likewise, with a war fought on one border, ongoing recovery from the devastating 1988 earthquake, and economic collapse, Armenia began to function independently of Moscow. In September 1991, it became the first Soviet republic to use the Soviet constitutional provision for a referendum on nationhood. With 94 percent of Armenians in favor of the referendum, Armenia officially declared itself independent on September 21, 1991. Then, in 1991, with the official dissolution of the Soviet Union, Armenia’s conflict with Azerbaijan became a war between two sovereign states.

**The media in the early years of Armenian independence**

For a country that only knew independence once before – for two short years from 1918-1920 – the call for freedom rang particularly strong in 1991, as the Soviet Union crumbled. Many Armenian citizens were the first to call for independence from the Soviet Union. They formed a vibrant civil society, which was fostered by a sudden burst of independent newspapers in Yerevan.

The Kharabakh issue dominated Armenian life and politics throughout the first few years of independence. As one might expect, it dominated the news in Armenia, and continues to be a major point of contention in political life today. Fighting in
Kharabakh continued until a ceasefire was approved in 1994, whereupon Armenians won control of the territory. Today it operates as the self-declared Republic of Nagorno-Kharabakh.

The economic struggles that came with independence also played a prominent role in media outlets’ coverage of the newly independent state. Largely a result of the blockades imposed on Armenia’s eastern and western borders by Azerbaijan and Turkey during the war for control of Nagorno-Kharabakh, Armenia became economically isolated. (Rutland, 1994) The conflict dictated the narrative of economic hardship that became a part of most Armenians’ daily lives. In 1992 alone, national income fell 43 percent, and industrial output plummeted 52 percent, while prices rose 1,100 percent, according to the Russian periodical Delovoi mir (as cited in Rutland, 1994). As the economy fluctuated widely, so did other industries, including the media.

Although an independent media had begun to take shape before independence, it was still struggling with economic sustainability. While there were many media outlets, they all struggled for survival and competed to gain market share. Armenia’s economic collapse made it more difficult for media organizations to stay afloat. Newspapers, in particular, struggled in this regard. A limited advertising market made it particularly difficult to allow an independent media market to survive.
newspapers reported that advertising made up only 10 percent of their revenue.\textsuperscript{13} (International Research and Exchanges Board, 2001) Even though dozens of newspapers were distributed in Yerevan, none had a circulation large enough to sustain it.

Despite their limited reach, newspapers provided the most critical coverage of the new government, according to Edik Baghdassaryan, editor of the online investigative journalism Web site Hetq.am and a longtime journalist. (personal communication, June 8, 2007) Baghdassaryan said journalists were ready and eager to pose difficult questions to their new government. However, because of their low circulation and narrow audience, the impact of these political conversations was somewhat limited.

Because of its nation-wide scope, television fared better than newspapers. The public television channel, H1, was the first to begin independent broadcasts. As a government-run channel, which covered the entire nation, it became a major source of news and information.\textsuperscript{14} H1 was established in 1956 and carried over its cultural dominance after the break-up of the Soviet Union. In addition, it broadcast the first independent Armenian news program, Haylur. (Armenia 1 TV, n.d.) However, as the

\textsuperscript{13} Most major American newspapers rely almost entirely on advertising revenue for their operating budgets. Advertising averages 80 percent of newspaper revenue sources, according to this article in the International Herald Tribune: \url{http://www.iht.com/articles/2008/02/07/business/paper.php}.

\textsuperscript{14} It is difficult to establish the exact number of media outlets and their predominance in Armenia’s media market in the early years of independence. The figures established here represent the collective judgment of several journalists interviewed in Yerevan in summer 2007.
country and the medium evolved, the state has become the dominant controller of the television channel. (OSCE, 2006)

Fortunately for Armenian media, as they struggled to become independent and accurate purveyors of news and information, the international development community made information access a priority in its democracy assistance programs. Spurred on by glasnost and the subsequent fall of the Soviet Union, aid organizations began to make media assistance an integral component of their programs. Aid included training for reporters, editors, direct investment in infrastructure (like television equipment and printing presses), among many other projects. (Kumar, 2006) Armenia was a major beneficiary of this new approach. This assistance helped to establish a more robust independent press in Armenia. (Aslamazyan, 2006) In an effort to cultivate a sustainable independent press for the newly independent republic, many nongovernmental associations committed to media development established offices in Yerevan and, later, other major cities in Armenia.

This support was not a panacea however. Overcoming an institutionalized framework that limited information distribution to create a new culture that encouraged consumers to cast a critical eye was no small challenge in the Armenian media market. One consequence of 70 years of communist rule was a public expectation that both the media and the government were purveyors of deception. (Sparks, 1998, p. 164;
Dudwick, 1997, p. 85) Under these circumstances, generating media literacy – defined
as “the ability to access, analyze, evaluate and create media in a variety of forms”\textsuperscript{15} – was extremely problematic.

Media development efforts strove to overcome these challenges in the first years following independence and continue to be implemented today. For example, training programs for reporters taught interviewing and research skills. Workshops brought together journalists and government officials to discuss how to improve relations. In addition, dozens of non-governmental organizations worked with independent media to improve journalists’ skills.

As noted in chapter two, one measure of the media’s success is the growth of civic engagement and civic organizations. It is evident that by opening access to more information, \textit{glasnost} helped pave the way for greater public dialogue about nationalism and identity. That access in turn created the space necessary for civic engagement. In Armenia’s case, it prompted a national movement for the succession of Nagorno-Kharabakh. By this measure, media was successful in moving Armenia toward democracy. However, it also concentrated civic activism around one issue, at the expense of the many social challenges Armenia faced in its uphill battle for democracy.

\textsuperscript{15} Definition drawn from the Center for Media Literacy: http://www.medialit.org/reading_room/rr2def.php.
Though hundreds of non-governmental organizations were nominally registered in Armenia, very few were effective due largely to the economic constraints on society at the time. The Kharabakh conflict also contributed to weakened independent movements for democracy. The government’s aid to Kharabakh in the conflict encouraged national unity over civic activism of any other kind. (Dudwick, 1997, pp. 98, 99)

Conclusion

Glasnost had a major impact on democracy’s future in the former Soviet republics. The opening it provided for discourse and debate created the momentum necessary for independence movements in all the constituent Soviet republics. Though it was not intended to result in a democratic society, Gorbachev’s acknowledgment that information control was no longer a reasonable option for the Soviet Union represented the pivotal and, ultimately, fatal blow to that empire’s future.

In Armenia, the hope and optimism produced by the Armenian National Movement and the struggle in Nagorno Kharabakh led to a vibrant and unified public intent on shaping a new future for their country. However, though there was unity in that political movement, unifying the country to achieve political goals was a more difficult objective to attain. National solidarity was prized above all, leaving little political space for diverse thought in the civil society.
The media at first provided vibrant accounts of the changes taking place in the
country. Its early embrace of *glasnost* led to an early burst in independent newspapers.
Later, however, in response to a culture that promoted singular thought, it began to fall
in line with old practices, like promoting the government’s cause in aiding the
Kharabakh effort. In the late 1990s and early 2000s these efforts gave rise to self-
censorship as media became concentrated in the hands of the wealthy and political
parties. Though public television remained the most accessible media nationwide, the
appearance of new stations with independent owners altered the media landscape.
Eventually, however, even those stations subjected themselves to self-censorship to
avoid repercussions from the governing authorities, as will be explored in chapter four.

Chapter four will explore the introduction of new media, which did little to
alleviate self-censorship in the country’s dominant media. Though online news outlets
could report with greater impunity, the limited reach of the Internet, effectively had
little to no impact on the overall civic culture. The Internet’s potential, with greater
infrastructural and other development, will also be explored.
Chapter 4. Electronic media’s influence on today’s Armenia

Introduction

Armenia’s transition to an independent republic in the early 1990s was marked by the appearance of numerous independent media outlets. At first, newspapers dominated the market. Later, as the media market solidified, new television stations dotted the airwaves, where once only state-controlled television was available. Coupled with these new outlets was the introduction of new media laws to protect freedom of the press and speech. These elements set the stage for how Armenia’s media landscape would influence the country’s democratic future.

This chapter will test the impact of the variables on today’s media landscape in Armenia. The analysis builds upon chapter three, which traced the impact of media on Armenia during the last years of Soviet communism. In addition, it will consider how new government regulations and ownership structures influence access to information, a key variable determining media’s impact on democracy.

To answer the question – How has electronic media influenced Armenia’s democratic development – I conducted interviews in Armenia in June and July, 2007. This time period was important; it immediately followed Armenia’s parliamentary elections in May 2007. The timing allowed me to conduct interviews to consider the impact of media on the elections, as well as the news coverage of the elections. There were 14 formal interviews, in addition to several informal conversations. They
included journalists from a range of media organizations, including newspapers, television, Internet news outlets, and radio. Interview subjects were selected based on their experience in the Armenian media and civil society sectors. The research also included numerous informal conversations with news consumers, Internet café users, government officials, and representatives of local and foreign non-governmental organizations.

Depending on each subject’s background, the interviewees were asked for their assessment of independent media’s successes and failures in Armenia, as well as the specific impact of electronic media on the country’s democratic development as a whole. The subjects were also asked for additional thoughts on the topic, which may not necessarily have been shared during the structured portion of the interview. Finally, each subject was also asked to recommend other potential interview subjects.

Interviews were largely conducted in the capital city of Yerevan, where nearly one-third of Armenia’s 3 million citizens live. Because of Armenia’s relatively small size, media is largely concentrated in Yerevan. A trip to Gyumri, Armenia’s second largest city, included an interview with the president of Asparez, Gyumri’s press club. Several independent newspapers and television stations serve Gyumri and surrounding towns and villages. The country’s remaining cities and regions are largely served by

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television and radio stations based in Yerevan, although there are some locally based media outlets.

Finally, statistical data and analysis about Armenia’s media market was collected from research conducted by major non-governmental and intergovernmental organizations. For example, some of the data includes Internet penetration rates from the International Telecommunication Union, Armenian media market statistics from the International Research and Exchanges Board, and press freedom and democracy rankings from Freedom House. In addition, some data and research was collected from examining laws and statistics made available by the Armenian government.

Analyzing these various sources of data, this chapter explores the influence of electronic media on democratic development. In addition, it will examine the legal frameworks that may enable independent media and encourage the engagement of civil society. It will also examine how the presence of foreign media and the existence of content restrictions shape Armenia’s ties to the global media economy.

From a weak press to television: Why TV dominates Armenia’s media market

The economic collapse in the wake of Armenia’s independence from the Soviet Union impacted every sector of the country, leading to the loss of many state-secured jobs and the formation of bread lines in many cities and towns. Whole segments of the economy had to be restructured or even built from the ground up, including the media
system. Previously, the only critical media that had existed was that delivered by *samizdat*, the Soviet-era system of distributing underground newsletters and other periodicals. (Ganley, 1995) *Samizdat* writers and journalists for the official state news agencies formed the backbone of the new independent media.

Due to the *samizdat* system, independent newspapers appeared almost immediately. Circulation was largely concentrated in Yerevan, the capital, and surrounding towns. Taking advantage of the freedom of voice that resulted from the dissolution of the central system of control, journalists were ready and eager to question their new, non-Soviet government. They did not shy away from asking the tough questions, said Edik Baghdassaryan, editor in chief of Hetq, an online investigative journalism site based in Armenia. The culture of *samizdat*, which encouraged criticism, helped to foster Armenia’s new civic culture.

Newspaper coverage in Armenia is often more direct and critical of politicians than mainstream television news coverage in the country. (OSCE, 2006) This independent coverage can be attributed in part to newspapers’ pluralistic ownership structures, which are less likely to be found in television markets. (IREX, 2007) Although some of these newspapers are affiliated with political parties, many media experts say that many of these newspapers provide the most objective and independent coverage of any media outlet in the country. However, due to newspaper’s limited
circulations, such aggressive reporting has little to no impact on society or government culture.

Though the number of newspapers in circulation in Armenia has remained steady, none reaches more than 4,000 to 5,000 people. (IREX, 2007) In addition, there is no national newspaper that serves the entire country. Most newspapers are only distributed in Yerevan and nearby towns. Outlying regions may occasionally get newspapers from the capital city, although in each case deliveries may consist of only a few dozen copies each. (L. Barseghyan, personal communication, July 12, 2007)

Outside Yerevan, newspaper circulation is extremely limited, if not nonexistent. In larger cities, like Gyumri (Armenia’s second largest city), weekly newspapers exist. However, circulation remains very low and many people say they are unwilling to spend the money (usually 100 AMD for a newspaper, or about US$0.30.17) However, many Armenian media experts, such as Gyumri’s Asparez press club president Levon Barseghyan, say expense is not the problem. Rather, the public is simply skeptical of what they read. A commonly shared assumption in Armenia dictates that the government and a few political parties control the news, Barseghyan said.

17 According to the World Bank, Armenia’s gross national income per capita is AMD600,000 or US$1,930, or AMD50,000 per month (US$162). See http://www.worldbank.org.am/WSITE/EXTERNAL/COUNTRIES/ECAEXT/ARMENIAEXTN/0,,contentMDK:20628754~menuPK:301586~pagePK:141137~piPK:141127~theSitePK:301579,00.html.
Aram Mkrtchyan, director of Radio Hay FM, largely blames the public for the decline of the print media: “People lost the habit of reading, getting the daily news from the press.” (personal communication, June 29, 2007) Mkrtchyan is also director of the Armenian Journalism School, a two-year master’s degree program at Yerevan State University, which is supported by the Washington-based International Center for Journalists. He said pricing isn’t an obstacle: Average citizens can afford the 30-cent price tag, but most are not interested in what’s printed. Mkrtchyan calls it a failure of the press in its mission to provide accurate information. “The (print) press has failed. In the Armenian landscape, there is only electronic media. … TV plays a big role in terms of audience and reach.”

Indeed, all the media experts interviewed agreed that television is a significant force in the media landscape. In Yerevan alone there are 18 television stations: three stations are relayed from Russia, and one station relays CNN International. Thirty-one stations serve the outlying regions. (IREX, 2007) Television, therefore, is naturally positioned as the most powerful medium. Most homes have at least one television station with access to local channels in Yerevan. Many also utilize satellite dishes with access to hundreds of international channels.

Even with satellite channels, however, many Armenians are limited to local and Russian channels for information because of language restrictions. While many more
Armenians speak English today than during the Soviet era, Armenian and Russian are the predominant languages of education, culture, and business. For example, movie theaters purchase films from Russian companies that dub Hollywood blockbusters into Russian, rather than undertaking the expensive process of dubbing films in Armenian. Russia’s version of MTV plays a steady stream of Russian-language music, with only the occasional American or European video. Similarly, major international news is heard from a Russian perspective, as Russian media outlets have the resources to cover a larger swath of the world. Local Armenian news is almost exclusively available on Armenian television channels.

Because news about Armenia is limited to nationally based stations, it is especially important that local television coverage presents accurate information. In May 2007, during the run-up to parliamentary elections in Armenia, media monitoring organizations criticized television news coverage for its bias. Some stations did attempt to represent opposition parties fairly. However, most of the coverage was devoted to the ruling Republican Party, which won a majority of the seats in the parliament. According to a monitoring report prepared by the Caucasus Media Institute (2007) – a local media development organization that receives funding and support from the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation – the ruling Republican Party of Armenia received 21 percent of all television coverage in the month prior to the
elections. Though the opposition Dashnaktsutyun party received 19 percent of television coverage, such reporting often portrayed the party in a negative light.

Yerkir TV, which is backed by the opposition Dashnaktsutyun party, aired more coverage of its political patrons than of other parties. Many media experts say, however, that Yerkir makes a greater effort to present more balanced news coverage. For example, the leader of the opposition Heritage Party, Raffi Hovanissian, was interviewed on a Yerkir political talk program during the parliamentary election campaigns. Yerkir’s political programming director, Kegham Manoogian, said Hovanissian (Armenia’s former foreign minister) had been all but banned from the public television channel H1. (K. Manoogian, personal communication, June 19, 2007) H1 is the highest rated television station in the country, and therefore the most influential. H1 also dedicated most of its coverage to the ruling Republican Party of Armenia. (International Research and Exchanges Board, 2007)

Although its reach is more limited than H1, Yerkir has influenced the coverage of other stations. For example, in May 2007, the son of the mayor of the city of Gyumri (Armenia’s second largest city) was implicated in a shooting crime there. Local media in Gyumri were reluctant to pursue the story for fear of reprisal from the municipal government. However, because Yerkir covered the story, other local stations
felt compelled to reply with their own news coverage. (K. Manoogian, personal communication, June 19, 2007)

Covering politically sensitive topics became possible because TV stations gained strength and independence in the first decade after the Soviet Union’s collapse. However, in 2001, Noyan Tapan TV’s owners, the Ararat Service and Lotos companies, shut the station down. Though the owners claimed it was the consequence of a business dispute, it was widely believed to have been pressured by governing authorities, who were often the target of the station’s criticisms. (Yerevan Press Club, 2001) The National Committee on Television and Radio denied Noyan Tapan’s 2002 application for a broadcast license, claiming the station had improperly filed its paperwork. (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2002) These actions spread fear amongst Armenia’s TV stations. “(The closure) told the rest of the stations that if you don’t act as we want you to act, then you’ll lose your license. … Some TV stations remain independent, but they’re becoming more careful. … Smaller stations without political connections are afraid of losing their licenses,” said Boris Navasardian, a longtime journalist and president of the Yerevan Press Club. (personal communication, June 22, 2007) Self-censorship is a major obstacle to independent journalism’s success in Armenia. Nearly every media expert interviewed suggested self-censorship is a
significant part of why ostensibly independent media outlets tilt their coverage to favor the ruling authorities.

Mesrob Movsissian, director of A1+ TV, said he thinks his station’s experience played a major role in the spread of self-censorship among TV media. (personal communication, June 19, 2007) In 2002, A1+ lost its broadcast license. Movsissian said government officials told him the station didn’t meet certain regulatory requirements. However, the station director said he thinks the real reason was A1+’s willingness to cover politically sensitive topics and criticize politicians. “(The government) showed their strength and the other stations became afraid,” Movsissian said, suggesting that self-censorship then became the accepted norm. Although Movsissian has sought to make A1+ relevant in the media landscape online, he has been unable to regain a broadcasting license: “The government is indifferent to us now, which is worse for us,” he said. “There’s no dynamism.”

Financial constraints are also a major obstacle to operating in a truly free manner. “Media that is independent of government control often suffers from corporate influence. Financially sustainable media may rely heavily on entertainment programming to draw large audiences and advertising revenues while doing little to serve the public interest,” writes Ann Hudock, an assistant representative of The Asia Foundation in Vietnam. (Hudock, 2006) In the case of Armenia, corporate influence is
also often de facto government control, as the wealthy are often connected to politicians or other political entities via business interests or otherwise. (V. Lima, personal communication, June 7, 2007)

Indeed, information control in any form is detrimental to democracy. Pippa Norris writes: “Contemporary observers caution that the quality of democracy still remains limited where state ownership of television has been replaced by private oligopolies and crony capitalism … Broadcasting cartels, coupled with the failure of regulatory reform, legal policies which restrict critical reporting, and uneven journalistic standards, can all limit the role of the media in its civic forum or watch-dog roles.” (2006, p. 68)

Yerkir Media, the opposition-party-backed station, has tried to counter those financial interests by providing the most air time for news of any other Armenian channel with 13 daily live newscasts. “There’s no reason for Yerkir Media to exist if there’s no news,” said Kegham Manoogian, the station’s political programming director. (personal communication, June 19, 2007) “It’s not just a business to us. News means something greater to us.” Manoogian said he blamed the lack of independent news on television which was so responsive to public demands for entertainment. Instead of regular local newscasts, he said, television stations are more likely to play music videos, soap operas, films, and game shows. According to Manoogian, this
move away from independent reporting to lighter fare may also be attributable to a
general fear of government retribution.

Self-censorship and fear have negated television’s potential as the most
powerful and democratic provider of information. As the most widely accessible
source of information, television has largely failed to provide its news consumers with
accurate, independent reporting. Although there are some exceptions, the powerful
influence of public television station H1 in dictating both culture and politics has
deterred other stations from having a significant impact and instead has encouraged
competitors to follow H1’s lead.

Consequently, one wonders what impact the Internet may have on the political
culture. Though access is limited, it is generally free of state controls and may have
greater potential for providing independent news in the future.

Is there hope for online news?

In 2006, 5.75 percent of the Armenian population had access to and regularly
used the Internet. (International Telecommunication Union, 2007) Though there is no
available concrete data on where most Internet access is concentrated, the author’s
travels around the country in summer 2007 and in previous years (2001, 2002, 2004)
suggest that most Internet cafes and private subscriptions are concentrated in Yerevan.
A digital divide clearly separates Yerevan from the rest of the country.
There is no raw data to determine why those with access are using the Internet. Anecdotal evidence and direct observation in the many Internet cafes around the capital of Yerevan indicate that news is often a low priority. It would appear that the Internet is mainly used for staying connected with friends and family in the widespread Armenian diaspora as well as for catching up on celebrity news. Many adolescents (as is the case in the United States and elsewhere) use higher-speed connections in cyber cafes for interactive gaming.

Despite these Internet links, connectivity and other telecommunications issues have stalled Armenia’s Internet growth. In a networked, globalized world, future generations of Armenians will inevitably fall behind if they cannot gain easy access to the Internet, said Mkrtchian, the journalism school director. (personal communication, June 29, 2007) “You cannot avoid infrastructure that the rest of the world is a part of. … We need to be pioneers of all technologies to keep our identity,” Mkrtchian said. He blames a lack of good governance and poor telecommunications laws for Armenia’s connectivity problems.

Not all online outlets have suffered, however. Reporters for the online investigative journalism organization Hetq.am pursue politically sensitive stories and publish them in full online. Only about 20 percent of Hetq.am’s readers are logging on from Armenia, according to editor Edik Baghdassaryan. (personal communication,
June 8, 2007) However, given agreements with several of Armenia’s newspapers, many of those stories are printed for those Armenians who don’t have access to the Internet. The remaining 80 percent of Hetq.am’s users, who largely log on from Russia and the United States, can read the posted articles for free. (E. Baghdassaryan, personal communication, June 8, 2007)

ArmeniaNow.com, another popular online news source about Armenia, largely functions as a training center for journalists. Only about 10 percent of the Web site’s hits come from inside Armenia, editor in chief John Hughes said. (personal communication, June 12, 2007) “The audience (in Armenia) just isn’t that big,” Hughes said. “For now, any online media reaches such a specific and elite audience.” This gap presents a major obstacle for one of the few truly independent and objective media outlets in the country. If the information is not getting to those who can use it most, and is not expanding its reach, then it is not serving its function as a democratic portal for information access. Hughes is looking to the future; he uses his newsroom as a classroom in the hope that the classroom will be a launching pad for an independent newspaper. “The only way print media here will change significantly is if a new product is created that demonstrates objective and accurate information can be used for commercial purposes,” he said.
Despite the obstacles to reaching large audiences online, the now-shuttered television station-turned-online-news-outlet A1+ is trying to reach news consumers that are looking for independent voices via its Web sites. Mesrob Movsissian, director of A1+, said the organization continues to publish online, via radio, and occasionally in newspapers because the staff is committed to independent journalism. (personal communication, June 19, 2007) “We want to show that journalism is not political. It needs to remain independent,” he said. In addition to written reports published online, A1+ also maintains its own YouTube channel. Raw videos dominate the site, though some edited news stories are also available.

For the average Armenian Internet user, however, streaming video online is not always the most convenient way to access independent news. Despite some organizations’ determination, Armenian electronic media face a significant uphill battle when it comes to infrastructure. The lack of advances in telecommunications has handicapped not only online media, but also television and radio which would be greatly aided by a broadband connection. WiFi is available in Yerevan, though it is not widespread. Broadband connections in homes are also uncommon and often cost-prohibitive. With a dial-up connection of, at best, 44 Kbps, it is nearly impossible to keep up with today’s graphics- and Flash-laden Internet. (United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, 2002)
Satellite is one way around the telecommunications obstacle. Mkrtchian, the journalism school director who is also the general manager of Radio Hay, has utilized satellite radio to expand the reach of his station’s broadcasts to Europe and Russia. But satellite can also be cost prohibitive. Consequently, the Internet is the most viable option for reaching mass audiences. Mkrtchian said he hopes investors and government officials see this potential as an incentive for constructing high-speed Internet accessibility both in Yerevan and throughout the country. (personal communication, June 29, 2007)

Opening the Armenian telecommunication market has come slowly. For example, until 2004 one company had the monopoly on the booming mobile phone market. Though the government had only a minority stake in mobile operator ArmenTel (a Greek company was the official owner), the government’s ownership guaranteed a monopolized market until litigation was threatened and a Lebanese company, Viva Cell, was allowed to enter the market. (Danielyan, 2005)

There are additional prospects as well. In January 2008, for example, Russian telecommunication company Comstar UTS announced it will begin building a WiMAX broadband network. According to Comstar’s president, the network will cover 75 percent of Armenia’s population and will be operational by late 2008. This would be Armenia’s first broadband wireless network. (Kiselyova, 2008)
Until these improvements in the telecommunication sector are implemented, however, television will remain the most powerful medium in the country. Because television stations have shirked their duties to provide accurate and open access to information, citizens and civil society will suffer. Independent online news organizations provide the best hope for bolstering the independent media market, but only when access is widely available.

**Legal framework for civil society and media**

Since independence, Armenia has experienced fits and starts in its civil society. The immediate post-Soviet years were marked with an eagerness for democracy. As the troubled post-communist years took their toll on the nation’s fragile economy and the Kharabakh war reached a stalemate, many citizens became disillusioned and, consequently, disengaged. Economic prosperity in the last five to eight years has once again divided the elites from the average struggling Armenians. (Ishkanian, 2003)

Among former Soviet republics, Armenia’s laws governing the nonprofit sector are considered the most progressive. (Green, 2002) Nonprofit organizations receive income tax and VAT (value-added tax) exemptions in Armenia’s tax codes, paving the way for easier nonprofit registration. Nonprofit registration may be considered a form of legitimating civil society groups, in that registration recognizes such groups as unofficial societal institutions. According to several media experts, journalism
organizations such as unions or other professional associations also register as nonprofit organizations to gain official government recognition. (personal communications, L. Barseghyan, July 12, 2007, and E. Baghdassaryan, June 8, 2007)

The Yerevan Press Club is the largest organization representing journalists and media workers in Armenia. As a non-profit, non-governmental organization, YPC represents nearly all the major media outlets across the country. Boris Navasardian has served as president of the YPC for 12 years. He said his organization’s aim is to provide professional training and support for members. However, he said the biggest obstacle he faces is journalists’ unwillingness to take risks in their reporting. (B. Navasardian, personal communication, June 22, 2007)

The media have fallen behind in their ability to call authorities to account. With little space left for civil society, the public has few tools for participating in what should be an independent and democratic state. Instead, the state functions much as it once did during the Soviet era, and many media organizations follow suit.

Despite these seemingly backwards steps, some laws have been more effective in positively influencing both civil society and the media. In 2003, the passage of Armenia’s freedom of information law instigated a shift in government culture. Dr. Shushan Doydoyan, director of the Freedom of Information Center of Armenia (FOICA) and a professor of media law and ethics at Yerevan State University, said that
prior to the law’s passage, getting government officials’ to respond to information requests was an uphill battle. (personal communication, June 22, 2007) Today those same officials respond to nearly all submitted requests. Although those responses may not always be positive, the more receptive attitude is indicative of a major shift. “The government culture is changing,” Doydoyan said. “It’s not possible for them to just ignore us.” In 2006, FOICA tracked 500-600 freedom of information requests. Of those, the government responded to about 500. In the law’s first few years of existence, government officials responded to only half the requests that were made. Doydoyan attributes this change to greater acceptance of the rule of law.

Compared to the rest of the Caucasus region (which includes Georgia and Azerbaijan), Armenia has made significant progress in protecting access to information rights. (Article XIX, 2005) Though Georgia is still widely considered to have the most progressive laws in this regard, Armenia’s regulations are far more liberal than neighboring Azerbaijan’s strict controls over information.

Legal structures must exist to sustain the political space for free expression. The changes apparent in Armenia’s bureaucracy are indicative of the key functional role the freedom of information law played in changing how media operate. Despite little publicity about the law, when it is used, it can provide a boost to independent
media. With a bolstered legal environment, democratic exchanges within civil society and the media are more likely to occur.

In 2002, when the opposition television station A1+ lost its broadcasting license, the move was clearly meant to intimidate. The government succeeded in its aim. Since that time, self-censorship has been common at most of the country’s television stations. The knowledge that a political misstep in programming could result in a shutdown, with little avenues for appeal, has been enough to keep most broadcasters toeing the governing party line.

Furthermore, libel is still prosecuted as a criminal offense in Armenia. Press freedom organizations widely condemn criminal libel as effectively silencing media’s criticism or investigations into wrongdoing. Indeed, because of the arbitrary way such alleged offenses are judged, many media organizations are even more fearful of retaliation. Internews, an international non-governmental media development organization with an office in Armenia, has encouraged the abolition of this statute through its efforts throughout the country. (Canter, 2005)

Another roadblock to open access to information is content restrictions on foreign broadcasters. After much deliberation in the summer of 2007, the National Assembly voted down a bill that would effectively ban all foreign broadcasters such as Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) and Voice of America from distributing
their content via Armenian broadcast stations. The ruling Republican Party of Army introduced the bill, whose opponents included most parties in opposition to the ruling authorities as well as foreign minister Vartan Oskanian. Oskanian, who was educated in the United States, said a ban on stations like RFE/RL “would be contrary to the public interest and the important contribution that independent and free media should make to fostering public debate [and] political pluralism.” (RFE/RL, 2007)

**Links between civil society and electronic media in independent Armenia**

Without a dedicated and independent media, civil society will inevitably suffer in Armenia. As the fourth estate, the media’s weakness as an institution has created an information gap: “Instead of serving as a mediator between government and the population, there is a vacuum of information. It’s a dangerous situation for this country.” (M. Movsissian, personal communication, July 19, 2007)

Indeed, media and civil society experts decry Armenians’ general disengagement with political and civic life. The information gap is one contributing factor. Another is the lingering legacy of the Soviet system. A sense of resignation pervades the public attitude about politics. “They are not apathetic; many citizens appear to care deeply about politics. However, they are discouraged by the events over the past decade in which citizens’ voices found few sympathetic ears in state
institutions and politics, and many have withdrawn from participation in public life into private concerns.” (USAID, 2003)

A look at raw numbers suggests that Armenia’s civil society is robust. According to most estimates, there are currently more than 2,000 registered non-governmental organizations for a country of 3 million people. Of those, more than half are located in Yerevan and a plurality are focused on human rights and public policy issues. (Professionals for Civil Society NGO, 2008)

The civil society sector in Armenia boomed after 1994 when many Western governments began to pump money into democratization efforts. (Ishkanian, 2003) Soviet-era organizations were transformed into non-governmental and nonprofit organizations. However, these organizations also carried with them the characteristics of Soviet governance: communist-era elites and party apparatchiks took leadership roles and excluded rural and working-class citizens. Consequently, rather than empowering a new class of engaged citizens, the new NGOs carried with them the old power structures.

Armenia is often compared to neighboring Georgia and Azerbaijan, as all three represent small, developing democracies that were once a part of the Soviet Union. Parallels can be drawn between all three countries. Armenia’s civil society sector is roughly as active as both those in Georgia and Azerbaijan, although the latter received
higher marks in the 2006 Freedom House Freedom in the World survey. (Freedom House, 2006) In its overall 2007 democracy ratings, Armenia ranks squarely between Georgia and Azerbaijan. All three countries are rated as partly free. (Freedom House, 2007a) In 2002, the first year Freedom House conducted its Freedom in the World survey, all three countries in the Caucasus region were rated as partly free. Only Azerbaijan was downgraded to not free in 2005 and continues to carry that label. (Freedom House, 2008)

All three countries also have similar press freedom rankings. According to Reporters Without Borders’ 2007 press freedom rankings, Georgia (ranked 66) and Armenia (ranked 77) far exceed Azerbaijan, which is ranked near the bottom of the list of 169 countries at 139. (Reporters Sans Frontieres, 2008) Freedom House’s 2007 press freedom rankings are not so disparate for the region. Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan are ranked 121, 142, and 164, respectively, among 195 countries. However, Freedom House rates only Georgia as partly free, while Armenia and Azerbaijan earn the label “not free.” (Freedom House, 2007b) These ratings have remained relatively consistent since Freedom House began its annual survey in 2001, even though the seven years since then have been marked by significant growth in electronic media in all three countries. The Internet’s reach, in particular, significantly expanded.
One may conclude, then, that the impact of electronic media has not had much influence on the democratic development of the countries, as their democracy ratings have remained relatively stable. However, Internet development is still nascent, particularly in Armenia, where access is still largely concentrated in Yerevan. It may take several more years of telecommunications development throughout the country before there could be a lasting impact.

**Conclusion**

More than 15 years after independence Armenian media continues to struggle with its own independence. A general ignorance about professional standards and, in some cases, a deliberate unwillingness to maintain such standards to promote personal causes or support friendly political parties have hampered the progress of a market oversaturated with newspapers, TV and radio stations. Though there is no shortage of information, the quality of that information is often lacking. Both local and international NGOs see the remedy as more intensive training in professional journalism standards.

Just as important as professional training is cultivating a legal and enabling environment that fosters and sustains an independent media. Unfortunately, support for press freedom is fragile, as evidenced by the revocation of the broadcasting licenses of two independent television stations in 2001 and 2002. In my interviews, I found
reasons for both optimism and pessimism. Though the legal framework supporting independent media has improved, journalists must still combat negative attitudes toward them. If the government culture, as well as the legal framework don’t fully support the right to open access to information, then it is unlikely an independent media will grow or assert its fundamental democratic right to information. While Armenia’s media laws have improved – and with it, the government culture – those laws must still be better publicized, as well as enforced for the independent media sector to succeed.
Chapter 5. Conclusion: Armenia’s uncertain future

Introduction

Whether electronic media has positively influenced Armenia’s democratic development – the research question posed in this paper – cannot yet be definitively answered. This thesis traced the impact of electronic media on Armenia’s democracy from the waning days of Soviet communism, through the introduction of *glasnost*, to the breakup of the Soviet republics, the early days of independence, and finally to today’s mixed media landscape. These historical and contemporary accounts helped answer the question raised in this thesis by providing examples from journalists and civil society activists, as well as first-person accounts of today’s media landscape. Despite this exploration, it is difficult to determine whether this thesis’ hypothesis holds true; that electronic media, given its potential for affording greater access to information, positively influences democratic development. The intervening variable in the equation – access to information – remains unresolved and therefore produces a mixed conclusion.

This thesis hypothesized that given preexisting democratic institutions; a new digital environment in Armenia would sustain and foster the country’s further democratic development. In addition, it postulated that for such changes to occur, access to information must be widely available via new media technologies. For example, Internet penetration needs to be pervasive to ensure the fullest possible
access. As we have seen in the analysis, access to information was insufficient to test the hypothesis as posed. However, using the theoretical model constructed in chapter two, the historical analysis in chapter three, and the examination of current media trends in chapter four, this thesis has instead helped to refine under what conditions the hypothesis may hold true.

The results of this analysis raised other questions about the impact of electronic media in the future. Given greater access to information and the widening impact of globalization, electronic media may come to play a greater role in providing access to information. In fact, in some instances electronic media has already had a positive effect in that it has provided access to news and information that may not have previously been available to the public. For example, Web sites like Hetq.am are producing investigative journalism online that are sometimes published subsequently in print and then perhaps discussed and shared among interpersonal circles. In this way, information that may not be available in the mainstream media is still making its way to the public at large. These new distribution systems do not differ greatly from what was customary throughout Armenia’s history in that both relied on word of mouth and social networks to ensure wide distribution.

The historical analysis conducted in chapter three demonstrated that the influence of glasnost helped shape the early incarnation of Armenia’s first independent
media. Building on the practice of *samizdat* – the system of an underground press that had thrived during the communist years – the critical voices that had appeared in those secret publications became openly available. The burst of independent newspapers that were available after the breakup of the communist regime was one indicator of a burst of a growing democracy that was fostering more free speech, which in turn fed the demand for more democracy and fewer constraints on the media. However, despite the diversity of news coverage in newspapers, few people outside Yerevan could gain access. Consequently, television filled the vacuum and became the dominant medium.

In recent years, government-controlled television has come to be the dominant force in the media market. Most Armenians have access to a television set, whereas few outside the capital can purchase a newspaper or log on to the Internet. Though there are 49 local television stations throughout the country, the public television station is dominant, as it has the widest broadcast area. Because it is backed by the government, its news coverage mirrors official statements and rarely – if ever – ventures into watchdog or critical reporting. As a result, most other private stations follow suit. Consequently, the quality of information broadcast on television largely represents the quality of most information that is available to the public.

Armenia is far from becoming a “cosmopolitan” democracy, where autonomous institutions can form interactive networks of dialogue. (Held, 1995)
Without greater access to a plurality of sources, information quality will likely diminish as the available voices become more homogenous. Without a plurality of voices, the diversity of information is limited. In Armenia, while there may be diverse voices available within the pages of newspapers, the limited circulation of the print press makes it unable to compete with the prevalence of television. Though television is the dominant source of information in Armenia, the prevalence of self-censorship has muted its potential for promoting progress in Armenia’s democratic development. As the electronic medium with the widest reach in Armenia, it is a critical source for information. However, because the information broadcast on most major television stations is homogenous and rarely critical of the ruling authorities, it has not encouraged greater civic engagement. With this element lacking, Armenia’s public sphere has suffered. Interaction and dialogue have wilted in a politically disengaged society. (Habermas, 1989) Armenia’s media face an uphill battle in its efforts to remain independent.

For digital media, the challenge is particularly acute. A relatively unregulated Internet provided a freer portal for independent journalism. However, such journalism can have little impact when it lacks an audience. Infrastructure development has lagged behind global standards. Access to the Internet is concentrated in the capital of Yerevan, and even then, it is largely the elites who can afford it. Several independent
media outlets are producing the type of information and news coverage critical to performing its role as an informative agent for the public. However, access to that information has not yet reached the threshold necessary to make independent media a more prominent element of civil society.

At the same time, democratic development has also stalled and, in some instances, regressed. Corruption is rampant, cronyism is routinely practiced, and average citizens are typically slighted in favor of oligarchs and other powerful elites, who effectively rule the country’s economy. (CRD/TI, 2006) It would be easy to characterize the democratic picture in Armenia as being bleak. Indeed, the political upheaval in February and March 2008 has made such a pronouncement even easier. However, these events may also point to a new future for digital media, a future that may promise greater power and influence in civil society and the political culture. As will be discussed below, digital media (both the Internet and text messaging) played a role in bringing together protesters.

The aftermath of the 2008 presidential elections and the opportunity for further research

While this thesis was in the process of being written, Armenia descended into near-chaos following the February 19, 2008 presidential election. Voters elected Armenia’s third president in the fifth presidential race since Armenia gained independence from the Soviet Union. Although President Robert Kocharian’s hand-
picked successor, Prime Minister Serzh Sargsian, appeared to have clearly won the election, widespread allegations and news reports suggested serious election code violations. Bribery, kidnapped precinct captains, soldiers shuttled from precinct to precinct to vote multiple times, and other unlawful acts were among the reported violations. Tens of thousands protested in the streets in a remarkably large show of civil unrest. Levon Ter-Petrossian, the first president of independent Armenia, and the losing candidate in this election, appeared to be an instigator of these protests. (Ishkanian, 2008)

The massive demonstrations culminated on March 1 when the military attacked demonstrators, and President Kocharian declared a state of emergency, which included a media blackout. Kocharian’s declaration forced all media outlets to report only official information made available from the government. In addition, the Internet was widely censored, and many of the independent news Web sites that served as the sole outlet for critical voices online were shut down, and their Web sites were disabled or altogether blocked. (RFE/RL, 2008a)

Kocharian’s move – though it effectively silenced opposition critics – also represented a tacit acknowledgment that media have become a powerful player in Armenia’s political landscape. Kocharian and Sargsian blamed inaccurate media reports for inciting protests. While the election’s declared winner, Sargsian, pointed to
the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe’s monitoring reports as proof that election irregularities were not widespread; the independent media (largely the digital media) critiqued the report and called it all but a sham. (RFE/RL, 2008c)

It also became difficult for most Armenians to listen to foreign media. After its broadcasts were cut from Armenian radio stations, the U.S.-government funded Radio Liberty resumed short wave radio broadcasts, which it hadn’t used since the Soviet Union blocked all foreign media from reaching its citizens during the Cold War. (RFE/RL, 2008b) In addition, the government also cut Internet access for many digital outlets. Among them was A1+, an opposition site that had been operating its own YouTube channel. (IFEX, 2008) The YouTube Web site was blocked in its entirety to users logging online from inside Armenia. To those outside Armenia, the site appeared to be down. ArmeniaNow.com, one of the few independent media outlets available online, continued publishing under a black banner that read “Media blackout: Official information only.” (Hughes, 2008)

Regardless of these restrictions, the Armenian blogosphere remained, for the most part, a vital node in relaying information to those outside Armenia. YouTube, in particular, provided evidence of party members bribing voters, police attacking protesters, and police arresting citizens engaged in acts of civil disobedience.18

18 For a sampling of some of these videos, visit The Armenian Observer blog at http://ditord.wordpress.org or A1+’s YouTube Channel at http://www.youtube.com/a1plusnews.
“YouTube turned into a phenomenon that everybody started talking about it. Even the government considered it necessary to publish a denial about the video on the Internet on Public TV,” said Artur Papyan, blogger for The Armenian Observer Web site.¹⁹ (e-channel.am, 2008)

Other digital media played a role in the dissemination of information. Text messaging spread news about protests and police activities among the crowds of demonstrators. Some who sent text messages were arrested for disseminating false information and encouraging others to continue its spread by forwarding those messages. (Musayelyan, 2008)

In light of this project, it is apparent that media play an informal institutional role in Armenia’s fledgling democratic process. Though media in Armenia are not yet fully independent – and though Armenia is not yet fully democratic – the events of March 2008 demonstrate its currency in the political system. Indeed, it may even bode well for the future impact of electronic media on Armenia’s democratic development.

Missing elements in analysis

Given the prominent role of the blogosphere in relaying information to the outside world during the election crisis, this analysis would have benefited from a closer examination of Armenian blogs. With so many voices jumping into the fray – particularly during the lead-up to the presidential election – a more detailed analysis of

¹⁹ See http://ditord.wordpress.org.
the content posted online would have helped to determine what news was making it into the foreign press. In addition, given greater time and resources in Armenia, it would have been useful to conduct a content analysis of major television news broadcasts there, and compare that news coverage to what was available online.

Additionally, a more detailed survey of Armenian bloggers could have been useful to better understanding online content. Such data would have helped create a more accurate portrait of Armenian bloggers, their motivations, and their priorities in news coverage. In addition, the prevalence of YouTube videos would also make for an interesting analysis about what videos are being watched, as well as contribute to the overall content analysis of news coverage. Comments on those videos – when statistically analyzed – may have provided interesting insights into the nature of citizens’ interaction with such content.

Similarly, content analyses of blog postings as well as subsequent comments on postings may help explain the nature of Internet use in the region. A detailed survey of Internet users would also help pinpoint who has access and for what purpose they use that access. Because such data is not readily available, it is difficult to concretely define the nature of digital media’s impact on and use in Armenian civil society.
Other opportunities for future research

Given recent events, it seems apparent that electronic media will play a larger role in Armenia’s democratic development. The question to consider next is: How will the future development of electronic media influence the democratic process? Further research into this topic may focus more specifically on the Armenian blogosphere, as described above, which has seemingly gained traction with the post-election political upheaval.

As Armenia’s telecommunications infrastructure matures, research into a more developed digital media sector will be more authoritative. For example, it will be useful to see how plans to develop Armenia’s first WiMAX network evolve. With higher Internet penetration rates and a society more accustomed to accessing information online rather than through traditional media channels, the nature of civic engagement may change.

In addition, comparing trends in usage in Armenia with those in neighboring Georgia and Azerbaijan may also help determine a successful model for infrastructure development and technology diffusion. Examining what development strategies have worked and which have failed may provide useful examples for Armenia’s telecommunications industry to follow. Furthermore, as the nature of civic engagement changes – particularly in a country like Georgia which has also experienced a “color revolution” similar to Armenia’s own recent political upheaval – a comparative
analysis may help account for variables unexplored in this thesis, such as political party structures, employment rates, and general economic development.

**Conclusion: Forecast for the future**

Although this analysis has neither proved nor disproved the hypothesis, it has shed light on possible ways by which electronic media could play a greater role in positively influencing Armenia’s democratic development. For example, while online news outlets may not reach as wide audiences as television, sharing content with more widely available outlets like newspapers and independent television stations make them more significant players in the public sphere. The government’s move to block digital outlets in the aftermath of the presidential elections indicates that the government believes they have had some impact, no matter how minimal.

In addition, the analysis suggests the importance digital media can play in the future with widespread telecommunication development around the country. Perhaps with greater access, Armenians will become more engaged in civic life. Indeed, the massive rallies in March 2008 were heartening in that they demonstrated that Armenia’s citizens are willing to stand up for injustice when they see it and are growing adept at using mobile phones and the Internet to organize mass action.
Furthermore, as the world becomes more global via greater interconnection, the Armenian government will have to respond to the many more sources of information and interaction available to its citizens. The Internet, text messaging, and even satellite television all mean that Armenian citizens cannot be isolated from information sources. As such connections grow, Armenians will be better positioned to participate in a global information society.

On a personal note, it is with great hope – now, after the civic uprising contesting the election results – that Armenia is on a path toward change. This thesis has demonstrated theoretically the important role information plays in a democracy. The protesters in Armenia have demonstrated empirically that they will continue to demand that information to participate in civil society and contribute to building their democracy.
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