

# ARMENIA

## INTRODUCTION

Armenia has experienced continued growth and political stability in 2002, and the news media reflect this overall trend. There have been no major changes in the print news media, but the number of publications and the frequency of publication have expanded.

Political parties, wealthy individuals, or the government continue to control newspapers, dampening what is generally an atmosphere of free speech. The loss of broadcast licenses for the country's most popular non-state television station and an independent television news service has thwarted the growth of electronic independent news sources.

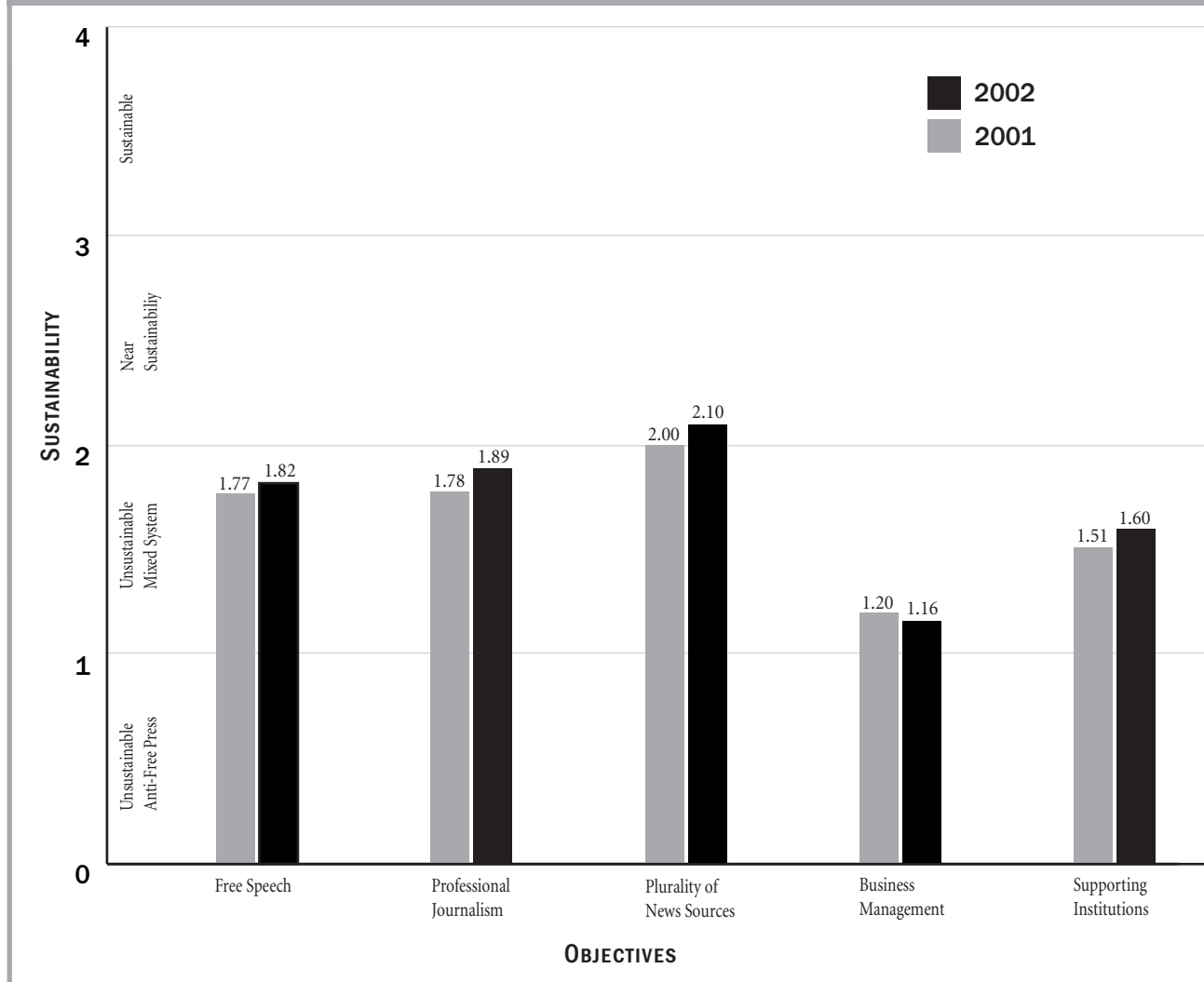
Poverty, emigration, and corruption continue to dominate Armenian life. These factors hinder the progress of Armenia's planned democratic and constitutional reforms, which are a condition of its acceptance into the Council of Europe. Virtually all news media are owned by political entities, the government, or special interests. Thus, the news media generally fail to objectively present issues of public and social importance, thereby failing to have a democratic influence on government policy and decisions.

Because Armenia is currently in an eight-month election cycle that includes local, presidential, and parliamentary elections, key national issues have been pushed to the recesses of consciousness among the news media: a peaceful settlement of the Karabagh conflict, which remains elusive; conclusion of a trial of those arrested in connection with the 1999 slaying of eight high-ranking officials in the National Assembly; and ongoing corruption in the privatization of state enterprises. The election period has also demonstrated government attempts to control the press and limit the freedom of speech.

Progress has been made among some news media in responding to social needs, while others remain closely linked to the political and power elite. The reader continues to be the loser. Liberal print, publication, and freedoms of expression continue to be widely accepted norms.

*Panelists remarked that "poverty is a form of blocking the news because no one can afford to buy a newspaper. People cannot afford to pay for television or the Internet."*

## ARMENIA-MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX



### OBJECTIVE SCORING

The averages of all the indicators are averaged to obtain a single, overall score for each objective. Objective scores are averaged to provide an overall score for the country. IREX interprets the overall scores as follows:

**3 and above:** Sustainable and free independent media

**2-3:** Independent media approaching sustainability

**1-2:** Significant progress remains to be made; society or government is not fully supportive

**0-1:** Country meets few indicators; government and society actively oppose change

### INDICATOR SCORING

Each indicator is scored using the following system:

**0** = Country does not meet indicator; government or social forces may actively oppose its implementation

**1** = Country minimally meets aspects of the indicator; forces may not actively oppose its implementation, but business environment may not support it and government or profession do not fully and actively support change

**2** = Country has begun to meet many aspects of the indicator, but progress may be too recent to judge or still dependent on current government or political forces

**3** = Country meets most aspects of the indicator; implementation of the indicator has occurred over several years and/or through changes in government, indicating likely sustainability

**4** = Country meets the aspects of the indicator; implementation has remained intact over multiple changes in government, economic fluctuations, changes in public opinion, and/or changing social conventions

## OBJECTIVE 1: FREE SPEECH

**Armenia Objective Score: 1.82/4.0**—The panelists generally agreed that although the Constitution guarantees freedom of speech, the freedom is often restricted through threats, intimidation, and pressure. One might say that Armenia has freedom of the press, but not an independent press. It is generally known that various wealthy and politically powerful individuals control the vast majority of the press, either through direct sponsorship or subtle threats and intimidation. The intimidation can come in the form of visits by tax officials or anonymous calls.

In one notorious example more than a year ago, the secret police made and circulated a videotape depicting the editor of the leading opposition daily having sex with an unidentified woman. The tape led to the editor’s divorce. In November, photos taken from the tape, now nearly 18 months old, were reproduced on the front page of a small, relatively unknown weekly. The editor is convinced that the Armenian secret police—probably the only people in Armenia capable of this act—did so at the behest of the minister of defense, the true power behind the president.

Not so ironically, the same editor had a popular talk show on a television station named A1 Plus (A1+), which lost its broadcast license in spring 2002. Considered a relatively independent station, A1+ lost its license through a new licensing procedure that was approved by parliament and signed into law by the president. Procedures for issuing the new licenses were followed precisely in an open and fair process. However, the law gives the president the power to appoint the board members of the licensing panel, allowing him to “stack” the panel in his favor.

*There is freedom of speech; there is no freedom of press.*

Journalists also have been attacked. The most dramatic incident involved Mark Gregorian, who generally contributes to foreign publications and writes noncontroversial analytical pieces. Why he was attacked remains unanswered. At the time, he was researching an article about the shootings in parliament on Oct. 27, 1999, which are also unresolved. The trial is still ongoing. Gregorian said he had uncovered no new information and was writing about the lack of any conclusion in the trial of the alleged killers.

Such incidents, though they may not be classified as “attacks” on the media, have the direct effect of creating a climate of uncertainty and intrigue—if not outright fear. The situation has improved to some extent. As one panelist stated, “In recent years less violence has been committed against journalists. Pressure on journalists was transferred to the court, so that courts punish journalists. Libel is punished both by criminal and civil codes. Two journalists have been charged under the criminal code, but neither of them was sentenced to prison.”

The legal climate and freedom of information are two areas of concern. However, some progress has been made in the legal area. Occasional lawsuits against some of the more yellow press are becoming more frequent. In the past year, the editor of *Armenian Times* was sued by a ranking official who had been called an “idiot” for allowing Armenian Airlines to degenerate and have some of its European flights cancelled by European airports who refused to allow the planes to land. The editor had asked, rhetorically, “how these idiots” get into such positions of power. The official proclaimed, “I am not an idiot,” and filed a criminal libel suit. But other edi-

Legal and social norms protect and promote free speech and access to public information.	
Free Speech Indicators	Legal/social protections of free speech exist and are enforced.
	Licensing of broadcast media is fair, competitive, and apolitical.
	Market entry and tax structure for media are fair and comparable to other industries.
	Crimes against journalists or media outlets are prosecuted vigorously, but occurrences of such crimes are rare.
	State or public media do not receive preferential legal treatment, and law guarantees editorial independence.
	Libel is a civil law issue; public officials are held to higher standards, and the offended party must prove falsity and malice.
	Public information is easily accessible; right of access to information is equally enforced for all media and journalists.
	Media outlets have unrestricted access to information; this is equally enforced for all media and journalists.
	Entry into the journalism profession is free, and government imposes no licensing, restrictions, or special rights for journalists.

tors attempted to join the suit and said that they, too, wanted to know how such idiots got into high government positions. The suit was eventually dropped.

While the editor was clearly irresponsible, the offended public official took the issue to court rather than into his own hands—a sign of progress.

Freedom of information remains one of the most difficult problems because of the lack of any law specifying what is public and what is not public information. Current law dictates that government secrets, in the interest of national security, are not public. Commercial secrets are similarly off limits. But the lack of any specific law or rules and regulations defining state secrets and commercial secrets gives great latitude to government employees and elected officials in determining what is and is not public information.<sup>1</sup> The result is that journalists and the public at large are left at the mercy of the government’s whims as it decides what information they can receive. And given Armenia’s Soviet heritage, the government tends to interpret all information as “government secrets,” and businesses refuse to answer business questions, claiming “commercial secrets.” According to one panel participant, “There are no legal regulations precluding media from access to public information, but since most information is not public, it is given out based on arbitrary decisions.”

## OBJECTIVE 2: PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM

**Armenia Objective Score: 1.89/4.0**—Journalism in Armenia is a mixed bag at best. Unfortunately, because there are so many poorly written newspapers and badly trained or untrained journalists, the overall quality of journalism has dropped below what are generally accepted standards of quality. This is reflected in a statement by one of the panelists: “There are some good journalists, but on the whole, few have any standards.”

Essential to the problem is that no truly independent newspapers exist in Armenia. Each has a sponsor, who expects certain points of view to be expressed or obvious in all articles. This also results in self-censorship by journalists, who understand that they must write in certain ways in order to keep their

<sup>1</sup> Editor’s note: A draft law on freedom of information has been prepared by a working group consisting of government and NGO representatives. The law was adopted by the National Assembly and awaits further review.

Journalism meets professional standards of quality.	
Professional Journalism Indicators	Reporting is fair, objective, and well sourced.
	Journalists follow recognized and accepted ethical standards.
	Journalists and editors do not practice self-censorship.
	Journalists cover key events and issues.
	Pay levels for journalists and other media professionals are sufficiently high to discourage corruption.
	Entertainment programming does not eclipse news and information programming.
	Technical facilities and equipment for gathering, producing, and distributing news are modern and efficient.
	Quality niche reporting and programming exists (investigative, economics/business, local, political).

jobs. A panel member explained that “the goal of the journalists in the country is not to provide objective information, but to support the point of view of the publication’s sponsor. For the journalist to make the sponsor of the publication happy means keeping the editor happy. This situation prevents free and independent journalists from working free of influence.”

Another factor is the simple organizational structure. Armenian newspapers have few, if any, mid-level editors. In all American and in most European newspapers, mid-level editors do most of the true editing work. Top editors should be managers and decision-makers and should rarely do “line editing.” Top editors will read stories before newspapers go to press, more so to know exactly what was written than to exercise any control.

In Armenian newspapers, however, usually only one or perhaps two editors have total control over stories. Because it is physically impossible for one person to edit an entire newspaper, especially a daily, the editors usually either accept or reject a story as written. This means that stories may vary in quality simply because editors lack the time to review bad stories and have reporters rewrite for clarity or accuracy.

Perhaps the most glaring problem is the widespread practice of “ordered articles.” Also called indirect advertising, these stories are paid for or “ordered”

by political figures or by anyone who has money. They are often poorly written and obviously not true or clearly biased. Because journalists know they are supposed to write what they are told, they care little about the literary quality.

This prompted one journalist on the panel to say, “Ethical standards exist, but few journalists follow them. We can see how our colleagues break them. Most journalists are guided by what they can get away with.” In Armenia, they can get away with a lot.

*“Ethical standards exist, but few journalists follow them.”*

Progress is being made, however, to establish a professional code of conduct for all working journalists. The Armenian Union of Journalists approved a code of ethics in December 2002, but not all newspapers have adopted it. Other media organizations like the Asparez Journalists’ Club, the Association of Investigative Journalists, and the Yerevan Press Club have also adopted ethical codes. Some of the panelists predicted that “every newspaper will soon have its own code of ethics,” and this has been prompted by the fact that “right now there is no difference (indications) between paid articles and unpaid articles.”

Journalists are very conscious of the influence of the rich and powerful on free expression and free speech. One panelist said, “When a newspaper gets money from a businessman, it will not offend him.”

Armenia’s poor financial situation is reflected in the financial situation of newspapers. Editors and journalists say they must accept money for articles in order to survive, and that they hide this income from predatory tax officials. “Many newspapers have two sets of books, one for themselves and another for the tax office,” one panelist said.

The financial situation in the regions is much worse because most villagers live at subsistence levels. “The regional press is very limited in terms of finances,” one panelist said. The lack of training in the regions is often pronounced. “In small newspapers, there are very few specialists. But in the larger ones, there are those who specialize in topics. Partially, there are newspapers that follow standards of professionalism. But this is not always true of the regions,” the panelists agreed.

### OBJECTIVE 3: PLURALITY OF NEWS SOURCES

**Armenia Objective Score: 2.10/4.0**—Armenians generally have access to a wide range of news sources in all mediums: print, radio, and television. Print media outlets in Yerevan are kiosks and street tables that provide a range of publications printed in Armenia and Russia. Russian-language publications, including glossy fashion magazines, are widely available, as are the major Russian newspapers, which normally arrive many days late.

Foreign-language publications, such as American or European newspapers and magazines, are available. However, they are very expensive and available only by subscription. English-language publications include the *International Herald Tribune*, *The Financial Times*, and the European editions of *USA Today* and the *Wall Street Journal*.

According to an IREX/ProMedia survey, however, less than 5 percent of citizens use newspapers as their primary source of information. The second-lowest source is radio. Radio is a popular form of entertainment, and Armenia’s wide variety of stations reflect a broad range of musical tastes—from traditional music to European, American, and Russian pop. Radio is undoubtedly the least politicized of any information or entertainment medium. News and information are provided daily from around the world in Russian and

Multiple news sources provide citizens with reliable and objective news.	
Plurality of News Sources Indicators	A plurality of affordable public and private news sources (e.g., print, broadcast, Internet) exists.
	Citizens’ access to domestic or international media is not restricted.
	State or public media reflect the views of the entire political spectrum, are nonpartisan, and serve the public interest.
	Independent news agencies gather and distribute news for print and broadcast media.
	Independent broadcast media produce their own news programs.
	Transparency of media ownership allows consumers to judge objectivity of news; media ownership is not concentrated in a few conglomerates.
	A broad spectrum of social interests are reflected and represented in the media, including minority-language information sources.

Armenian, and in French from a French-language station. According to the survey, about 10 percent of the population regularly listens to radio.

The most popular medium by far is television, which is viewed by 85 to 90 percent of the population. Television is considered the primary source of news, information, and entertainment. Armenians have free access to about a dozen television channels, about half of which are Russian. The local stations are state-controlled, and the independent ones are heavily influenced by their owners, who quite often belong to the country’s power elite.

*Panelists also agreed that “all of the press and television are connected to business and politicians, and divided among them. Only radio is not political. Everybody knows who the television stations belong to, but print media is harder to detect because the ownership changes. The owners of the stations also own businesses which they advertise. Some newspapers are financed from the same source.”*

As mentioned earlier, the country’s most popular television channel, A1+, lost its license last year when the broadcast law was changed and new licensing procedures were followed. This generated much antipathy toward the panel that made the decision and prompted accusations that the government was attempting to control the news media. Few of the local stations do any original programming, and few depend on advertising for financial independence. Rather, they are heavily subsidized.

Panelists agreed that “when a television station loses its license, it is a form of censorship. Lots of foreign channels, mostly Russian, are available.” Another added, “In the past, the government has interfered with the Internet when they blocked pornography sites. The Internet is expensive here, more so than in other countries.”

Panelists also agreed that “all of the press and television are connected to business and politicians, and divided among them. Only radio is not political. Everybody knows who the television stations belong to, but print media is harder to detect because the ownership changes. The owners of the stations also own businesses which they advertise. Some newspapers are financed from the same source.”

Information availability in the regions differs greatly from that in the capital, Yerevan. Poverty is so extensive in the regions that few people can afford to buy print media. Therefore, the regions receive no newspapers because of low sales and the high cost of delivery. At a result, regional communities are poorly informed. Panelists remarked that “poverty is a form of blocking the news because no one can afford to buy a newspaper. People cannot afford to pay for television or the Internet, and very few have computers.”

## OBJECTIVE 4: BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

**Armenia Objective Score: 1.16/4.0**—Generally, newspapers and other media outlets are not managed as businesses simply because they do not need to be. Editors and station owners get most of their money from private—and therefore controlling—sponsors, from circulation sales, and from ordered articles.

Independent media are well-managed businesses, allowing editorial independence.	
Business Management Indicators	Media outlets and supporting firms operate as efficient, professional, and profit-generating businesses.
	Media receive revenue from a multitude of sources.
	Advertising agencies and related industries support an advertising market.
	Advertising revenue as a percentage of total revenue is in line with accepted standards at commercial outlets.
	Independent media do not receive government subsidies.
	Market research is used to formulate strategic plans, enhance advertising revenue, and tailor products to the needs and interests of audiences.
	Broadcast ratings and circulation figures are reliably and independently produced.

Because newspapers and other media outlets do not compete in a market environment, they are not managed as profit-driven businesses. When an editor or owner needs an infusion of cash to pay bills, he or she simply appeals to a sponsor. The sponsors or owners may change without any notice or fanfare, and this is revealed only in the particular slant of the news that may or may not be presented.

*Because newspapers and other media outlets do not compete in a market environment, they are not managed as profit-driven businesses.*

As a result of this lack of financial independence, the editorial independence is also lacking. This does not mean, however, that all media are totally biased. Most newspapers and news media outlets attempt to present themselves as unbiased and independent, but they generally fall into two camps: pro-government or opposition. Newspapers such as *Aravot* (Morning), *Haykakan Zhamanak* (Armenian Times), and *Iravunk* (Right) are supported strongly by opposition forces, and their news reflects their backing.

Government-owned and/or pro-government newspapers include *Respublica Armenia* (Republic of Armenia), *Hayots Ashkar* (Armenian World), and *Golos Armenii* (Voice of Armenia), a Russian-language publication.

*We (newspapers) live by the principle “just survive.”*

Middle-of-the-road newspapers, which are also the most progressive financially, include *Azg* (Nation) and *Novoe Vremya* (New Times). Of all of these, *Novoe Vremya* has made the most strides to becoming financially independent, although its content does indicate some pro-government leanings. Most independent media are on their own financially. According to a panelist, “The subsidies given by the government to the independent media are so small that they can be considered symbolic. Some even refuse to take them, and the subsidies have no influence on the content of the media.”

Again, there is a huge disparity between media in the regions and in Yerevan. The financially successful *Tsyke* (Dawn) newspaper in the northern city of Guimri relies heavily on its sister television channel, which is owned by the same people. But in general, regional newspapers are dependent on government support. “There is no advertising to be had in the small towns because they are so poor,” panelists agreed. “If each *marz* (region) has its own printing press, it would help. We (newspapers) live by the principle “just survive.”

## OBJECTIVE 5: SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS

**Armenia Objective Score 1.60/4.0**—Professional news gatherers are supported by various international and local organizations that provide a wide range of training opportunities. Armenia has an extensive nongovernmental organization (NGO) community, and many, if not all, NGOs provide training. Perhaps the most important are IREX/ProMedia for the print media sector and Internews for the electronic broadcast sector. Each provides regular training in all aspects of the profession.

In addition, there is the Yerevan Press Club, which is funded by the US Department of State, as well as the Open Society Institute and other international donor organizations. There is also the National Journalists Union, which, with the help of the OSI and Yere-

Supporting institutions function in the professional interests of independent media.	
Supporting Institutions Indicators	Trade associations represent the interests of private media owners and provide member services.
	Professional associations work to protect journalists’ rights.
	NGOs support free speech and independent media.
	Quality journalism degree programs that provide substantial practical experience exist.
	Short-term training and in-service training programs allow journalists to upgrade skills or acquire new skills.
	Sources of newsprint and printing facilities are private, apolitical, and unrestricted.
	Channels of media distribution (kiosks, transmitters, Internet) are private, apolitical, and unrestricted.

van Press Club, also provides training and programs. In addition, the Caucasus Media Institute, funded by the Swiss government, provides regular and long-term training and journalism programs, primarily for the print media.

*“Most international organizations are providing lots of short-term training,” the panelists agreed. “The most effective programs are in cooperation with international organizations. Local organizations learn from international organizations.”*

But additional training in specialized areas is also provided by organizations such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). The OSCE works closely with the Council of Europe, which also provides occasional programs focusing on freedom of press issues. The American Bar Association (ABA)/Central and East European Law Initiative (CEELI) project of the ABA provides frequent programs related to freedom of press issues and the judiciary.

“Most international organizations are providing lots of short-term training,” the panelists agreed. “The most effective programs are in cooperation with international organizations. Local organizations learn from international organizations.”

One complaint that is often heard from local editors is that “the level of training at universities is not

good enough. It is not satisfying. It would be better if our expectations were higher,” one panelist said. The level of journalism taught at the universities is very low because professors are generally unaware of modern journalism. Few professors have actually worked as journalists themselves.

The panelists enjoyed the mix of organizations that offer training and development. “Local organizations know our local psychology and needs,” one said. “International organizations can provide technical assistance. It’s very valuable to come into contact with people from other cultures.”

Panelists agreed that printing facilities were adequate. The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) helped finance an alternative printing plant to the Tigran Mets (the main print house), which is partly state-owned and was the only printing plant in the country for a while. “There are several print facilities, so there is competition and the government can’t be very influential,” the panelists said. However, some argued that “many small print houses are privately owned, but you can still feel the political pressure.”

Most consider distribution to be the weakest part of the newspaper business. However, the state monopoly distribution business is being privatized. This has created a competitive market within which new and small distribution companies can open.

“Most newspapers have no dealings at all with the post office and sell all their newspapers through the kiosk system,” the panelists said. In the regions, contractors deliver newspapers. For example, in one region, a contractor sells newspapers from door to door. It is very effective, because circulation is low in small towns.



## PANEL PARTICIPANTS

***Gretta Grigoryan***

Editor

*Zangezor* newspaper, Goris

***Nora Hakobyan***

Women's Republican Council (NGO)

***Anahit Haroutiunyan***

*Ditord* magazine

***Pap Hayrapetyan***

Editor

*Sevan* newspaper

***Vahan Ishkhanyan***

Investigative journalist

***Anahit Norikyan***

Deputy-Editor

*Kumayri Banvor* weekly

***Sarah Petrossyan***

Leading journalist

***Artur Sahakyan***

Investigative journalist

*Iravunk* newspaper

## PANEL MODERATOR

***Naira Manucharova***

Local Program Manager

IREX/Promedia, Armenia

## OBSERVER

***Maya Barkhudarian***

USAID Mission, Armenia