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ARMENIA'S PUBLIC TELEVISION IN THE TRANSITION PERIOD: PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

The annual budget of Armenia's Public Television (APTV) is 1,000 times smaller than the budget of the BBC, Europe's leading TV broadcaster. This may not be interesting, but it is definitely a fact. We offer this comparison because we are always ready to adopt (and do adopt) the BBC model for organizing and managing television production, and its formulas for streamlining the flow of information. Some of these, however, either do not work at all under our realities, or work for just one week, or—saddest of all—work in such a way that it is better to get along without them. The thousandfold difference in the budgets of our two organizations once again shows how much television realities, ultimate goals, public expectations, and the challenges facing the two countries—where one is the cradle of European democracy, and the other has only recently won its independence—differ from one another.

The problem, however, lies not just in the current financial gulf. The problem is that the understanding of priorities at two opposite ends of the European continent can be 1,000 times different. Thus, if the BBC sets itself the task of making the transition to digital broadcasting in Great Britain and around the world (Digital GB and Digital World), presaging the strategy and standards of the planet's television broadcasting in coming decades (and perhaps the 21st century as a whole), so APTV has to solve its own ultimate goal. With a budget of \$5 million, it has to make the transition to digital transmitters, reequip its central control room, create a digital local network for its information service, and acquire digital video, audio, and editing equipment to meet the needs of certain programs.

Not to mention that, since the day the broadcasting company was founded back in 1956, no repair work has been done inside the buildings, where the studio equipment and administrative offices are badly in need of modern technology and new furniture. The heating problem has not yet been fully solved. That is, we are talking here of providing the most basic working conditions for our personnel.

This is only the technical side of our overriding task, but it is 1,000 times farther away from the problems facing the European system today. Nevertheless, this sort of problem is already finding its solution nowadays.

And now, permit me to move on to other, more important (in the context of our Tbilisi forum) matters:

- Our mission;
- Creating an independent television policy, free from the dictates of state and government;
 - Creative freedom;
- Providing a forum for political parties and nongovernmental organizations to express their views;
- Independence, on the one hand, from the government that provides our budget and, on the other hand, from advertisers and major economic entities;
- Living in harmony with the logic of the market under conditions of competition from a multitude of private broadcasting companies, without turning into a commercial organization in the process;
 - Legal regulation of television broadcasting;
 - Gradual integration into the structure of European television broadcasting;
- Clear prospects for transforming our broadcasting into an average European public channel.

I shall not deal with all of the above, but allow me to look at certain individual fine points in more detail.

The mission of public broadcasting, sometimes known as Channel One, has several specific features. First of all, it is determined by public expectations. This means that, compared to our two dozen private broadcasting companies, public television on air should be

- exceptionally responsible in selecting the material for its programs (for the overwhelming majority of the television audience, everything transmitted on Channel One is, first, associated with the positions of state and government agencies, which is in turn a stereotype left over from our Soviet past, and second, it is seen as the sole criterion of veracity, especially in programs concerning our health care problems, explaining new laws, and dealing with government policies);
- exceptionally demanding in the purity of the Armenian language (in recent decades, the marriage of our two languages has flooded the airwaves, and our television language has become so incomprehensible, difficult to follow, and ungrammatical, that the very essence of what is being said is sometimes distorted; at other times, journalists use one and the same word or term completely differently because they don't know the true meaning of the word, not to mention the orthographic and stylistic mess in commercials);
- comprehensive with regard to program topics (the public expects Channel One to give special attention to educational, popular science, children's, young adults', and educational programming; just as much air time should be devoted to programs on agriculture, health care, and social, legal, sporting, cultural, and patriotic programming, without forgetting the problems of the handicapped, pensioners, single mothers, national minorities, and the church);
- satisfying from the point of view of on-air policy. (Channel One transmits (1) to Yerevan, where almost half the republic's population lives; they expect mainly programming of a political nature and coverage of interparty conflicts, while the imposing stratum of young people seek entertainment programs; (2) to the regions, which are basically agricultural, where people expect programs about rural life, agricultural works, and international news; and (3) via satellite. In Europe, America, Russia, the Near and Middle East, and Australia, our audience is the Armenian diaspora. What is most interesting in each of the above regions is that they each have not only different, but sometime directly opposite needs. Films that are liked in Europe raise a storm of protest in the Near and Middle East; if the audience in America demands serials, in Russia they demand that they no longer be transmitted)

I have listed only the most obvious layers of expectations of our varied audience, but am already wondering if we would be able to satisfy public demand even if our budget were 2,000 times larger than today's. Hardly, I think....

To be sure, Channel One devotes a great deal of attention to political and entertainment programs, to agriculture, to feature films, to series, and to sports. The problem is, however, that in loading the airwaves with these undoubtedly very important programs, the probability that we will lose a part of our audience is very great; as a consequence, this will lead to defeat in the competitive struggle with private television companies. Meanwhile, according to our data, APTV is the only television company on the territory of the CIS that has maintained its exclusive leadership in the national airwaves. Channel One therefore faces yet another overriding problem: maintaining its leadership in the republic's television market to become a trailblazer in the following areas:

- Introducing new technologies;
- Shaping broadcasting policy according to Western standards;
- Ensuring the production of programming with a high level of professionalism, political correctness, and good broadcasting taste.

Here, I would like to dwell on three fundamental points, listed by the International Federation of Journalists as shaping public broadcasting. They are as follows:

- Political independence (from the government) and economic independence (from commercial entities);
 - Transparency and the responsibility inherent in a democratic government;
 - The pluralistic approach and accessibility to the different strata of society.

These principles are the foundations of foundations. In this context too, Armenia has no need to modify its laws. The Law on Public Television and Radio Broadcasting, already in force for several years now, satisfies fully the above three fundamental points. The problem lies elsewhere. At this stage, the most important thing is applying the law on a daily basis. This is still, unfortunately, extremely problematic. Why? What is the problem?

In attempting to answer this question, people generally mention our periods of crisis and different versions of having overcome them after the manner of the East European countries during their transitional period, especially Hungary (1999) and the Czech Republic (2000). In both cases, where there was appropriate legal framework, there were crises of public broadcasting caused by the following reasons:

- Expectations of reforms by the society;
- Dictates by the governing political forces;
- High-handedness on the part of the broadcasting companies' directors;
- Strikes by the companies' personnel;
- Waves of public protest;
- Disorganization in the companies' operations;
- Problems of legal regulation;
- Bankruptcy or fundamental restructuring.

There had been no such crises in Armenian public broadcasting in previous history; in recent years, however, there have been times when, in the heavy atmosphere of bringing to light some of the fateful events in Armenian society, it walked on the razor's edge. On the one hand, Channel One became a cause for dissatisfaction among the audience; on the other hand, it created the precedent of televised debates between the country's two main leaders. Only Channel One could have brought this idea to life. It would have been unthinkable in the programming of a private television company.

I am certain too that, during the upcoming presidential race, the Armenian public will expect and even demand open televised debates between the main candidates on Channel One, and the candidates will be forced to take this reality into consideration.

If there was a certain clarity to the charged atmosphere of the inside political struggle during the 2003 presidential elections, its televised version was hugely popular as a result. That same year, the exceptionally balanced presentation on Channel One of the extremely contentious parliamentary election campaign was responsible for the audience's complete indifference. It was also possibly due to around two dozens of the opposition and progovernment parties being offered absolutely equal on-air

conditions. In addition to their legally mandated air time, each party got 50 seconds in one informational bulletin. In order to exclude the possibility of one and the same party always appearing permanently on the air, a rotation system was used. What happened next? Political scandals suddenly disappeared from the screen and therefore public television ceased to be interesting; as a result, the audience lost its ability to define which candidates to choose.

In spite of this, I think that there is a positive side to it all, since people are beginning get used to the idea that a political contest is a serious and balanced undertaking—one that does not tolerate one-sidedness and excessive emotions.

The transparency of our public broadcasting company and the creative freedom of its personnel are two points I shall raise simultaneously, since they are in my opinion extremely interconnected.

In Armenia, the need for transparent management is regulated by law. It was for this purpose that the Public Television and Radio Council was created, along with the Public Television Council. These are composed of personalities who are well recognized by the public. I think, however, that such a model has outlived its usefulness, since these structures have no direct part in the production process and, while they enjoy advisory status, can express only their opinions. The councils regulate only the proportions of one kind of programming or another, and cannot influence their quality. We should thus seek, find, and introduce other forms of transparent management, so that decisions taken by the commercial director, the programming director, the executive producer, the editor-in-chief, the head director, the chief engineer, the chief accountant, and other heads of department are clear to those personnel who will implement them directly. One way of achieving transparency could be the rating of programs, thanks to which the cause-and-effect relationship of financial flows and success among the audience of the company's main programs would become clear to the public.

In this context, the creative freedom of editors and journalists is of course directly linked to all of the negative consequences of the rating system; in combination with it, however, it falls into the channel of predictable financial risks. This is most likely what awaits us in the coming years.

On the other hand, it is also clear that, in order to survive in the competitive struggle with private TV channels, public television must carry on active commercial operations. This does not mean, however, that the culture and information sector will fall victim to market relationships.

Independent, impartial, and balanced information is undoubtedly an essential component of democracy. Nevertheless, as a television production, it cannot stand alone in the public airwaves.

I mean that, in talking about the democratization of the country and assessing in this context conformity of the company to Western standards, we are at this moment turn to information blocks and demand that they adhere to these standards. It emerges then that the remaining 23 hours of broadcasting exist only for the purpose of filling the airwaves somehow until the major news broadcast and that democratic values can slumber for the whole 23 hours, and must awaken again at 9:00 p.m. for exactly 45 minutes.

Without a doubt, political forces, party and social organizations, are pivotal for news programming. It is also beyond doubt that the same structures are pivotal for the democratization of the country. For just this reason, exceptional attention is being given to the informational bloc.

Above all, however, democracy is civilization and culture. However in our public broadcasting, I have yet to see anything that directly links the pioneers of democracy (be they from government agencies or from the opposition) with civilization and culture. In Channel One's programming, I have never seen any political figure visit a museum or an art gallery, attend a concert or theatre performance, or go to church.

The problem is not that there are few or no programs about them. I'm not saying that. It is simply that they and our democratic imperatives appear on-air only in our half-hour news program, and that's it! Imagine a situation in which Othello appears on stage only at the moment of Desdemona's murder, and the rest of the time he spends offstage, dealing with personal matters.

In our programming, democratic values are assigned just such a nonsensical role: come on stage at the most dramatic moment. And do you know why? Because only our news program is monitored—that is, the moment of Desdemona's murder. What happened prior to that moment is not clear. One other thing is clear: it is the authorities who perform the role of Othello; the opposition that plays Desdemona; black PR that is Iago; and the handkerchief is the incriminating evidence. However, we are journalists and not Shakespeare.

This is perhaps one of the reasons that there is a thousandfold difference between us and the most powerful television broadcaster in the land of the Great Bard.

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