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Armenian Media System Overview According to the Hallin and Mancini Model

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Abstract

An overview of the Armenian media system is presented from the perspective of media professionals. Interference with the media system by the political system is analysed and the health of the Armenian media system is explored in the context of its transition from a Soviet republic towards a liberal model. The international situation contextualises analysis (resurgence of Russia–West enmity and globalisation) as does Armenia's troubled relationship with its neighbours: with Turkey due to the 1915 genocide and with Azerbaijan because of the dispute over Nagorno-Karabakh. Relevant domestic affairs, such as the successful citizens' mobilisation and the 2018 Velvet Revolution are also considered. The methodology used is based on in-depth interviews carried out in Yerevan (09/23) with 13 key informants; their answers are explored with content analysis using Hallin and Mancini's dimensions. The study will serve to discuss how the media are used as tools of power and how the media system reproduces the political system (polarisation and individual ownership). We find that media is owned and/or controlled by political parties, and that the government controls public media but also part of the private sector through broadcasting licences and economic pressure. News media are not self-sustainable, thus, media economic dependence compromises its editorial independence, and very few media are independent. There is plurality, but highly polarised; there is no systematic censorship, but defamation fines reinforce journalists' self-censorship; internet freedom is high but generates misinformation. Even so, there is professionalism, therefore there may yet be hope for the media if peace and the economy stabilise.

Keywords

Armenia; Armenian media; Hallin and Mancini; media systems; political system; press freedom

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1. Introduction

This article provides an overview of the current Armenian media system. The analysis is guided by the Hallin and Mancini (2004) framework and special attention is paid to connections between the media and politics, media funding, and press freedom. To make it more understandable for non-Armenian readers, a brief socio-historical contextualisation now follows. Armenia is a former Soviet republic with a troubled recent history, which has passed from the rule of one empire to another, and suffers from unresolved territorial conflicts with its neighbours (Mirzoyan, 2010). Armenia's geopolitical position is complex, the country lives locked in the grip of its two historical enemies: Turkey, which perpetrated a massive genocide against the Armenian population in 1915; and Azerbaijan, with whom the Artsakh territory (known internationally by its Russian-Persian name: Nagorno-Karabakh) has been disputed for decades.

Artsakh is an enclave physically within the frontiers of Azerbaijan (linked to Armenia by a land corridor) but with a population of approximately 150,000 mostly Armenian inhabitants. The problem started in 1917, it "froze" during Soviet times, and restarted during the final years of the USSR (Kocharyan, 2016). The war has seen intermittent flare-ups with Azerbaijan over the last three decades, but two recent episodes became definitive turning points in the conflict. Firstly, the 2020 so-called 44-day war, when Armenia accepted Azeri sovereignty over the disputed territory. Secondly, the recent 19/09/2023 Azerbaijani bombing of Artsakh, which occurred while this research was being conducted in the field, that has caused the mass exodus of the Armenian population (Mourenza, 2023). As a Christian island on the border of Europe and the Muslim world (Sahakyan & Atanesyan, 2006), Armenia is aware of its solitude and has not ceased to seek a place on the international chessboard that would allow it to be safe, prosper, and decide its own future. It is what some experts call complementarian foreign policy that in the Armenian case means to balance strategic and friendly relations with Russia while engaging in political, economic, and cultural interaction with the EU and the US (Atanesyan et al., 2023), although this complementarian position is changing due to current circumstances, as we discuss in Section 6.

Two more elements are important for an understanding of Armenia: the diaspora and the Velvet Revolution. Armenia is a land of few inhabitants (3 MM) but with a large population spread around the world; the Armenian diaspora, estimated at some 8–10 million (International Organization for Migration [IOM], 2021), is the result of the genocide committed on the Armenian population by the Ottoman Empire in 1915–1918 (Adalian, 1991; Bruneteau, 2006). The largest diasporan communities are located in Russia, the US, and France, but also in Iran, Syria, Israel, Argentina, etc. Being aware of the threat that Armenia's solitude in international geopolitics poses to the preservation of the Armenian identity (Manukyan, 2021), the diasporan communities are determined to maintain their traditions, language, rich culture, and heritage to strengthen and protect their roots.

Another key element in understanding today's Armenia is the Velvet Revolution that took place in 2018 and forms part of the so-called colour revolutions, a remarkable phenomenon in which non-violent protests overthrew autocratic regimes in post-soviet republics: the 2003 Georgian Rose Revolution, the 2004 Ukrainian Orange Revolution, and the 2005 Kyrgyzstani Tulip Revolution (Beacháin & Polese, 2010; Rodríguez Rodríguez & Díaz Anabitarte, 2014). In the Armenian case, the peaceful social revolution managed to prevent Serzh Sargsyan's third term in office and brought the mass leader Nikol Pashinyan as Prime Minister. Twenty-first-century citizens' mobilisations (e.g., Arab springs) are also characterised by the key

role played by social media and the internet (Sánchez-Duarte & Magallón-Rosa, 2016). During the Velvet Revolution, citizen journalism was a very common practice and the Pashinyan leader's intense use of Facebook live-streaming to broadcast his marches to the capital and generate support was also noteworthy, all of this converted social media into an unprecedented mobilisation tool in Armenia (Khurshudyan, 2019; Odabashian et al., 2018).

2. Methodology

The main research technique used to collect data was face-to-face interviews. They were done in English and the answers have not been corrected to preserve the literalness of the interviewee's words. Fieldwork was carried out in Yerevan (Armenia) in September 2023, with nearly 20 testimonies accessed, among them 13 remarkable in-depth interviews with an average of 60 minutes duration, with key informants directly related to the topic under consideration—representatives of media outlets, academia, and experts in the field—all of them with senior professional profiles. Among them, we find: deputy editors or editors-in-chief from news agencies, investigative media, news websites, a leading daily newspaper, and an online news TV channel; directors of most relevant press corporations; cybersecurity and media experts; and also academics. Representatives of public broadcasting (TV and radio) are missing from this sample, as attempts to access them were unsuccessful. In addition, half a dozen semi-structured interviews and informal talks were conducted with diverse individuals, such as international relations experts, journalism students, and professionals in the fields of tourism and translation. These testimonies were useful for an adequate contextualisation and understanding of the information. Furthermore, two interviews, one in-depth and the other semi-structured, were carried out in Madrid in June and July 2023 with members of the Armenian General Benevolent Union in Spain, as a preparatory task for the fieldwork in Armenia. The location of the sample has been possible using the snowball technique, starting with members of the Armenian community in Spain. Talking to so many different profiles has been necessary for a foreign researcher for a better understanding of the context, considering also that the outside point-of-view of a researcher from abroad sometimes came as an advantage, particularly when approaching sensitive political issues. In addition, a local co-author has been essential for the correct interpretation of the facts in a local key.

The discourses obtained from the key informants provide the basis of the results obtained and have been analysed with content analysis based on Hallin and Mancini's (2004) framework dimensions for the media system as well as for the political system. Due to the lack of knowledge of the Armenian reality among Western readers, in the definition of analysis variables, priority has been given to addressing the specific national features of the Armenian case, rather than to the scope of the international comparison, that is why special attention has been given to key elements such as the role of the diaspora and the omnipresent impact of the war. Digital dimensions are recurrently addressed in the analysis to overcome a shortcoming of a model conceived in the pre-digital era.

As the adequacy of the Hallin and Mancini model for understanding variations between different systems around the world has been questioned (Mattoni & Ceccobelli, 2018), in this case study we select a hinge country between East and West, such as Armenia, which may help to assess to what extent the Hallin and Mancini model offers useful analytical tools for the study of non-Western countries' media structure. Moreover, Armenia has a convulsive socio-political context and some peculiarities that make it an interesting case study. Furthermore, this research aims to give visibility to countries whose small size takes attention

away from their country-specific problems, as Kõuts-Klemm et al. (2024) denounce, where media and journalism research is mainly focused on big Western European countries.

3. Characterisation of the Current Armenian Political System According to Hallin and Mancini's Framework

Armenia is moving towards a liberal democracy, but after seven decades of communist rule, it still remains attached to a social welfare system, where private media and state-funded public media coexist. On the dimension called consensus versus majoritarian democracy, Armenia can be considered as a majoritarian democracy because the winning party (Civil Contract, in power since 2018, re-elected in 2021) currently concentrates political power so that there is a clear distinction between the government and the opposition, though not such a clear separation of power between legislative and executive. The ruling party also holds the majority in parliament, so every draft law brought by the government is passed. An example of this which affects the media structure is the new Law of The Republic of Armenia on Audiovisual Media that since 06/08/2020 allows public TV (loyal to the government) to broadcast advertising (The Republic of Armenia, 2020). Advertising was previously only broadcast on private channels, as public TV benefits from public budgets. This new law (and the change to the previous Law of the Republic of Armenia on TV and Radio Broadcasting; The Republic of Armenia, 2000), means that, since 2020, private channels share advertising incomes with public TV. Weakening private TV channels´ finances is a way to control them.

Regarding the distinction between rational-legal authority and clientelism as forms of governance, we find that Armenia clearly falls into the category of clientelism. The first contributory factor in explaining clientelism is that Armenia has been largely dominated and involved in conflicts (Nalbandian, 2018), and democratic culture needs peace, independence, and time to settle in. A second factor may be Armenian economic weakness; the country ranks only 85th out of 193 on the Human Development Index (United Nations Development Programme, 2022), and since independence in 1991, it has never risen above 75th place (90th being the lowest). According to a nationwide survey (Center for Insights in Survey Research [CFIISR], 2021) monthly household incomes are 43% less than 130,000DRAM (about €300), 30% between 130,000–260,00DRAM (€300–€600) and just 22% over 260,000DRAM (€600); and only 51% of the population sees a future for their family in Armenia over the next one to four years (CFIISR, 2021). Such data makes clear the daily economic struggle for people, organisations, and companies, which favours opacity and resource management often going hand in hand. However, clientelism in Armenia mainly emanates from the oligarchic system, where all too often access to resources is politicised and/or in exchange for various forms of support. A clear example of that is the broadcasting licensing system managed by the Commission on TV and Radio: In exchange for a broadcasting licence, some private TV channels moderate their level of opposition to the government. Another clear example is given by the informants in the sample when they affirm that some advertisers prefer to contract their advertising with government-friendly media in order to avoid inspections of their companies. In countries with a history of clientelism, governments can exercise pressure by enforcing the law selectively (Papathanassopoulos, 2004).

On the distinction between moderate and polarised pluralism, Armenia can be categorised in the polarised pluralism model, not due to the presence of parties with extreme ideology, but because the tense relationship between political blocs. According to Informants 1 and 13, political parties in Armenia do not differentiate among themselves on the basis of ideology—as there is no left-wing/right-wing party

distinction, the following statement makes this idea clear: "When during electoral campaign we analyse the electoral platforms, programs of parties, we don't see any real difference" (Informant 2). Armenian political parties cannot be categorised as in the West (conservatives, liberals, socialists, etc.). They are characterised using categories such as counter/pro-nationalism or counter/pro-Russian, but above all Armenian political parties are based on the leadership of an individual—they are personalistic parties.

Therefore, if Armenia is categorised as polarised pluralism, it is because the relationship between parties is not based on consensus at all and the relationship between government and opposition is not collaborative. Moreover, most of the sample points out that polarisation has increased greatly, not only in parliament, but among the population due to the defeat in the 2020 war which meant the loss of Artsakh territory: "Until 2020 there was the feeling that we all were connected about Nagorno-Karabakh independence….After 2020 this union crashed and I have the feeling that Armenia people is [sic] not any longer connected" (Informant 7). The war also fractures positioning towards Russia, with some actors seeing Russia as an important ally for Armenian national security ("the presence of Russian troops in Nagorno Karabakh is stopping Azerbaijan to make a full genocide in Nagorno," Informant 7) while others blame them ("Russian behaviour is not appropriate, they must keep open Lachin corridor and they don't," Informant 8). This points out that pro-Russian citizens started changing their minds and beginning to consider that Russia betrayed Armenia by failing to protect them: These statements are discussed in Section 6 and were collected in the days before the Azerbaijani bombing of Karabakh on 19/09/2023 (each new war episode increases polarisation).

On the idea that Armenia is forgotten by the international community, there is also consensus, but when it comes to the question of how to deal with it, disagreement arises again among informants.

Most of the sample points out that the political system is degraded, an opinion backed up by different public opinion surveys where the "army" is always the most highly-regarded institution and "political parties" the least, scoring under 5% in trust (CFIISR, 2021; Caucasus Research Resource Center [CRRC], 2022). The current degradation of the political system in Armenia, reduced to personal interests rather than group ideology, contrasts with the strong political party system that Armenia created on its independence and the strong community ties with which the ancient communities of the Armenian Apostolic Church structured society (Sahakyan & Atanesyan, 2006). In light of this context and according to independent international experts, Armenia is now considered a transitional or hybrid regime, only scoring 35/100 on democratic status (Freedom House, 2023).

4. The Armenian Media Structure

Mass media outlets in Armenia are all operated by both state-owned and for-profit corporations, but private media are far more numerous than public. Armenia has almost 10 news agencies, among which the most important are Mediamax, Arka, PanArmenian, and Armenpress (the only state-owned one). In the past, especially after the Soviet era when people were thirsty for a plurality of information, print media experienced a golden age and hundreds of print media were published. However, press circulation is currently very low and declining, the most popular daily newspapers include the leading liberal *Aravot* (Morning), *Joghovurd* (People), *Hraparak* (Square), and *Azg* (Nation). The director of one of these newspapers, as a member of the sample, says they print only 600 copies a day, which is incomparable with its 50,000 daily online visits. One of the reasons for keeping the print version is because of advertisers, such as

government institutions or large companies: "Maybe it is tradition, maybe it is prestigious for them to have an advertisement in print media" (Informant 8). Most informants agreed that in Armenia the online versions of newspapers differ from the print version of the same newspaper, and consumption modes are indicated as a cause: "If you read on the metro on the screen you cannot reflect about complicated issues, just read the titles, the highlights, don't dig, you scroll 20–30 titles in one minute" (Informant 8). One of the informants offers an interesting sociological explanation:

> The press in Armenia is young and, unlike in the West, there are no newspapers with roots and tradition, there are no newspapers that also act as generators of opinion in society. We do not have in Armenia an analogue like *Washington Post*. (Informant 7)

Armenia has around 50 private TV stations and two public networks called 1st Channel and The News Channel of Public TV. Another public channel called Shoghakat belongs to the Apostolic Church of Armenia; historically, communities established around the Armenian Apostolic Church have played a key role in social structure and political processes, and they are still a key player in Armenian society (Sahakyan & Atanesyan, 2006). The country also has dozens of private radio stations that provide different kinds of music, news, and analysis; leadership on the airwaves corresponds to Public Radio of Armenia (Hayastani Hanrayin Radio).

WhatsApp and Viber groups, alongside YouTube and Facebook, are the most widely used platforms/social media, with around 60% of the total population using them multiple times a day. Instagram, Telegram, and TikTok also have significant engagement, being used by 30–16% of the population (Prisma Research and Analysis, 2023, p. 28).

According to the Armenian population's media consumption shown in Figure 1, the pre-eminence of TV channels can be highlighted, preferably the Armenian ones (84%). Russian channels also have a prominent position (53%). Not all Russian media are necessarily pro-Russian; important information on the Russian media is offered by one member of the sample: "[Russian media] are the main source for Armenians about
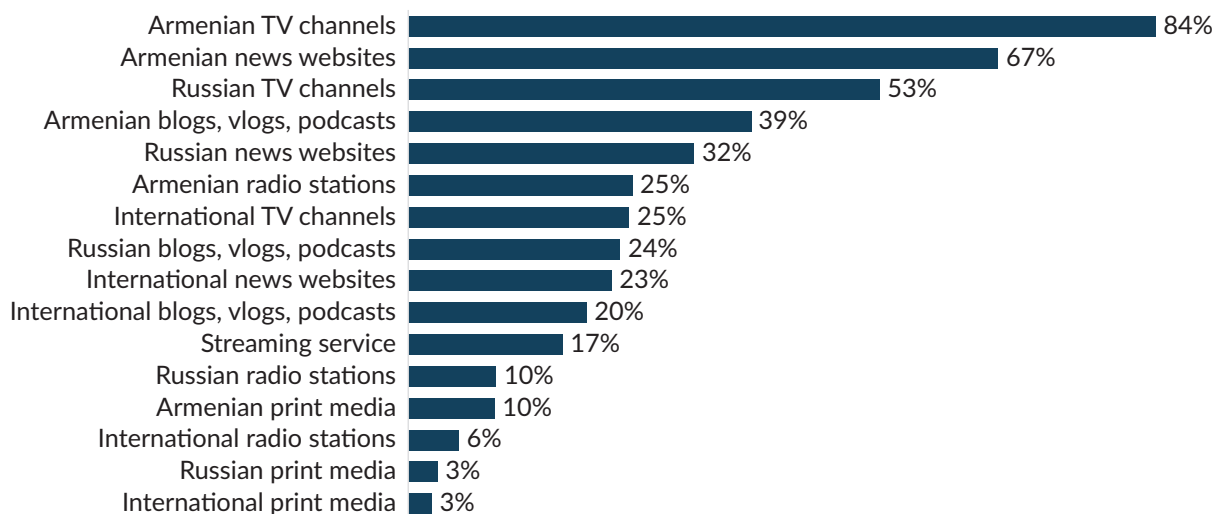

Figure 1. Media consumption by media type among the Armenian population. Source: Prisma Research and Analysis (2023).

international politics as Armenian media outlets don't have journalist correspondents in foreign countries" (Informant 6), which may explain pro-Russian feelings in public opinion (cf. Section 6).

If we look specifically at sources of information for political and social news, according to Prisma Research and Analysis (2023), digital platforms, particularly social networks, blogs, vlogs, and podcasts, appear to be the primary sources with 37% of the responses, very closely followed by TV (36%). Qualitative insights suggest that TV retains its significance as a primary information source, particularly in rural areas and among individuals aged 45 and above (Prisma Research and Analysis, 2023). At a greater distance, we find family and friends (12%), news websites (10%), radio (4%) and print media (1%). If we combine 37% of social networks and 10% of news websites, we see that 47% of the Armenian population gets its news through digital media. An important fact is the increasing shift from traditional sources to internet-based sources for consuming political and social news; the growing trend of accessing news websites via social media (Prisma Research and Analysis, 2023) is particularly noteworthy. This trend shift has also been recurrently pointed out by most of the sample, recognising the value of this trend as an alternative and agile source of information, but also warning of the high danger of misinformation that it might suppose.

Concerning trust in media, we observe that 34% of the population "don't trust any media" (CFIISR, 2021, p. 4). More recent data confirms this trend as 47% find "news presented by Armenian media" somewhat untrustworthy or totally untrustworthy (Prisma Research and Analysis, 2023, p. 30). All these percentages are lower than the level of media consumption, which may imply that people still want to know the truth but do not perceive media sources as appropriate for this. Also, the political elites' anti-media speech, found by the international non-governmental organisation focused on safeguarding the right to freedom of information, Reporters Without Borders ([RSF] 2023), contributes to undermining public trust in the media.

The final element for a full picture of the media structure is that there is a significant market for Armenian media in countries with large diaspora communities. In the USA alone there are over a dozen newspapers, published either in the local language and/or in Armenian. Informants (8 and 12) report that this media has become outdated, and they have no influence on Armenian society as they are very much focused on their local context; in fact, when Armenians in the diaspora want to be updated about current issues in the motherland, they consume Armenian made-in-Armenia media. A different case is that of some diaspora influencers who have followers in their home countries as well as in the Armenian motherland. To sum up, while the "traditional" diaspora media have no influence on public opinion in Armenia, it seems that new platforms (some influencers) are beginning to exert influence. Where the diaspora has exercised influence, both then and now, is in economic matters. Two examples of this are the financial support of some diasporan Armenians who contributed to independent TV broadcasting in the late 1990s (Informant 2), and the Russian diaspora's current economic aid in support of opposition media (Informant 12).

5. Analysis of the Armenian Media System Revisiting Hallin and Mancini's Framework

5.1. Political-Media Parallelism and Media Financing

The entire sample agrees that today's Armenian media are degraded and polarised, as they agreed before on the political system's degradation and polarisation (cf. Section 3). Several explanations are offered for the deterioration of the media, and they can all be grouped into two types: (a) those related to the new digital

environment, and (b) those connected to the political structure, specifically to clientelism, one of the dimensions already explained in Section 3. Among the first group of explanations, sample members point out the voracity and competitiveness that the internet has brought to the media landscape in Armenia: saturation of the market, immediacy that invites unreflective consumption and misinformation, distribution of advertising among more actors, too many new actors, and intrusiveness. Within the second group of explanations, clientelism, informants affirm: "Some media outlets were supported with black money, that is why maybe now we are suffering a big crisis in media" (Informant 3); "no strong politician system, this is the problem, then we cannot have normal media area" (Informant 7); or "wealthy businessman, political figures they think that they should own or control media...because this understanding, they give some easy money to editors and media market is not developing in absolute" (Informant 10).

The whole sample groups the media as follows: (a) pro-government media, (b) oppositional media, and (c) independent media. Pro-government media include some private media and all public media: "Public TV is fully government-oriented" (Informant 4's words, and similar statements from most of the sample). The second group, opposition media, mostly consists of media owned by previous leaders or circles close to them, and "new oligarchs are appearing, and they are controlling their share of media" (Informant 10). What is relevant here is that the media belongs to one person. Two informants (2 and 10) make a distinction in the opposition media. They distinguish between those founded or bought by oligarchs (and/or previous leaders) and the media "for rent": "Other media...as soon as they become influential, they seek somebody with money to shell their influence to" (Informant 10). To sum up, in the first group the media is used to maintain power and in the second to stay active in the political race. Proof of that is that it is common practice to sell the media after bad election results: "[after losing the 2021 elections] dismantled all his media—they were the third force in parliament and they sold TVs, websites, telegram channels....They decided that if their propaganda weapon was not effective they did not want them anymore" (Informant 10). The third group is very small, according to the whole sample just a few can be considered independent media outlets in Armenia. Some media claim to be independent, but voices from the sample point out that they might have "hidden agendas." Independent media are generally supported by international donors (by Western institutions); informants 4, 6, 8, and 9, as professionals in media receiving international funding, declare no direct dictation from the donors concerning editorial policy, which allows them free coverage of national politics: "Western donors are not interfering in editorial policy....It is a matter of values, not agenda" (Informant 9). As regards journalistic quality, a direct relationship can be observed between independent media and the higher quality of their content from a journalistic point of view.

An imbalance is perceived in the Armenian media market: too much media for too little an audience, with an even smaller audience willing to pay for access to news—"Our people not only here also in the diaspora, they prefer not to pay any cents for a content if they can find another content which is free" (Informant 7). Monetisation attempts such as subscription plans have failed ("some colleagues tried, they didn't have law, I think it is too early for us," Informant 8) or are grossly insufficient ("we were doing a special platform where you have to pay to watch the content, for the three months we had it open we collected 18 euros," Informant 7). Both informants also point out that the elites do pay for specialised information (financial, scientific, etc.).

Advertising does not seem to be the solution either. A few explanations are given: the advertising market does not handle large amounts of money because the Armenian market is small and it is now even smaller for private media because since 2020 they have had to share advertising incomes with public TV

(cf. The Armenian Law on Audiovisual Media analysis in Section 3). According to some members of the sample, there is also some corruption in the allocation of advertising: "[In the] previous regime in Armenia, all the ads market was concentrated in the hands of the son-in-law of the former president" (Informant 10). The idea that some advertisers prefer to invest their budget in government-friendly media to avoid possible inspections of their business is mentioned by several informants (1, 2, 4, and 10). Fortunately, large international advertisers operating in the country do not follow this way of thinking, which gives some space for independence. Informant 8 also speaks of how globalisation punishes small markets in terms of advertising, for instance, worldwide streaming platforms undervalue content made in minority languages.

As a result of the above, "It is impossible to be self-sustained, to live without a sponsor" (Informant 8); "unfortunately, I cannot name any media which is independent because it is commercially independent so if it exists, they are not covering current affairs, or political issues, they are just entertainment or sports" (Informant 12). Listening to all the testimonies one gets the impression that the media in Armenia devote as much effort to economic survival as they do to journalistic work itself.

In short, the media is not divided along ideological lines, but according to which group of power each outlet is financed by, thus the media is used to obtain/retain power. Political polarisation is reflected in media polarisation, both exacerbated by economic weaknesses and war pressures.

5.2. Press Freedom

No Armenian reporter/media worker has been killed and none has been detained to date according to the prestigious international organisation RSF, devoted to denouncing abuses of press freedom around the world. However, the same source affirms that anti-media rhetoric from political elites has been established and that this hate speech against journalists goes unpunished, which ends up affecting reporters' work (RSF, 2023).

Only one informant repeatedly speaks of propaganda: "media viewed always as a propaganda weapon" (Informant 10), a comment made in relation to the seven decades under the Soviet system. But it is also made in connection with the war, as we once again see how armed conflict constantly shapes Armenia:

> [The usage of propaganda] is especially critical during wartime, then many people think that media should be a propaganda weapon.

> We had a very unfortunate situation in 2020, when the government was basically under the state of military rule, was forcing the media to only speak about military success. But there was not military success...so people were very surprised and disappointed when they knew we were actually losing land and people. (Informant 10)

The whole sample agrees that there is no machinery for systematic censorship, e.g., all of them declared they were speaking freely during the interviews, on and off the record, which is confirmed by the researchers' perception. However, this freedom of expression has some limits and has fluctuated between governments. Most members of the sample recognise that they can now exercise openly critical opposition which was unthinkable before. To fully understand the comparison with "before," one should not only remember the communist past but also, after the Soviets, there were periods when serious incidents of abuse of power

occurred, such as during the Republic Square demonstrations: "Ten people were killed, in 2008 March 1st, emergency situation declared and many websites where blocked, YouTube was blocked for a couple of days, it was the first time in the independent Armenia when Internet was blocked" (Informant 3). Indeed, a 20-day censorship was introduced by presidential decree after that.

Given this context, the 2018 Velvet Revolution was very welcome as shown in the following data from a national survey. When asked "what kind of expectations did you have from the events (known as "Velvet Revolution") of April 2018?," 82% of the population answered "positive," 12% "no expectations," and just 3% had negative expectations (CRRC, 2020). This peaceful mass social mobilisation brought about a change of government that automatically improved democratic indicators, e.g., from 2018 to 2019 Armenia climbed 20 places in the international press freedom ranking (RSF, 2019). But after that hopeful start democratic deterioration started again, as most of the sample admits. An example of this is media interventionism, "the initial times of this government five years ago, they had very limited influence on media, because most of the media belonged to the previous authorities....They were so popular that using Facebook or other social media was completely compensating" (Informant 12). The turning point was the 2020 war when Armenia lost the sovereignty of Artsakh to Azerbaijan. Since then, several informants explain, the prime minister's popularity has fallen. Before the 2020 war, 67% of the population believed that "the Direction in which the country's domestic politics are going" was the right one (CRRC, 2020). After the defeat in the 2020 war, 45% feel that "Armenia is heading in the wrong direction" (CFIISR, 2021). Even so, Nikol Pashinyan was re-elected in 2021.

Interference in the media takes place via economic and/or legal means. One example is the previously mentioned laws which basically mean a serious decrease in advertising income for the private media (cf. Section 3); weakening private TV channels' finances is a way to control them. Private channels are also controlled through the broadcasting licensing system: "Previous government designed the system the way that only their media could get the license and these guys are not reforming it" (Informant 10; "these guys" refers to the present government).

Another example, explained by Informant 12, is the changes to article 1087.1 of the Civil Code concerning insult and defamation (which came into effect on 23 October 2021). Fines for insulting and defamation have tripled: "You do not go to jail, but you get fines, you get so many debts that you are not allowed to work anymore" (Informant 4). This economic threat undoubtedly reinforces self-censorship among journalists. A further example of government interference in the media has to do with the appointment to positions. The members of the board of the Council of Public Broadcasters of Armenia, which is the body responsible for the management and supervision of the public broadcaster, are appointed by the prime minister. It seems that this process is becoming more formal as, according to Informant 6, the Commission now organises an open call for candidates and a Provisionary Competition Commission elects the members. Even so, cases of hand-picking members to occupy high responsibilities in public media are reported: "Right now, in public TV, the editor of this news department of public TV is the former editor of the prime minister's family newspaper" (Informant 3, with similar observations by Informants 4 and 6).

Maybe because the internet allows more nooks and crannies of freedom, the overall perception of the sample improves when evaluating internet freedom of expression, a perception corroborated by Freedom House (2023), which awards 72 points (out of 100) to Armenia in "internet freedom." In comparative terms,

this score is somewhat better than Armenia's 49/180 place in the world press freedom ranking (RSF, 2023). Even so, several voices in the sample as well as independent research (Prisma Research and Analysis, 2023) warn of the "noise" created by internet-based media and the danger of misinformation.

Finally, it is important to highlight the existence of associations of media professionals in Armenia devoted to improving media independence, currently and actively working on issues such as media self-regulation or protection of press freedom. This commitment to the professionalisation of journalism gives hope for the future strengthening of the media system.

6. Main Findings: A Snapshot of the Armenian Media-Political System

Armenia is an ancient nation but, as an ex-Soviet republic, is de facto a young independent country. It has a history of domination, war, and enmity with its neighbours (Azerbaijan and Turkey) which hampers Armenia's place on the international stage and affects its economic and democratic development. Armenia is considered a transitional or hybrid regime only scoring 35/100 in democratic status (Freedom House, 2023) and ranking 85/193 in the Human Development Index. Since its independence in 1991, Armenia has had several governments varying in degrees of authoritarianism and Russian patronage. The civil society's accumulated discontent (economic struggles and abuses of power) erupted in the 2018 Velvet Revolution— the peaceful social mobilisation that brought a new government and new democratic winds of change. But the loss of sovereignty over Artsakh in the 2020 war plus a few more episodes of governmental interference (in the media, for instance) started to undermine government popular support (though the government was re-elected in 2021), which in turn seems to be leading to a decline in the quality of democracy.

This historical-political context is reflected in the media system. There is plurality in the Armenian media today and more freedom of speech—the voice of the opposition can be heard—but in such a polarised way that it does not contribute to democratic dialogue. Political and media polarisation feed back into each other.

Public media is loyal to the government (hand-picking people for positions of responsibility is common), and the government also controls part of the private media through the broadcasting licensing system and regulations exerting economic pressure. Opposition media belong to former leaders or other oligarchs. In short, both groups, the government and the opposition, use the media either to maintain power or to attain it; an example of this is that selling media outlets after bad electoral results is common practice ("if *my* media does not bring me political victories, I no longer need it" mentality).

There is plurality in the Armenian media system, but there is no independence because news media are not economically self-sustainable; advertising and monetisation initiatives are not enough and sponsors are needed, and this financial dependence conditions editorial freedom. International donors, diversification of donors, and advertising by international companies are identified as the sources of funding that give more independence to the media. Very few media are independent, they are also the ones that tend to offer high-quality journalistic content.

There is no machinery of systematic censorship, although mechanisms such as exorbitant fines for defamation fuel journalists' self-censorship. Freedom of speech exists and according to the international non-governmental organisation Freedom House, Armenia scores highly (72 out of 100) on internet freedom.

However, the shift from traditional sources to internet-based sources for the consumption of political news and, specifically, the increasing trend of accessing news websites via social media might increase misinformation. The dominance of TV and new media stands out, as opposed to the low penetration of radio and print media.

7. Discussion

The first question to be discussed when researching anything in Armenia is its foreign policy, because, as a small young republic, this strongly affects domestic matters, including the political and media systems. To find "its place in the world" is a must for Armenia, as its security, its economic sustainability, and the preservation of its cultural identity (Manukyan, 2021) depend on it. Troubled relationships with neighbours have forced the country to conduct complementarian foreign policy specifically between the UE/USA and Russia. However, the 2020 Artsakh-Karabakh War and the present escalation of enmity between Russia and the West are changing this balance. For some authors, Armenian elites have started to doubt Russia's role in Armenian international policy (Atanesyan et al., 2023). Our findings are partially coincidental with these results, as sample testimonies also point out that the elites' trust in Russia is declining as it is also declining among the citizens. But on this last point our results are not coincidental, because, according to a nationwide survey (Atanesyan et al., 2023), although Armenian society's trust in Russia has consistently declined over the past 10 years, Russia is still considered the main strategic ally by public opinion. An explanation for that may be the major role of Russian media in Armenian society's media consumption, shown in Figure 1 (Section 4). It is also important to highlight that this nationwide survey was carried out before the very recent 19/09/2023 war where Armenia lost and experienced considerable international isolation.

A second question to address in this discussion concerns the strengths and weaknesses of the Hallin and Mancini model. It is clear that the model's dimensions are not sufficient to approach the dynamics of digital age media (Mattoni & Ceccobelli, 2018), nor are they suitable for considering the key role that smart mobs (Rheingold, 2004) play in the 21st-century social changes, that is, the empowerment of connected citizens. Today, media systems research does need to include those two dimensions—information and communication technologies impact, plus the power of cyber-activism—because in present hybrid media systems (Chadwick, 2013), older media merge with and adapt to newer digital media and the news-making process is no longer dominated by elites (Mattoni & Ceccobelli, 2018). To overcome such shortcomings, Mattoni and Ceccobelli (2018) propose to add, for the study of media systems, information, and communication technologies-related indicators transversally in the four original dimensions (structure, political parallelism, professionalism, and the role of the state) plus a new one: grassroots participation. Most case studies already do both. For instance, Vasallo (2020) reports that "the digital landscape scenario reflects the overall national media situation in Malta" (Vasallo, 2020, p. 23), and finds the advantages of it for press freedom: "Access to new technologies has also meant that new, independent newsrooms have emerged…who together with other established media houses, are creating a platform for investigative journalism to flourish" (Vasallo, 2020, p. 23). Our case study also addresses both improvements to the model, a digital vision along the four classic dimensions, plus the new dimension on smart mobs/citizen journalism. Our findings partially agree with Vasallo's results, as on the one hand, the sample members admit higher levels of press freedom on the internet than in traditional media but, at the same time, they highlight negative aspects brought by the internet such as the danger of misinformation, voracity of the market, or intrusiveness. As regards to grassroots participation, our case study reports the key role played by social media during the Velvet Revolution (2018). This insight supports Mattoni and Ceccobelli's

(2018) position: citizen mobilisations are now so important as to rebalance interactions between media and political systems.

Still, Hallin and Mancini's four dimensions for comparing media systems are a milestone, and they have aged better than their three ideal types proposed—Mediterranean or polarised pluralist model, North/Central Europe or democratic corporatist model, and North Atlantic or liberal model—as they themselves admit in subsequent reviews of their own work (Hallin & Mancini, 2012, 2017). The four dimensions have guided our analysis, but the ideal types proposition has also been useful to our work as follows: in the political contexts of media systems, Armenia shares some characteristics with the polarised pluralist model or Mediterranean model (Hallin & Mancini, 2004), such as a majoritarian democracy that allows legal proceedings against media owners which feed journalists self-censorship and clientelism and that sometimes leads to government pressure by selective law enforcement (Papathanassopoulos, 2004). Regarding the role of the state, Armenia is moving towards a liberal democracy, but as a former Soviet republic, it is still a work in progress. We cannot yet completely evaluate the movement of Armenia´s media system from the "Mediterranean-post Soviet" model towards the Liberal model. It would seem that some endemic characteristics, the strong political-media parallelism (government interference and media ownership of the political class), together with the small size of the market (globalisation punishes small markets) are still heavy burdens. In comparable countries, e.g., Malta (a small country moving from the Mediterranean to the liberal model), scientific literature reports that this transition was adversely affected by increased advocacy by all media organisations and, as in Armenia, by the pronounced role of political parties and the limited capacity of a small market (Vella et al., 2023).

8. Conclusions

The health of the Armenian media system is not good. The media is polarised as political interference is very high (power concentration and clientelism) and anti-media rhetoric has been installed among political elites which feeds the low public trust in media (public trust in political parties is even lower). Political elites' media ownership is the rule, thus, media economic dependence burdens media opinion independence. International donors and international advertisers are identified as the best source of media funding for opinion independence, but caution is called for, as it fuels Armenia's dependence on foreign actors, and "hidden agendas" need to be watched.

Press freedom exists but defamation fines reinforce self-censorship. In short, Armenia is just one more case proving that media systems are a reflection of a country's political system. It is not clear yet if the ongoing transition towards a liberal model with a Soviet past helps or constrains the media system. As in other similar countries, the pronounced role of political parties and the limited capacity of a small market are adversely affecting the media system. The committed work of associations of media professionals and some media outlets gives hope for improvement. Moreover, peace needs to settle into place.

Armenia suffers/benefits from the same problems/advantages as any other country in the digital era; the threat of misinformation that comes with internet-based news media versus the internet as a new space of freedom. However, the harm may be worse in terms of democratic quality erosion because the status of democracy in the country is not completely stable yet. The Armenian population was fully integrated into the concept of smart mobs, which was demonstrated by the protagonism of the citizens and social media in the

successful and peaceful Velvet Revolution. Two growing trends have been pointed out: one of accessing news websites via social media, and another of diasporan influencers increasing their number of followers in the motherland. Both deserve further monitoring.

Even though the respondents were a qualitative sample, the heterogeneity of their profiles and the saturation obtained in their responses gives a representative overview of the Armenian media system from the perspective of journalists and editors.

Conflict of Interests
The authors declare no potential conflict of interests.

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