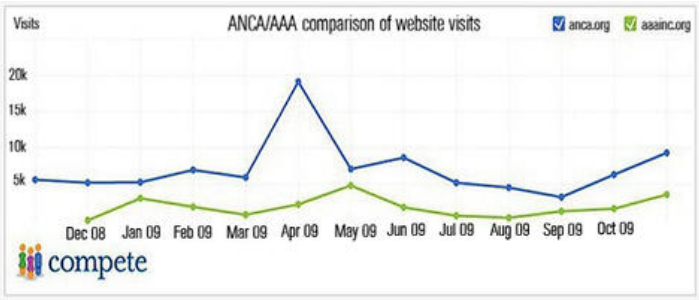
A TALE OF TWO CHARTS

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By Richard K. Ohanian, Los Angeles USA, 9 January 2010
The question of “change” in Armenian political organizations is rather perplexing. Bringing up the subject to a random member of any such organization created over the last 100 years would be like opening Pandora’s Box. There always seems to be a “chicken or egg” problem when it comes to initiating change in an organization with a long history: Should the change come from the top? Or is it supposed to be initiated from the rank and file? Given the very nature of most Armenian political organizations, which are highly centralized and top-down despite contrary beliefs, one can conclude that change will not happen unless the collective leadership of the given organization decides to jumpstart the process.

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But why do we need change? Isn’t the status quo good enough? One can answer that question from various angles; this article is an attempt to make the case for change in Armenian political organizations, especially the ones operating in the diaspora, based on two simple charts.
By the standards of many, the Armenian National Committee of America, aka the ANCA, is perhaps one of the best grassroots advocacy and lobby groups among the various Armenian political organizations. Thus, let’s simply focus on ANCA, to make the case.

Browsing Facebook, one can notice two charts with revealing facts posted on Aram Hamparian’s (the ANCA executive director) Facebook profile—kindly shared with everyone about the ANCA’s website traffic.

The chart above illustrates a comparison between the ANCA website’s (www.anca.org) traffic with the website traffic of the Armenian Assembly of America (www.aaainc.org).

In order to do some rough yet interesting statistical analysis, one can:

1) Assume all of the ANCA’s website traffic comes from “Armenians” residing in the United States.

2) Associate each website hit with a unique visitor of anca.org; hence assume 10,000 hits refers to 10,000 distinct visitors of the ANCA website.

3) Ignore the impact of RSS feed on website traffic.

4) Assume there are about 1 million Armenians living in the U.S.

5) Assume a life expectancy of 75 years for Armenians living in the U.S.

6) Assume a uniform distribution of population in 15 age groups, with 5 years of interval.

That puts about 66,000 Armenians in each age group (of 0-5, 5-10, up to 70-75 years of age).

7) Assume the age groups of 0-15 and 65-75 years of age won't have the capability or the desire to visit anca.org. This excludes roughly 450,000 Armenians, leaving us with approximately 550,000 Armenians who are in an age group potentially capable of using the internet and visiting a website.

8) Let's assume that out of the 550,000, 20 percent are interested in politics one way or another (1 in every 5 Armenians in the age groups of 15 to 65). Therefore we arrive at a rough figure of 100,000 Armenians who live in the United States, have the means to visit the ANCA's website if they choose to do so, and are politically aware, savvy, or active.

Now, out of that 100,000, on average, about 7,000-8,000Armenians visit the ANCA's website on a monthly basis. That comes to be about 7-8 percent of the 100,000 we deduced above. Thus, one can conclude that based on the above calculations, more than 90 percent of the Armenians living in the U.S. who are interested in politics and have the means to go online and visit a "grassroots" political organization's website choose not to do so on a regular basis.

Another important indicator in the above chart is the 20,000 hits the ANCA website received during April 2009. This is a very important figure as it roughly shows the ANCA's penetration level within the Armenian American population. This figure indicates that the ANCA, with its current reputation and activity level, is known only to roughly 20 percent of the "politically aware" population of Armenians living in the U.S. The basis for the above conclusion is the following: April 22, 2009 was a turning point for the Armenian Cause (Hai Tahd), as it marked the announcement of the "roadmap" to normalize relations between Armenia and Turkey. It is safe to assume that regardless of someone's point of view on the issue, a politically and socially aware Armenian American would have visited the ANCA website to gather information regarding the roadmap between the two states, if the ANCA was known to him or her.

Thus, one can conclude the following: After years of grassroots activity, the ANCA, perhaps the most popular Armenian political organization, enjoys merely 7-8 percent popularity among Armenian Americans, and just about 20 percent of the Armenian American population knows about the ANCA and its activities. Put another way, 80 percent of Armenian Americans are oblivious of the ANCA and its activities. That is telling!

In order to gain a greater perspective, one can do a comparative analysis of the ANCA with other ethnic groups involved in foreign policy advocacy. The second chart shows a comparison of the

website traffic of the ANCA and the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC).

Comparing AIPAC and the ANCA is not rocket science, as one could easily conclude that AIPAC is a much more popular and stronger organization than ANCA. For starters, one can compare each organization's yearly budget, or their rate of success with respect to the goals they set, or the power and influence they project in Washington, D.C., and conclude that with more than 50,000 members and a yearly budget of tens of millions of dollars (considering the most conservative figures), AIPAC cannot be compared with the ANCA.

Meanwhile, the traffic AIPAC sees on its website is roughly twice that of the ANCA's: www.aipac.org gets an average of 15,000 hits per month. Yet, the Jewish population in the U.S. is roughly six to seven times that of the Armenian American population. On a population-adjusted basis, therefore, anca.org sees roughly three to four times more traffic than aipac.org does. This leads to the conclusion that it is not the size of the website traffic that matters, but the characteristics of the demographic that is attracted to each website and the actions that each demographic chooses to take—empowered and motivated by its respective lobby group website.
Perhaps a better figure of merit for comparing the two lobby groups is the amount of money the ANCA receives on a monthly basis from its support base normalized by 8,000 hits (the donation the ANCA receives per website visitor) compared with the money AIPAC receives normalized by 15k (the donation AIPAC receives per website visitor). Unfortunately, the numbers are not available for more rigorous analysis; however, one can again make a safe guess and conclude that AIPAC will leave the ANCA behind by great margins. This means that in comparison with AIPAC, the ANCA has to do a lot more to empower, inspire, and motivate its support base in raising funds and achieving organizational goals.

The question that immediately comes to mind is, perhaps, the most important one: Why, after decades of its existence, is the ANCA only known to so few Armenian Americans? This question brings up the many systemic shortcomings and structural flaws in the modus operandi of most of the Armenian political organizations operating in the diaspora today. Readers are encouraged to analyze the fundamental elements and basic principles of the organizational structures, models, and methodologies practiced in Armenian political organizations and note that the prevailing culture and practiced mode of operations in the majority of these organizations date back to the early 20th century. Core processes—such as information gathering and processing, knowledge and manpower management, resource allocations, strategic planning and thinking, decision-making, public relations, youth and community engagement, recruitments, and training—and many more processes practiced in traditional political organizations are obsolete, ineffective, inefficient, and above all repelling. The average age of their membership—which is alarmingly high—is a measurable indicator of the unpopularity of Armenian political organizations among the youth in the diaspora. Hence, it is not a secret that the modus operandi of Armenian political organizations operating in the diaspora

needs fundamental changes. However, why such changes do not occur in the pace they are supposed to occur is the main question that perplexes everyone.

On a tangential note, some readers might consider this analysis to be fatalistic and representing a brand of world-weary cynicism. This trend of labeling those who think "differently" has been consistently popular among the leadership of various Armenian political and social organizations when the latter group is confronted by many who question the status quo. In spite of consistent systemic failures and apparent structural and institutional inefficiencies and ineffectiveness, many "leaders" beat an upbeat drum of optimism about the future, and continue their "business as usual" mode of operations. Unfortunately, this consistent sense of "optimism" has two potential downsides. By refusing to look at our current realities and ignoring the negative consequences of wrong policies set by the machinery of each organization, these organizations can delude themselves about the ineffectiveness of their policies and the inefficiencies of their processes. This trend simply creates a culture that rewards lack of accountability for systemic failures. Focusing on the measurable results such organizations achieved during the last decades, one can easily conclude that most of them are failing both in the diaspora and in Armenia.

A second downside to false positive-thinking is the potentially cruel burden it can impose on the community. For instance, expecting the community to be relentlessly hopeful despite consecutive failures on the part of Armenian political organizations without initiating substantial changes (as opposed to cosmetic changes) only adds to the frustration, isolation, and disengagement of their respective Armenian communities, especially the educated youth. A substantial change could mean imitating the trend adopted in many developed countries, where the leadership of a political party facing a major defeat in national elections simply accepts the consequences of their collective failures and resigns from power or does not seek re-election—to pave the way for a new generation of leaders. Unfortunately, such a healthy process has not been adopted by Armenian political parties and organizations in Armenia or the diaspora.

Hopefully, 2010 will be the year of initiating "change" in the lifespan of Armenian political organizations. And their respective leaderships will be able to envision and jumpstart much-needed change in the core processes of these organizations.