THE WRITER AND THE ARMENIAN REALITY

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Category: Opinions

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This is part two of a two-part series about Armenians and Media published in honor of Catholicos Aram I's designating 2019 "The Year of the Armenian Media. (1)" This article was originally delivered at a panel discussion, "The Diaspora's Second Generation Responds," held in honor of the Hamazkayin NY Chapter's 50th Anniversary on May 6, 2017.

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"Literature is not an ornament, a pleasant pastime or a pretty flower. Literature is a weapon with which to struggle against injustice."

- Zabel Yessayan (1878 – 1943), Armenian novelist, translator, and professor of literature.

This presentation concerns the political stories that Diasporan Armenian writers wish to tell about Armenia, Artsakh, the Genocide, and related issues. What is the purpose of such writing? To convey to non-Armenians and Armenians our "story" so people will better understand us and take our viewpoints and interests into consideration.

Following are 4 Positives with regard to Writers and the Armenian Reality:

1. Diasporan writers usually with some exceptions live in countries with some freedom of speech and the press.

2. Through the work of advocacy groups, writers, and others, the mainstream and alternative non-Armenian media have a better though still limited understanding of and sympathy for Armenian viewpoints, including the Genocide.

3. There is more coverage of Armenian political issues in non-Armenian media than ever before. This is due partly to the existence of an independent Armenia since 1991 and the ongoing Artsakh issue. We should be aware that it's mainly the culmination of many decades of intense political and journalistic work by the Diaspora.

4. There are hundreds of Diasporan Armenian media outlets around the world.

Next are 4 Negatives with regard to Writers and the Armenian Reality:

1. The US, Europe, and many Western and Middle Eastern countries have long-standing political, economic, and military relations with Turkey and Azerbaijan.

2. So, even though press freedom had long been considered a 'given' in Western mainstream media, the news and opinion pieces largely reflect the Pro-Turkish and Pro-Azerbaijani and thus anti-Armenian and anti-Artsakh policies of the US State and Defense Departments, the foreign policy establishment, think tanks, defense and energy industries, NATO, and the Jewish lobby.

For example, even Azerbaijan's self-admitted violations of the ceasefire are treated as if Armenian forces are equally to blame. Many such articles are written by hired hands of the Azeri lobby. One outrageous article accused Armenia of instigating WW III. An article in the infamously pro-Turkish London-based *Economist* magazine said that Armenians merely "left Turkey" in 1915. Thus, Armenian writers and our global Armenian communities wage a constant uphill struggle to counter disinformation and hostility.

3. Armenian communities and organizations have generally not offered a living wage to Armenian writers. Thus, many who would otherwise enter writing professions either choose something else or apply their expertise to non-Armenian media.

4. The concept of "reconciling" Armenians and Turks is gaining popularity with some Armenian and non-Armenian writers (2). Much of this is because various groups invested in advancing this concept are, with payments and/or jobs, luring Armenian writers who, as I noted, are not big wage earners. As we know, some governments and NGOs use so-called "Reconciliation" initiatives to avoid addressing restorative justice for the Armenians and to dismiss the danger Turkey poses today for Armenia.

These realities, positive and negative, can either demoralize us or unite us and spur us into action.

Let's turn now to the "Mainstream American Media" (MSM for short):

A person whether Armenian or not undergoes career advancement in the MSM only if he or she plays along with the game and does not rock the boat. Understanding or sympathizing with Armenian issues is rarely part of that game.

Unfortunately, of the many Armenian Americans in MSM, few have advanced Armenian issues. For example, *The Washington Post's* David Ignatius' long career has been one of mainly praising Turkey (3). The MSM sometimes publishes Meliné Toumani. She advances the erroneous idea that we descendants of Armenian Genocide survivors are "haters. (4)"

In fairness, unless the writer is already very well-established, even a motivated Armenian in the MSM may have problems spotlighting Armenian issues. In 2007, *LA Times* reporter Mark Arax tried to publish an article about the Anti-Defamation League's denials of our genocide. His boss, Turcophile Douglas Frantz, stopped it and reassigned the story to a Jewish writer. Arax was then forced out of the *LA Times,* though eventually so was Frantz (5).

Thankfully there are bright spots. For example, Raffi Khatchadourian of *The New Yorker* has written fine articles about Armenia in that magazine (6). Chris Bohjalian, well-established mainly as a novelist, has written effective articles in the MSM (7).

Do we really wish to see Armenians "make it" in the MSM if they must ignore or undercut our Cause to advance up the career ladder?

Fortunately, the print and broadcast MSM -though still powerful- no longer have a monopoly on the public mind. We must make better use of independent, alternative media (AltMedia for short) which have been gaining strength ever since the advent of the Web. The MSM would like you to think that AltMedia is full of so-called "fake news." In fact, much of the AltMedia are reputable whereas too much of the MSM parrot either the government line or that of powerful special interests across the Left-Right-Center political spectrum.

The good news is that Armenian writers are increasingly using AltMedia. One such writer is Joachim Hagopian (8), whose pieces are frank and controversial but always interesting. AltMedia are a greatly under-utilized resource.

Let's turn to the Armenian Diasporan media. Some advantages:

1. Any aspiring Armenian writer can cut his/her teeth by writing for our Armenian community newspapers and websites. The then-unknown William Saroyan got his start writing for *The Hairenik Weekly* in Boston (9).

2. In Armenian media, our writers can candidly publish on topics that non-Armenian media would not. These articles can also inform and mobilize our masses.

3. We are also seeing non-Armenians consult Armenian media for information, especially now that nearly everything is online.

Now, a caveat:

In Armenian news media, the landscape consists of writers most of whom are employed by various Armenian organizations and political parties. While these writers perform more than capably, they may also have to follow the dictates of the media owners. The owners could be Armenian churches, charities, corporations, political parties, or lobbying groups. An advantage of this reality is that a noble mission, agenda, or political platform of the media owners can be faithfully pursued. A disadvantage of this reality is that your viewpoint may not always be welcome. And, the media owners may not be able or willing to be as critical on some issues as they otherwise would, just as we find in non-Armenian media. This should not deter us from trying to make inroads. Perhaps most important, more independent, self-sustaining Armenian media outlets are needed. This can be difficult to achieve if potential benefactors and advertisers expect editorial conditions to be met in exchange for financing.

Following are 11 suggestions for advancing Diasporan writing in any medium:

1. For Armenian media owners: Please pay your writers, even if modestly. We must encourage aspiring writers and journalistic excellence.

2. To our organizations and communities: Invest in young writers by sponsoring, training, and employing them to serve our people's interests. For example, the Rhode Island-based Armenian

Students' Association provides a journalism internship stipend (10) for prospective candidates with *The Armenian Weekly* and *The Armenian Mirror-Spectator* newspapers. This example should be emulated. To its credit, the Hamazkayin created the Tololyan Literary Award (11) for writers on Armenian topics. The organization also launched a journalistic enterprise called H-Pem, for which emerging and seasoned writers can contribute (12). Another example: Author Margaret Ajemian-Ahnert's Journalism Scholarship rewards women writers in Armenia who must agree to work in Armenia for the same number of years that they are supported by the grant (13). We need more financial aid programs and contests to encourage Armenian writers. Benefactors should stipulate that upon condition of their award acceptance, the winners fulfill journalistic duties that advance Armenian interests.

3. Writers: Consider submitting your articles to AltMedia (14). In the Armenian realm, some examples include independent media platforms such as *Keghart.com,* and *USA Armenian Life.*

4. Avail yourselves of self-publishing platforms for books such as CreateSpace.com or Lulu.com. In my years as a publicist for book publishers, many Armenians who have written works favorable to Hay Tahd have told me of their inability to get their Armenian stories picked up by an agent or acquired by a traditional publishing house. If publishers turn you down, consider self-publishing your story as you would like it to be told instead of revising your story to fit the interests of others.

5. Utilize smaller media. Smaller mainstream newspapers in towns, cities, and regions are being used by Armenian writers for Armenian subjects. These papers are usually more welcoming than larger mainstream media.

6. Post your comments under online articles that touch on Armenian, Turkish, Azeri, and related issues. In Canada, a group of Armenians called Bahag or "guardian" informally monitored the press and responded to falsehoods. Now activists in various locations assume that function. This concept should be emulated around the world.

7. Keep sending Letters to the Editor. While many newspapers may not always welcome and may even censor an Armenian point of view, unpublished letters can have an educational effect on editors. Local newspapers tend to be more open. Let others, such as our advocacy groups, know that you have sent such a letter.

8. Individuals and organizations can hold to tradition and simultaneously evolve. Today, global writers of Armenian extraction are producing works in languages other than Armenian. To address this reality, the NY Chapter of Hamazkayin initiated "Literary Gems and Wine," a recurring event featuring readings by up-and-coming Armenian writers who produce works in English (15). Such programs should be emulated.

9. Network with other Armenian writers and media persons. As our Armenian writers grow in their careers, they and our communities need to remain in contact. One way may be to establish a Diasporan Armenian Writer's Association and Database. While Armenia and Artsakh have journalist

unions (16), we in the Diaspora do not (17). I'd also like to see more English-language media in Armenia employ Diasporan English language editors so that non-Armenians will not dismiss these articles because of inadequate grammar.

10. Realize our strengths. For example, Armenia is on crucial geopolitical real estate though the major powers would have us believe otherwise. Do not let others belittle Armenia's value in an important, volatile area of the world.

11. Each Armenian is a soldier for Hay Tahd. Every one of us is a writer in even the smallest of ways. Struggling against and defeating powerful forces is part of the Armenian DNA. Our ancestors are watching us and we cannot and should not surrender.

ENDNOTES

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