

Media Relations: Tips from leading Armenian experts

# MEDIA DIVERSITY INSTITUTE

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Armenian experts**



Media Diversity Institute, 2004

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# **Media Relations: Tips from leading Armenian experts**

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Journalists' Club 'Asparez' – Gyumri  
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Yerevan Press Club – Yerevan

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## Introduction

**M**edia relations is a universal skill. There are standard techniques, or variations of them, that tend to work in almost any place – and methods that can be guaranteed to fail almost anywhere. Learn the correct techniques, and you will be able to communicate effectively with the media in your home country, or in any other for that matter. The Media Diversity Institute provides international expertise in media relations to Armenian NGOs through manuals and training workshops.

But in every country there are always local idiosyncrasies that can make the difference between merely achieving a good working relationship with the media, and harnessing its power in ways that make your organization really stand out from the rest. These are the things that no-one not from ‘here’ – wherever here happens to be – can think of. Things relating to local tradition, culture or sometimes simply habit.

For this reason MDI has invited a selection of people from Armenia to write a series of tips based on local experience. Some of them are journalists and editors who regularly seek or receive information from NGOs. Some of them are NGO managers with successful publicity track records. Others are public relations specialists who have made careers advising clients on skills similar to those outlined in this manual. Some of the addenda writers are more academically oriented, while others are more practical in nature. All are Armenian, with great experience of working in or with the Armenian media.

Not all of them agree with each other. Nor does MDI necessarily agree with everything that each has written<sup>1</sup>. But each of them has something interesting – and useful – to say.

We hope that, used in conjunction with the universal techniques described in MDI’s other media relations manuals and training workshops, their experience will prove valuable to you and your organisation.

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<sup>1</sup> Particularly MDI believes that journalists should never accept gifts or payments of any kind, because this fatally undermines their objectivity – and therefore their willingness and ability to report the truth at all times. MDI believes that NGOs which seek short-term gain by offering journalists gifts, damage the development of the media in their countries.



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**1. Some recommendations  
from a journalist  
of experience to  
heads of NGOs**

**By Tigran Liloyan, journalist,  
'ITAR-TASS' news agency**

**C**ontacts NGOs have with the press hardly differ from the PR practices of other institutions. There is no need to re-discover America or invent the bicycle anew – it is sufficient to use decades of Western experience, and that of the past decade in our country.

■ Do not try to convert a journalist to your faith, i.e. to make him or her a member of your organization. This is difficult, and sometimes even unrealistic, considering the fact that there are several thousand NGOs in our country. Distributing journalists among all of these organizations or enticing them into membership is out of the question. Make a reporter your ally, companion-in-arms, your partner at worst.

■ Do not get bored of communication with the press. And try to chase away all your doubts that it will expose your dirty laundry to the public. Do not hesitate to invite journalists to your events, activities, conferences, and congresses – a congress or election of a new governing body of your organization is the biggest if not the only chance to appear in the papers or on television screens.

■ It is not enough to conduct a given forum to a high level, it is also important to skillfully publicize the results. Therefore, pay attention to the press release, a document to be distributed to the journalists. It should contain data about your organization – the founding date, its previous heads (particularly in case of persons of great popularity), membership and main problems.

■ Write concisely and clearly. If you have nothing to write about in the report or press release, do not write it at all; if you have nothing to say at a press conference, do not conduct it. Press releases, statements, reports for the press should be brief, clear and comprehensive. Provide details on your organization but, I will repeat myself, do not run it over numerous pages.

■ Do not get carried away with excursions into the distant past of our people. A press release is not the place for a campaign to eradicate illiteracy

about our history, nor is it fiction. It should not be boring, nor should it provoke extreme emotions. It should be a sort of crib for a journalist, containing additional information about your organization, your worthy initiatives and, what is most important, about your activities.

- With the release you could enclose photocopies of previous releases. Of no less importance is your logo. Also, include brief – yes brief, no more than 5-7 lines – biography information on the organization’s leading figure. A professional reporter will skillfully inject this into the material, which will only gain from it.

- Do not complain about financial difficulties and lack of funding – it is widely known to be a common problem. Try not to especially publicize the fact of receiving grants, which may provoke an envious reaction on the part of the journalist, and possibly that of his reader as well.

- A press conference should be well thought through, both with regard to its form and its content. Prior to your speech, do not pass around the hall in order to greet every one present – this American PR technique provokes nothing but an indulgent smile here. Do not attempt to consecrate those present into the mysteries of human history from the times of the forefather Noah. Outline the main, pivotal points, the theses upon which your speech is based. Speak distinctly, correctly, without asides and lyrical digressions. If you lack a sense of humor and are weak on folklore, do not waste your time with jokes.

- Do not let journalists divert the conversation along the lines that is most preferable for them. And do not be astonished at untimely or simply stupid questions – it is probable that the editor, having remembered about you, your organization or your activity at the last moment, has sent a novice reporter who was the first employee at hand.

- Using slides or similar means is hardly very effective, since all of these charts could be printed out and distributed to those present – who will not use them anyway.

- Any refreshments at a press conference – except water – is not customary here. Try to provide a sufficient number of glasses – disposable glasses are preferable.

■ When selecting a site for a press conference, do not go to extremes – there is no need for either a merchant’s grandeur or for the stinginess of a niggard. Find a location large enough to accommodate all the journalists invited. It is important to avoid the crush, but also, in case of a small number of reporters, to exclude the possibility of vacant seats in the hall since they will be highlighted by cameras. If necessary, invite activists or employees of your organization to occupy the vacant seats – they should be at hand as a reserve, to sit intelligently playing the improvised crowd. Mind that your people do not occupy seats intended for reporters – they should be ready to give up their places to journalists. In winter, ask the guests to take off their coats, so that the TV pictures and photographs do not resemble the waiting room at a railway station.

■ When preparing a press conference, send an invitation by e-mail, call the editor-in-chief, and do not be loath to remind him again about the event by phone on the preceding evening.

■ The press conference should be conducted by one person. If there are two people at the microphone, journalists may sense dissension within your organization. Besides, silly statements by your press conference partner may spoil their favorable impression of your speech.

■ Returning to the press release: it should reflect in a nutshell whatever you say at a press conference. By the way, distribute it only at the end of the press conference, otherwise journalists suffering from impatience – as a rule, they are all of this kind – will leap from their seats and, forgetting about the speaker – you in this case – try to get the press release as soon as possible. Having received it, they will lose all interest in you. The number of press releases should be sufficient for all. It is better to have a few extras than to have to promise journalists that they will be copied and sent on to them.

■ The text of any material prepared should be clear, intelligible, written in a good, correct and proper Armenian language. There may be a Russian version (for publications appearing in the Russian language) in order to avoid an incorrect translation – anything may happen.

■ Do not make the report, press release, interview or press conference cumbersome by using complex professional terminology. When composing the text, place yourself in the position of a journalist or the reader, answering the questions you would like to get a reply to.

■ Many organizations prepare a folder containing a notepad, a pen or a pencil, and some souvenir for the journalist attending the press conference. There is no need to do that. Firstly, our press conferences are attended by journalists with their own stationery. Secondly, you may be misunderstood, provoking an unhealthy thought by a journalist about these excesses: “imagine how rich this organization is if it has the opportunity to distribute such gifts!”

■ Make a wide use of the unique possibilities of e-mail and Internet. However, do not send huge texts and photos – especially several photos at once – via e-mail. This slows down the computer at the editorial office, and has a negative impact on the attitude of the editorial staff towards the sender of such huge volume of information – i.e. to you. Try to find possibilities for creating your own website on the Internet.

■ Use any pretext, any opportunity to come to the international media’s attention. When a great power celebrates its national holiday, send congratulatory notes from your organization on its letterhead to that country’s president /king/ prince/premier and its ambassador in Armenia. In case of a September 11<sup>th</sup> attack in New York, make a public appearance condemning terrorism – it should be done immediately, the same day. In case of tragedy, such as what befell the UN mission to Iraq, do not hesitate to write to the Secretary General, express your support and sympathy. Should a parliament of any country ban smoking in public places, welcome this step a declaration or letter. Such things are encouraged abroad. I hasten to add that you should react to the events related to your NGO’s activities. Certainly, everything should be within reasonable limits: the society of vodka or beer lovers would hardly welcome a foreign state’s introduction of prohibition, nor should the guild of carburetor experts comment on new abortion laws in the United States. Do not forget to write on your organization’s letterhead the aim of the organization,

its founding date, etc. In general, a letterhead is the face of your organization: its proper design is an integral part of your success.

■ Feel free to establish contacts with your foreign counterparts.

■ A guarantee of successful PR work with the press will be formation, using Soviet-era terminology, of a body of 'active functionaries', which in the West is referred to as a 'pool' of journalists, who regularly write about your organization, are aware of its ins-and-outs, and know its staff personally. These should be your privileged persons from the media world, 'your' people in its editorial offices. They should be informed about your affairs, plans, trips, activities, etc. It would not be necessary to impress on this pool of activists what your organization is up to, how it should be viewed and what it wants from itself and others. Regrettably, there is practically no specialized press in Armenia. Those that do exist are rare. Therefore, count on publicity in the general press.

■ Generally, do not try to get rid of the media and its representatives as they were irritating flies. In the first place, this will worsen your relations with the press, which is after all considered to be the fourth estate. Secondly, this will prove fertile ground for any of your rivals, competitors or enemies, who could provide discrediting information about you or your affairs to an insulted journalist whom you unintentionally chased off. By the time the information appears in a newspaper, its correspondence to reality is of little importance – just see how hard it is to disprove it. Therefore, the maximum possible respect should be accorded to the press – without however flirting – in order both to feed the wolves (give the journalist material) and save the sheep (for the interests of your organization not to suffer).

■ If anything discreditable is written about your organization, do not panic. Keep in mind that negative publicity is still publicity. Collect your thoughts, first trying to uncover the source of this dirty trick. Sometimes, it is better to ignore it – it depends on the situation and specific circumstances. If you decide to react, parry the information at once, not a week later. Demand a retraction from the editorial office or publication of your counter-comments.

■ Many organizations aspire to publish a newspaper or a bulletin at all costs. Do not take such a rash step: it is a very expensive, and often ineffective to the point of being senseless, since the chances are that your newspaper or bulletin will join the stocks of numerous publications without readers. It is better to spend your efforts and means on establishing relations with, and promoting your organization's ideas and activities to, already established newspapers, or even better, a famous TV channel.

What I have written here are recommendations, rather than dogma, but are based on my 20 years of experience in journalism. Life will certainly introduce any corrections needed to my theory. Take a risk!

■ **Tigran Liloyan, is Armenia's correspondent for the ITAR-TASS news agency. His work appears regularly in Armenian, Russian and French newspapers. He is the recipient of, amongst other prizes, the Annual Award of the Yerevan Press Club "For Respect for the Facts and Being Well-Informed".**

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## **2. Mass information and coverage of disability problems in Armenia**



**By Armen Alaverdian, executive director,  
'Unison' NGO**

**T**he role of media in shaping public opinion on any issue can hardly be overestimated. In this respect, the effectiveness of an NGO's work hinges, to a large extent, on its ability to conduct a successful publicity campaign.

Armenian NGOs are not entitled to engage directly in entrepreneurial activity. As a result, a considerable part of their resources comes from grants from donor organizations or from private donations. But in order to have funds for conducting a publicity campaign as part of the implementation of a grant-funded program, it is essential to have already thought this through during drafting stage – while preparing an outline for the program. By doing this, if an NGO is awarded a grant, it has the means to satisfy the PR-campaign needs of the program.

But competition is severe, and many NGOs may not make the list of the fortunate organizations that receive funding – they may have to make repeated efforts to procure the financial means to carry out their organization's mission. However, contrary to common opinion, working with the media effectively depends not only on the amount of money invested into conducting a PR-campaign, but also on selecting the best methodology for its implementation. I am convinced that efficiently conducted PR work by NGOs can get results without large financial investments – and even in their absence.

Here are some approaches that Unison uses during its work with the media, which have given us positive results, and which we think will also be applicable to other organizations:

1) It is essential that journalists perceive the importance and urgency of the problem raised. Unison addresses problems faced by disabled people, among which a key issue is disabled access –

we at the organization are naturally aware of the essence of the problem, the existing obstacles, and possible means to eliminate them. On the other hand, very few journalists are aware of this issue, and so attach little importance to it, or assume that it will not interest their readers or, in the case of radio and TV, their audience.

Whenever we invite media representatives to an event, we attempt to present the problem in sufficient detail. Even during a short telephone conversation it is possible to single out the main elements of the problem. In this case they are:

- a) people with disabilities make up 10% of the world's population;
- b) as a result of the earthquake and the Karabakh war, the number of the disabled people has increased in Armenia;
- c) as a result of lack of physical access to cultural, educational, trade and other facilities, the overwhelming majority of disabled people are largely barred from many spheres of life. But in other, developed countries, such people enjoy a full life.

It is only after all of this that we mention the event or action to which we invite the media representative, and when and where it will be conducted. If it is impossible to run through this information during the telephone conversation, a written invitation may be sent with a brief summary of the problem and the aim of the given event.

2) One should also note that, if you have sufficient funds, it is desirable to conduct the activities in imposing places (for instance, in the conference halls of the best hotels). Our experience has shown that such places suggest to the journalists that the event is important and urgent – they are more likely to respond to an invitation to such a venue. Otherwise, another approach is also a possibility: after commenting on the pressing nature of the problem, state that it is regrettable, but necessary given the lack of funds, to conduct such an

important event at the host organization's own offices. This may also impart a special acuteness to the topic, which is an effective means to interest the journalist.

3) We always invite *all* the media active in Armenia, irrespective of their political beliefs and orientation. Taking into consideration the fact that the number of Internet users is increasing sharply in Armenia, one should not ignore electronic media as well. In general, there is no reason to fear that "too many journalists will come". On the contrary, it is always possible that too few will attend the event. To minimize this problem, where possible we try to fix a day for the event that avoids undesirable clashes. For example, one of our press conferences took place on a day that three others were occurring simultaneously, including the press conference of the chairman of the National Assembly. Under these circumstances, the small number of journalists present at our press conference on disability issues was not surprising. We learned from this sad experience – we started to follow the political ins-and-outs more closely, as well as advertisements for future events.

4) It is crucially important to establish personal ties with media representatives. Such ties have been a help to us, particularly in taking our PR campaign on to the leading Armenia TV channels – coverage which undoubtedly contributes to the solution of the issues we raise.

5) The tactics mentioned so far relate to ensuring the active participation of media representatives in events and activities. No less important is the issue of how a specific issue will be covered. The current stereotypes and labels concerning the disabled ('confined' to their wheelchairs, helpless, poor, ill, handicapped, etc) have unfortunately become clichés for our media. Such entrenched approaches have a negative impact on public opinion formation. To ensure proper coverage of a specific issue, we prepare one-page press releases

for each event, which concisely sum up the main aim of that event and detail the activities that will contribute to the solution of the problem being addressed. When addressing media representatives during oral presentations we ask for their assistance, emphasizing that without it we will not be able to carry out our mission and change public attitudes towards disabled people. This approach usually contributes to mutual trust and interest.

6) At round-tables, press conferences, other public events and personal interviews, we aim to make it clear to journalists that our work concerns and defends the interests of real people. Factual evidence – photos, videotapes, documents, personal ‘success stories’, etc. are more convincing to journalists than nice but empty talk.

■ **Armen Alaverdian is the executive director of the ‘Unison’ NGO for assistance to those with special needs, which was founded in 2001 with the aim of defending the interests of the most vulnerable layers of the population. From the first months of its establishment, Unison has paid special attention to work with media.**

### 3. The press and NGOs

**By Hakob Avetikian, editor-in-chief,  
'Azq' newspaper**

**W**hat can be done to establish cooperation between NGOs and the press? This is an urgent question. The fact is that for the majority of NGOs, the press and the media in general are not freely accessible and, as a result, wide sectors of the population are not informed about the activities of these NGOs. This lack of publicity prevents NGOs from testing the impact of their organizations, or the validity of their principles and methodologies.

To overcome this situation, it is essential to view things as they are, and to admit that there is deep and mutual reservation between media and NGOs. Investigating the causes of this distrust is a problem. In the first place, the number of NGOs and their spheres of activity in Armenia are so numerous and diverse that those responsible for the press think, not without grounds, that the existence of the majority of them is unnecessary. Some even believe that these organizations have been created to introduce division and cleavage to the nation. There exists another viewpoint: that the majority of NGOs have been established to keep the flow of grants and credits coming, and that if these were to dry up, that these NGOs would immediately disappear.

Many editors and journalists think along these lines: "Your organization is a 'grant-consumer', so be so kind as to share these grants with my newspaper, radio or TV company – otherwise why should I promote you? Nobody gives us anything free of charge, and so you should pay as well..."

The reserve is mutual. NGOs, in turn, commonly complain – and not without grounds – that the media do not publish, announce or broadcast anything free of charge, and consequently that, cooperation with them is senseless.

How to overcome this state of affairs? What is the way to transform NGO-media relations into inter-

active communication benefiting society? It is here that the necessity of using modern PR techniques becomes apparent, though unfortunately these are not practiced in Armenia due both to the lack of professionals and a lack of proper attention to this field. The basis of PR is mutual understanding. Here my focus is not on individual or international recognition or on ties, but simply a study of how for media chiefs and their journalists work.

For instance, many of our NGOs think that if they organize a seminar or a round table and invite media representatives, that those representatives are obliged to attend and to cover the event. But no editor or director can afford to have an employee devote so much time, perhaps 4-6 hours to such an event. Besides sending an invitation, the NGO in question should give to the media, at the end of the event, a press release with relevant photos. This press release should not be extensive, but should concisely present the topic of the day, its importance for society, the opinions expressed during the event, and the conclusion. Experienced PR specialists usually enclose in that press release information for the editor, in which they provide additional data about the organizers of the event and the issues discussed, giving the editor freedom in deciding on its importance and applicability. The press release should not exceed one page in length. Editors appear to be – and usually are – very busy people who do not have time for reading extensive material. The press release should not have a fixed heading since editors prefer to formulate the headlines themselves.

It is effective when heads of NGOs bring the invitation to the editor personally. It is an opportunity to communicate with the editor and to emphasize the importance of the event. It is a very productive way to ensure the presence of the most influential media.

Our NGOs should realize that in our country it is the print media in particular that experiences serious financial difficulties, and it is not fair to

expect extensive coverage from the newspapers without a reciprocal attitude. Consequently, when preparing an initial budget for a program, an NGO should allocate some funds for the media – not as a payment for a report or an article (no grant providing organization will agree to this type of ‘bribe’) but for advertising an event or activity. The prices for advertisements are not high in Armenia, at least nowadays. A paid announcement published in a given newspaper 2-3 times might be very useful in creating a positive opinion of an NGO, a positive atmosphere surrounding it. It should always be taken into consideration that editors are usually very attentive to their advertisers’ activities and try, as promotion, to provide positive coverage of their various activities. Armenian banks started to work in this manner, with some results.

Naturally, a journalist should not be offered bribes. Sooner or later the editor will uncover this, his antipathy towards the NGO in question will only be aggravated.

There is one more local characteristic. Armenian TV stations, due to their less numerous production levels, are more willing than their foreign counterparts to cover the activity of a given NGO. Certainly, this situation cannot last for long – in the near future TV companies will try to focus exclusively on significant events. However, for the time being it is possible to use this opportunity by focusing PR on TV station directors. However, there is a trap here, in which local NGOs are frequently caught. The editors of the print media follow the evening TV news and often prohibit the use of, or order the removal of, information about events covered there – and rightly so. The reader does not like to see in the morning newspaper, a press release about an event he watched on TV the previous evening. In this respect, print media and TV stations are permanent rivals. It is essential to select a different strategy for cooperation with the press, whose readers are always from the social layer closely following all events and happenings



– the NGOs’ target group. For instance, material on the event can be provided to the newspapers one day earlier – this will especially interest the editor. Editors usually refer to this style of press release as material of the “happened tomorrow” type.

Finally, it should be emphasized that establishing personal ties and friendly relations with media decision-makers is of decisive importance. Having a good attitude towards the editor and his journalists, attention to birthdays and other events, as well as phone calls and personal visits may contribute to winning their favor.

■ **Hakob Avetikian has been editor-in-chief of the Yerevan-based ‘AZG’ daily newspaper since 1990. He is originally from Lebanon, where he was a correspondent, and later chief editor, at the ‘Zartonk’ newspaper. He is a member of various journalistic associations and their governing bodies, including: the journalists unions of both Armenia and Lebanon, the Media Association of Armenia and the Yerevan Press Club.**

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**4. And how does your  
NGO's activity benefit  
ordinary people?  
A strange question  
indeed**

By Levon Barseghian, editor  
'Gyumri-Asparez' magazine

*"An ox can be approached from the rear,  
a horse - from the front, for the former  
not to butt and the latter not to kick..."*

(Hrant Matevosian, Armenian poet)

**I**t is a strange question, isn't it? But there are hundreds of public organizations in Armenia that do not have an exact answer to this question, that have not thought about it, or found time for it despite activities ranging up to five years in duration. By a strange coincidence, it is the heads of these NGOs in particular who grumble most frequently that media do not pay proper attention to their organizations' activities.

This discontent can only be partially justified. If we analyze the early history of NGO-media relations in Armenia, it becomes clear that NGOs were to blame concerning the issue of media disregard and indifference towards them. From the media's side, this 'disregard and indifference' was actually more of a bluff used to provoke NGOs into paying for coverage of their activities.

It is undoubtedly the fault of NGOs that their relations with the media over the past few years cannot be referred to as anything but commercial. NGOs have developed bad habits with the media. If the media now says, *"You have received a grant, have you... then pay"*, it is the inexperienced, naïve heads and managers of the NGOs that are responsible. *"The shooting of a report about an NGO costs this much, broadcasting, that much - repeat broadcasting enjoys a 50% discount..."*, is now a typical response to phone calls from innocent NGO people trying to focus the attention of media news services on their activity. *"If you want us to make a film about you, it is a different sum of money. If it is a joint program, a talk show, we will do it with pleasure for X hundreds of dollars..."*, as if NGOs have been created to feed the media. Where in this is the media's role of acting for society? And is it only NGOs that are in need of a TV debate or radio interview on a hot issue?

On the other hand, during 10 years at the head of a profit-seeking media organization, I have heard more than 30 different accusations by NGO directors along the lines of: *“Why isn’t our activity covered?”* My reply has been the same each time – if you conduct activities of public significance and we are informed about them, then omitting them is out of the question for us. But if your activity serves your personal needs or those of a donor, then we are not interested. I am still of the same opinion.

In NGO-media relations, the issue “to cover or not to cover” resembles a game of cat-and-mouse. A person in a media organization needs to understand – perhaps by guessing – whether the NGO presenting itself is a potential financial customer or not, and only after that decide on a course of action. If there is even a small chance of being paid, or if there are funds allocated in the NGO’s program for the media, coverage will by no means be free of charge. (The issue in question certainly does not concern typical paid services provided by media such as announcements and advertisements proper).

In Armenia the current situation is that the lion’s share of media outlets view any report on NGO activity as an advertisement. One can hardly explain to the media that much information can be both news and advertising at the same time – information designed to gain an advantage necessitates an advertisement, but the widespread appeal of a piece of information can turn it into news. Certainly, when the efforts of an NGO help prevent an environmental disaster, or facilitate the movement of physically handicapped people inside a high-rise building with no elevator, information on these activities is primarily of social significance. It could hardly be characterized merely as an advertisement for the NGOs concerned.

But, under the present circumstances, media will not cover and comment on such events from the standpoint of public interest. They view them

only as advertising for NGOs. To put it mildly, they disregard their social function and transform themselves into casino slot machines. Such media are numerous in Armenia.

What can be done to eliminate the deep-rooted negative stereotype of NGOs as ‘grant-consumers’? What can be done to alter the obstinate position of those media loath to see any social benefit from NGO activities, and prone to view their activities only through the prism of financial gain?

First and foremost, it is essential that NGOs, as public organizations, be genuinely public. They should assess anew their nature and the purpose of their activities, to answer the question – what benefit do we and our activities, and all the paperwork of our offices, actually offer to people? Have we turned into just paper-pushers and bureaucrats? Do we exist for society, for the protection or implementation of a socially significant ideal – however small – or it is that society exists to serve our ideals? In reality do we exist, egoistically, for ourselves?

When an NGO feels that it has been created for society, when a social ideal predominates in its activity, when it exists for the people – and not vice versa – in this case it will understand that media is important only as a means for communicating information. Fulfillment of a concrete ideal of social significance does not depend on the degree of media attention given to an NGO. It is under such circumstances that the media loses its extreme importance for an NGO, and the psychological barrier of not being noticed, not being covered, not being revealed to the public, gradually disappears and is finally overcome. It is in such cases that there is a shift in the roles in the NGO-media relationship – the media finds that it has become secondary.

A pinch of indifference towards a previously arrogant media, and suddenly it is the journalists that begin to seek cooperation with the NGO. *“So, how*

*is it going, do you have any news for me? Keep us informed.*" A little bit of false disregard towards a media organization that remembers NGOs only when it smells of money (it is possible to invite all media to a press conference, but 'accidentally' forget about somebody) and it will come around, asking, *"And what about us?"*

NGOs should keep in mind that, unlike them, media organizations are actually rivals – and frequently bitter ones. Occupy the place in the center. An ordinary press conference or briefing, on a socially significant issue, will bring the rivals to your door. After that, want it or not, they will return to follow you and your activities.

It is possible to go one step further, and instead of publishing thousands of booklets that simply become waste paper, to establish such media that will be not be profit-seeking (and shamelessly greedy for money) but social, people-oriented media. Some NGOs are already working in this direction.

■ **Levon Barseghian, based in Gyumri, Armenia's second largest city, is the editor of 'Gyumri-Asparez' magazine and the President of the Council of "Asparez" Journalists' Club.**

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**5. Hard work and  
successful results are  
not enough: it is time  
for NGOs to reconsider  
their approach  
towards PR**

**By Elena Kurdian, PR specialist,  
USAID/IBM Business Consulting**

**“W**ho cares about public opinion?” These words, expressing disappointment and helplessness, can frequently be heard among our citizens. The truth is that the people’s voice has remained a theoretical ideal – in practice it has little chance of reaching the ears of state officials and decision-makers. But at the same time, the necessity to overcome public indifference and civil passivity is stressed from high level rostrums – it is an issue that is placed on the agenda of numerous meetings, congresses and conferences. What is the sense of it all?

It is not right merely to blame deliberate disregard of public opinion as the main cause of this situation. It also points to the lack, hindrance or inefficiency of communication mechanisms. This explanation is supported by the fact that it is not only the higher circles whom NGOs are failing to reach with their messages – society in general also has a poor knowledge of public organizations. The majority of our citizens characterize the activity of NGOs solely as humanitarian, and if asked to name some organizations, struggle to recollect even a couple.

NGO workers, who come together voluntarily to devote their time and efforts to solving society’s problems, frequently act in a narrow circle. Their work remains hidden to the public at large. With the exception of several notable success stories, important programmes implemented by various NGOs come and go like rain in the desert – the results of the work, the experience acquired, the methodologies developed, are buried in dust and oblivion, leaving no visible trace.

It is essential that NGOs seriously reconsider their approaches towards public communication and develop skills for organizing this activity. There is a popular saying, “A speaker needs an audience”. However, when it comes to public communication, it is also important to clearly perceive the role and activities of the speaker.



The most obvious misconception among Armenian NGOs is the assurance that their activities will speak for themselves. It is important to realize that hard work and successful results do not guarantee that news about it will reach the people who might be interested in it, those whom you wish to keep informed about your ideal or the work accomplished. It is always necessary to remember that information is a commodity that should be 'wrapped' and 'served' to the customer (in this case your audience) in a proper manner. Only in this case can you expect your message to be heard.

There is no need to re-invent the bicycle. Public communication mechanisms have been developed and are effectively operated everywhere. IJF/MDI's 'Media Relations Handbook for Non-governmental Organizations' presents all the chief mechanisms whose proper application has proved efficient the world over. Armenia is no exception in this case. There are certainly some distinctive features here, but they are of a technical nature. For instance, the use of electronic mail has not yet reached a high level of popularity in our country. Ordinary correspondence is also not very effective. In contrast, telephone communication or direct contacts are widely used. The principle, however, remains the same: in each particular case, the one responsible for the public communication should be realistic, selecting the means of communication most convenient to the audience.

In their relations with the media, NGOs frequently build into the relationship a number of prejudices that stem from incorrect interpretations of previous failures. Two of these prejudices are the most widespread.

The first may be summed up by the following statement: "Journalists seek only sensation or conflict. Issues that are really important do not interest them". Accusing journalists of looking for sensational, unusual, extraordinary material is equivalent to complaining that water is wet. Ultimately, any journalist serves his audience and does his best to prepare material, be it an article or a programme, that will interest the audience. Bearing this fact in mind, it is essential to present your

activity in such a way as to bring out its peculiarities, to emphasize its most important aspects to the public. It is natural that a boring event, press conference or press release – even one devoted to a hot topic – will not provoke interest.

The second prejudice is the idea that journalists frequently distort facts and words. Extraordinary events do happen in which incorrect information is deliberately provided – in such cases the only way out is to resort to the law. However, blaming a journalist is not always right. Often it is the organizers of the event who were unable to present the information appropriately, by failing to give exact answers to journalists' questions, or by failing to create conditions for the journalist to clarify all the obscure points.

Both types of prejudice point to the same necessity: information should be properly 'wrapped' and 'served'.

Last but not least. In the field of public communication in general and in establishing relations with journalists in particular, keep in mind that your ultimate target is not the journalists, but their audience. To be on television or radio, or in a newspaper, is not an aim in itself – any media is only a loud-speaker that transmits your message or information. Your final aim is to bring that message to the attention of the people you are working to benefit. Otherwise, you risk recreating the mistake of one NGO at an event it planned for the distribution of humanitarian aid: parents of the children eligible for the aid were barred from entering the hall where the aid was being given out. Assembled journalists immediately turned from being potential ambassadors for the NGO, to spokesman for the humiliated and dissatisfied parents.

■ **Elena Kurdian is a PR specialist at USAID/IBM Business Consulting. She studied journalism at Moscow State University, and worked at several Armenian newspapers before entering public relations. As a PR expert, she has worked for both NGOs and on the staff of the President of the Republic of Armenia.**

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## **6. Ten recommendations to my colleagues**

**By Vigen Sargsyan, External Affairs Officer,  
The World Bank Mission in Armenia**

**I** could never have imagined that after 16 years of work in the print media (and at a most dramatic historical period) I could have settled into such a bureaucratic institution as the World Bank as an 'External Affairs Officer'. This title involves the shaping of the World Bank's image, work with the press, ties with the NGO sector, monitoring of political and economic developments, provision of internal information flow within the institution, coordination of several programs and other responsibilities. The diversity of the bank's activities and its "open door" policy are the two main reasons that have inspired this work, termed 'public relations' – or the already 'Armenian-sounding' abbreviation, PR. This is a profession that has just celebrated its 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary in Armenia.

It is impossible to analyze our current situation in a few paragraphs. The issue of freedom of information remains a critical problem in Armenia. It is not surprising that a relevant law has only recently been adopted in our country, and has not yet been put into action. On the one hand, state officials attempt to use the media to create their personal images; on the other hand, PR specialists have a low level of professionalism and, as subordinates, are in a dependent position. One should also comment on the carelessness of the press when it comes to reporting. In short, whether we speak of providing, receiving or presenting information, the country has a long way to go.

Here I offer to my colleagues 10 practical recommendations that have been forged in the crucible of my past five years' experience:

1. Try to work with a 'selected group' of journalists. Here I do not mean the 'elite', but the establishing of constant ties to specific journalists. This gives the journalists the opportunity to learn the ins-and-outs of the NGO, and so to acquire proficiency in coverage of its themes.

2. Before reporting anything, try first to understand your audience. What professional, educational, political, and cultural interests do they have, what kind of information do they need? How adequately does your information meet the concerns of the audience?

3. Always remember that you will be judged primarily as a personality, and only after that as a spokesman for the institution. Meeting with either the public or media is a 'personified' type of communication. Thus, the image of your organization directly hinges on your perception of and devotion to the audience.

4. Provide short, clear and memorable messages. Public information, and especially that reported through electronic media, requires short and precise messages. TV new pieces often do not last more than a minute-and-a-half. The information reported in those 90 seconds should catch the audience.

5. Never resort to bureaucratic language or to professional terminology. Both styles are unacceptable for the general public and the media. Moreover, it is especially difficult to establish a bond with the audience using these styles.

6. Each and every interview is a bilateral agreement. It should be clear beforehand who will conduct the interview, what topics and problems will be raised, and what the duration will be. Assisting the journalist in the preparation of a specific topic will improve the coverage. (Few journalists find the time to read numerous reports and analytical articles). Always use facts and figures to enrich the material presented.

7. It is more efficient to serve as an interesting, balanced and reliable source of information than to regulate communication with the media. Apply a constant approach to journalistic restrictions and responsibilities. Patience, assistance and understanding will help to improve the coverage given to your NGO.

8. One of the most important elements is the institution's communication strategy and its plan of activity. Irrespective of the size of an organization and its position in the society, the strategy should make clear what mission and aim it has, what messages should be sent to the public, and through what media and PR techniques the institution should communicate with the audience.

9. Each PR specialist should have a clear perception of whom he is supposed to serve: the boss, the institution or the public. Prioritization here has a direct impact on the PR specialist's efficiency.

10. Each public information officer should ultimately be conscious of the fact that he is obliged to ensure freedom of information and fulfill constitutional rights for the granting of information.

■ **Since 1998, Vigen Sargsyan has worked for the World Bank in Armenia as an External Affairs Officer, dealing with public relations, the media, and relations with the NGO sector. He spent 16 years prior to that working in editorial positions at 'Ayzhm' weekly, 'Golos Armenii', 'Novoye Vremya' and 'Respublika Armenia' newspapers, and writing for a number of others. He is a member of the Journalists' Union of Armenia and the Yerevan Press Club, where he has been a board member since 1995.**

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**7. Lessons from our  
10 years of good – and  
bad – PR experience**

**By Artak A. Saroyan, Secretary General/CEO,  
Armenian National Union of YMCAs**

*“Communication with various sectors  
of the public to influence their attitudes and  
opinions in the interest of promoting  
a person, product, or idea...”*

(A definition of public relations)

**P**ublic relations directed at the mass media is a good tool for promoting an NGO's work and ideas. Over the past 10 years the Armenian National Union of YMCAs has had both good and bad experiences of it. Learning from those experiences, the YMCA has developed standard mechanisms for dealing with mass media representatives during PR campaigns.

Before talking about those mechanisms, which are basically a list of practical steps, I would like to share some more general thoughts the importance of working with mass media.

It is important to understand, that depending on an NGO's profile, its mission, vision, strategies, and the role of its PR component, can and should vary. Let me give two examples.

■ If the main direction of the NGO's work or current major projects is related to advocacy and awareness raising issues (for example the promotion of a healthy lifestyle among young people), then excluding a mass media PR component could lead to complete failure. Mass media PR is a very powerful tool for mobilizing society to solve problems. Regular information can change people's attitudes and behavior, and force decision-makers to be more competent. In such cases, it is vital to work intensively with the mass media using all means of transmitting information.

■ If the main direction of the work or current major projects is related to services (such as aid, rehabilitation, or humanitarian pro-



grammes) then mass media PR can be used to present the organization, the completed and the ongoing work. In this case the absence of mass media PR may not cripple the project, but it can cause difficulties – such as making it more difficult to find funding for future work.

I closely follow publications, articles and TV programs, and I think that Armenia's NGO sector presently pays most of its attention to enlightening people about concrete problems, possible solutions and the substance of its work. The consequent raised public awareness brings its own results – growth in memberships, local assistance and so on.

Many organizations have a PR strategy document. (For example, such an information strategy document is being developed at CRINGO, the Caucasian NGOs Network, of which the Armenian YMCA is a member). Sometimes the document will contain specific information strategies, defining what information should be broadcasted, how often, the target audience, which media should be used, the frequency of updates, and possibilities for feedback and evaluation. Such a strategy allows staff to plan annual, or other regular PR activities, allowing greater effectiveness in their work with mass media representatives.

Internet and IT service PR should be mentioned. Today the Internet is a very effective way to be represented 24-hours a day. An organization's website can become a widely accessible electronic business card. Youth organizations can use the interactive element of the website to attract their young members to communicate, discuss different themes, vote in surveys and polls and even play games. A website is also a convenient tool for virtual libraries and resource centers. I would advise any NGO to following the 'hit' statistics of its website, which will give a clear picture of which pages are visited more often, showing where to focus the most effort in keeping the information up-to-date.

The importance of distributing e-mail publications should also be mentioned – and immediately I would like to caution those who decide to rush in to this. Carefully target your audience! Many advertisements are distributed by e-mail, with the recipients frequently not warned before being included on the distribution list. To reach your audience via e-mail effectively, and without unpleasant reactions, never sent e-mail publications to unsolicited recipients unless you are sure they are really interested in receiving such e-mails – and always give to your recipient a way to unsubscribe from the distribution list. The YMCAs in Armenia have just started to use Internet for their PR work, but already consider it an important means of publicity.

However, newspapers and other printed publications, radio and TV still remain the most effective media for PR work in Armenia. In comparison to the Internet, work with these media requires much more preparation. Practical steps developed by the Armenian YMCA for work with these mass media are as follows:

- Create a planned scenario of the action or event, which you want to be covered by the media;
- Target an audience and select the appropriate media outlets;
- Inform journalists and other media representatives in good time;
- Prepare and distribute a brief printed overview of the organization and its work, a text of any speeches and presentations or other information that you want to publicize or broadcast. This will help avoid misunderstandings and mistakes;
- Provide correctly printed names and translations if needed;
- In the case of a press conference, checking that the date does not clash with other important events will result in greater press and TV coverage, and so greater impact;

- Expect approximately 70% of journalists invited to actually attend;
- Allocate enough time for question and answer sessions – the more questions that are answered, the better picture of your work will be drawn;
- After the press conference try to ensure that everything was clear to the journalists.

Of course there is no ultimate recipe for successful media PR. On the other hand, following some of these steps will make the process of 'learning-by-doing' a little easier. Good luck!

■ **Artak Saroyan has been an active member of the YMCA movement in Armenia since 1994. In 2001 he was appointed Secretary General/CEO of the Armenian National Union of YMCAs, and has also worked of the European Alliance of YMCAs based in Prague. He is a member of the Information Strategy Development Group of 'CRINGO' (the Caucasian NGOs Network).**

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**8. Four strategies that  
have been successful  
for us**

**By Tatevik Tovmasyan, PR manager,  
'Arena of Education' NGO**

**I**t is no easy task to explain the relations of our NGO with the media, or evaluate our strategy in this sphere. Why not? Because we, the NGO, represent only one side of this interaction – on the other side is the media itself. The different positions of the two sides coincide on some issues, but not on others. When they do not, the strategy adopted by the NGO to inform the public of its achievements in a timely manner becomes crucial.

I will not focus too much on the instances when we organize or implement a program which, due to its urgency, immediately catches the attention of the media and the public, who both inevitably become aware of our organization and the event in question. And please note that the Arena of Education organization does not claim to possess extensive experience in PR, because it is only three years old.

To best describe our achievements, I will focus on four general factors:

1. the organization's 'Ideas of Gyumri' newspaper, through which it publicizes its activities;
2. the fact that certain members of our NGO have professional education and skills in the sphere of journalism, which greatly contributes to the organization's PR successes;
3. that anyone from the educational community who needs publicity gets this opportunity through us;
4. that the NGO has established excellent business ties with local and regional educational bodies.

Let me address each of these factors in detail.

1. "Ideas of Gyumri" newspaper: When our organization was established, one of its goals

was to provide constant interaction with the educational community of the Shirak region – including expressing that community's concerns and problems. We very quickly understood that for cooperation to be fruitful, it was essential to create a favorable environment for the educational community's integration, mutual contact and self-expression. It is for this purpose that the organization established the 'Ideas of Gyumri' publication. This newspaper has created a channel through which the organization voices the opinions of wider circles of the population, conducts analysis and arrives at concrete conclusions. Its success may be judged by the fact that, though the newspaper is published using a grant, its popularity is so great that it may later be self-supported by self-financing. Certainly, the publication helps to focus public attention on our activities, with the result that members of the educational community reading the newspaper:

- a. are informed about the organization's activities;
- b. understand that the newspaper offers them a forum to express their ideas, raise issues of concern to them, and introduce their opinions on problems;
- c. discover contacts with whom they may cooperate, raise and solve the problems they are interested in.

**2. Journalism education and skills:** The fact that some members of our NGO have professional education and skills in journalism assists our organization in two very important ways:

- a. the organization's PR is planned and implemented more systematically;
- b. because of their contacts with active members of the media scene, there is a certain subjective attitude towards covering the organization's activities and separate programs, sometimes based purely on personal ties. (This is especially so in a city like Gyumri, where everybody in this field knows each other).

**3. Publicity opportunities:** Because we realized that modern information technology is not widely available to all the educational centers of the region, and consequently that not everybody has information on developments in the education sphere, our NGO collects, edits and distributes information to interested parties. The organization constantly hosts round tables, conferences and trainings, in order to provide members of the educational community with the opportunity for self-expression. (This contributes to and ensures their future active cooperation with the organization). Naturally, this leads to exposure for our NGO and a relationship between it and the media.

**4. Business ties with local and regional educational bodies:** The last factor upon which I would base the success of our NGO's PR, is its level of cooperation with local and regional educational bodies – which is the result of considerable effort. The point is that these bodies, having the primary mandate and responsibility for the education sphere, are themselves in acute need of effective cooperation with NGOs. However, here one needs to consider the current situation in Armenia, in which a state official may welcome or ignore offers of cooperation with an NGO. The contacts and ties of our NGO with these bodies ensure our participation in the bigger picture – and constantly enlarge public awareness of our organization. Bear in mind, however, that in a transitional society such as ours, good relations with the state or with local-government bodies may be misunderstood – may be misinterpreted as signs of being aligned to them.

■ **The 'Arena of Education' NGO, based in Gyumri, Armenia's second largest city, specializes in education issues: problems facing teachers and factors that impact on the quality of education. Tatevik Tovmasyan is a practicing journalist and a journalism lecturer at the Gyumri State Teachers' Training Institute. She does PR work for Arena of Education, the Gyumri Development Foundation, and other organizations.**

## About The Media Diversity Institute

**T**he London-based Media Diversity Institute is a non-profit, non-partisan organisation which promotes conflict resolution through diversity reporting in developing societies.

The institute's Reporting Diversity Network (RDN), brings together journalists, news organisations, media assistance centres, journalism schools and others in a collaborative effort to mobilise the power of the news media in support of a deeper public understanding of diversity, minority communities, inter-group conflict, and human rights. The RDN promotes the highest standards of professional journalism as they relate to coverage of minorities, diversity, and inter-ethnic relations, and develops the tools, training vehicles and practical reporting initiatives required to implement those standards.

Fair, accurate, sympathetic and in-depth reporting is vital in promoting understanding between different groups. The media has all too often been used as a weapon, promoting prejudice and discrimination. MDI aims to change that and turn media into a tool for strengthening human rights and democracy.

### **We do this primarily through education, training and co-operation with:**

- practicing journalists;
- journalism professors and academics;
- media owners and decision-makers;
- media, human rights and minority organisations.

Our comprehensive approach, dealing with the issue of diversity from all angles, is the Institute's unique characteristic. We train journalists and media managers in best practice; we teach minority organisations how to communicate with the



media; we work on strengthening minority media and we work with the journalism professors who will train future generations of journalists.

**MDI activities are divided into nine main areas:**

1. diversity awareness training for journalists and media decision-makers
2. practical diversity training and professional development for mid-career journalists
3. diversity reporting news production initiatives, including team-reporting and news agency projects
4. diversity curriculum development, in cooperation with journalism faculties
5. media and public relations training for minority groups
6. projects designed to promote reconciliation through the media
7. production of diversity handbooks, resource manuals and training manuals
8. post-conflict professional development for journalists, with a special emphasis on Post Trauma Stress Disorder (PTSD)
9. media monitoring of diversity-related issues