

Media and Fight against Corruption

On the crossroad of perceptions

It is not a secret that the public attitude regarding media coverage of corrupt practices is equivocal. Some perceive this as a process of “standing somebody up”. Others see this coverage as a political order. The third are certain that the media coverage and facts will yield no consequences. There are the forth, who rejoice at the courage demonstrated by the reporters; the fifth who consider such media references as another set of ineffective activities implemented within the framework of a grant or a project, and the sixth who regard such efforts as one of the pseudo-imitation components of fight against corruption. But eventually what is the role of media in the fight against corruption?

The expert opinion, intuition, one’s feeling of powerlessness and finally, the discreet populism hint the same idea, “the role of media is extremely important for fighting corruption”. The pessimists will insist that no matter what media does, the outcomes will not be tangible: individuals and reporters will suffer consequences for nothing...

Actually it won’t be inaccurate to claim that on both sides of corruption there are mostly the pragmatic, and for the pragmatic the truth is whatever works. Corruption is something that works - it is everywhere; it is effective, feasible and easy. The pragmatic can work out some clear perceptions regarding the role of media, which are as follows:

- I can hide information from media;
- I am too small of a figure for media to be interested in me;
- Hurting me, the media will hurt the more powerful as well, so it won’t do it;
- Media can be bribed as well;
- Media is not free. It is controlled, and one just needs to know where the control panels lead;
- The journalist is also human and as such, has certain things to lose in this life. S/he also has personal needs and interests.

Public demand

It is widely acknowledged that media presents whatever the public is interested in and demands. In Armenia perhaps not everything is offered on such a basis. However, it seems that there is really no public demand for the theme of corruption and materials regarding it. It is a fact that the Armenian society is marginalized and whenever one side hears, reads and watches something bad about the other one, they feel excited - this is pleasant news for them. However, this “pleasure” can hardly be called a public demand. Is the society ready to take the role of an active agent, rather than a passive observer? Is there awareness that when a journalist reports on a case of corruption, s/he is inevitably at risk? It is difficult to provide a unanimous answer here. One thing can be predicted though: it is highly unlikely that today the society will support the brave journalist and protect his/her fundamental rights and professional career, and one reason for such behavior can be the fact that the society itself is not organized.

Vicious circle and the quest for exits

The society is weak and anticipates the support of the media. Journalists want to feel the protection of the society, feel that their back is secure, but they don't. The society is weak to be able to defend journalists. In such cases mutual assistance is the way to self-empowerment. In fight against corruption an artificial unity between journalists and society is impossible. Small steps and successes, gradual establishment of mutual trust – this is the prescription that seems to be the most feasible and doable one at the moment. One thing is certain: the fight against such a complicated phenomenon as corruption, should not be unpremeditated, at the same time, however, it should not be planned very minutely, with clear distribution of roles. Among the necessary steps are

- the cooperation between experts and journalists;
- creation of conditions ensuring a certain degree of at least the financial independence of the journalists;
- complementarity of journalism, investigation and research components and acquisition and use of new methods;
- ensuring institutionalized involvement of TV, radio and paper media, as well as civic institutes in the process;
- a statement/warning issued by the government and the political forces for the pragmatic: “media will deal with these issues. Watch out and be ready!”

The issues are numerous. We'll mention a few:

- Any discourse about corruption eventually is generalized and aggregated on the level of the whole field and faces a deadlock, since even the technical instruments to construct a dialog about the theme are not yet worked out;
- The issue is too tightly hidden behind the curtains, and there is a hidden fear to share opinions with a journalist;
- There is a lack of experience and inadequacy of skills to engage in profound analyses, inability to make a bigger step and go beyond mere investigation of concrete cases, inability to separate people from the problems;
- The scope of shadow activities is large in media as well, and this connects to the “hierarchic” reality of Armenia with the threads of corruption;
- The effectiveness of various projects remains on a low level and strangely, even some international grant projects “avoid” the media institutions that have been working effectively;
- Today regional media lacks a proper degree of freedom even more so, than their urban counterparts;
- The economy being corrupt itself, makes media economically (commercially) dependent.

It seems that this list could go on for pages, whereas the solutions are being late.

The paper is elaborated based on the opinions passed by the participants of the discussion “The Role of Media in the Monitoring and Analysis Process of Fight against Corruption”, which took place on April 13, 2006. The roundtable discussion was attended by independent analysts, government officials, and representatives of the international organizations and media. The round table was organized with the support of British Council.