

# Media vs. Public Opinion: A Look into Armenia's 2018 Elections

---

A Thesis

presented to

the Faculty of Humanities

at Notre Dame University-  
Louaize

---

In Partial  
Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the  
Degree

Master of Arts in  
Media Studies

---

by

LORY HOVIVIAN

MAY 2020

**© COPYRIGHT**

By

Lory Hovivian

2020

All Rights Reserved

Notre Dame University - Louaize  
Faculty of Humanities

Department of Media Studies

We hereby approve the thesis of

Lory Hovivian

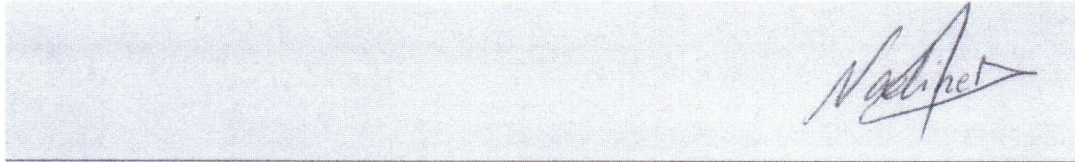
Candidate for the degree of Master of  
Arts in Media Studies - Advertising

---

Dr. Maria Bou Zeid



Chair



Dr. Nadine Karam

Committee Member

---

Dr. Rita Sayyah

Committee Member

## Table of Contents

<b>I. Introduction: Elections and the Media .....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>II. Literature Review .....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>III. Theoretical Framework.....</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>IV. Research Questions.....</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>V. Methodology .....</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>VI. Social Media, Public Opinion and Politics .....</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>VII. Cultural Politics and the Media as a Means of Propaganda.....</b>	<b>36</b>
<b>VIII. Social Media Reshaping Political Campaigning in Armenia: Is the Media Free? .....</b>	<b>41</b>
<b>IX. Data Collection and Analysis.....</b>	<b>47</b>
<b>X. Conclusion.....</b>	<b>55</b>
<b>References.....</b>	<b>61</b>

## **I. Introduction: Elections and the Media**

Media “misinformation” has garnered an increased importance in recent years with the emergence of news channels and their significant role not only in news reporting, but in their evolving influence in the formulation and determination of public opinion in the areas of political, economic, cultural and social issues. With new types of media outlets such as alternative media or citizen press emerging daily, the role of the media has increased. Traditional media has become liable in the issues it covers, and thus has an undeniable effect upon the objectivity and integrity of its readers and listeners.

Moreover, it has only become clearer that the relationship between public opinion and media misinformation is an urgent issue to address, and one with needs further academic and methodological evaluation.

Parliamentary Elections were held in Armenia on the 9<sup>th</sup> of December 2018 namely because the parties in the Armenian National Assembly were able to elect a candidate for the position of Prime Minister just two weeks after the resignation of incumbent Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan on October 16, 2019. These constituted the first held elections post the 2018 revolution, as well as the country’s first-ever snap elections (News.am 2018). The outcome of the elections was an overwhelming victory for Pashinyan’s Alliance (My Step Alliance n.d.), receiving an unprecedented 70% of the vote and winning 88 out of the 132 seats in parliament (News.am 2018).

The media in Armenia encompasses mass media outlets which are based in the Republic of Armenia, from television stations, to magazines, and to printed media, newspapers and other forms of digital and online media (BBC 2018). All of the aforementioned are operated by both state-

owned and for-profit institutions and corporations, which heavily rely on everything from advertising, to personal and corporate subscription, and other sales-related revenues including paid interviews, exclusives and other event coverage. As of 2018, the independence and transparency of media outlets in Armenia and its capital has been under fire – particularly in their coverage of political events, government policy and particular public officials (BBC, 2018).

Moreover, despite the reality that the Armenian Constitution does guarantee the freedom of speech as well as the freedom of expression, media freedom remains restricted among threats of a resort to violence and harm, political inferences, as well as defamation lawsuits in cases where a negative light is shed on anyone powerful or in a place of authority throughout the country (Eurasia.net 2019). Armenia is currently ranked as the 80<sup>th</sup> globally as per the 2015 Press Freedom Index report which is compiled by the international organization Reporters Without Borders (RWB) and has not moved from this position for the past four consecutive years (RWB, 2019).

Moving from this reality, a correlation between the turbulent political atmosphere within Armenia and the current situation of its media portrayal has yet to be tackled. Moreover, the politically charged and often bias media portrayal of various public servants and more specifically figures such as the Armenian President and Prime Minister, has fueled controversy and swayed public and popular opinions alike. Looking at the outcome of the elections in Armenia in 2018 from a “media influenced” lens has not been researched, documented or even recognized – this trend has been overlooked completely amidst bribes to the media as well as political backing of major media outlets.

**Thesis Statement:** Online and offline media outlets in Armenia used their unique ability to sway public opinion, shift public perception and influence social and political outcomes in Armenia's latest elections.

## **II. Literature Review**

### **a. Historical Background: 2018 Elections in Armenia**

Serzh Sargsyan, an Armenian politician who served as Armenian Prime Minister twice, and as the third Armenian President between 2008 and 2018, found himself in a political turmoil and popular resistance amidst his attempts to hold on to power successively despite multiple public statements that he would not be running for elections again (BBC 2018). After winning in the February 2008 Armenian Presidential Election thanks to the support of the ruling Armenian Republican Party, a party to which he conveniently serves as chairman, Mr. Sargsyan assumed office in mid-April 2008. On the 18<sup>th</sup> of February 2013, he was then re-elected as President for a second successive term and completed the term's entirety (Herszenhorn, 2013).

Although vowing not to become Prime Minister once more during a public speech in 2014, he publicly supported an amendment of the Armenian Constitution the following year which would allow for his re-election. Subsequently, Sargsyan was re-elected as the Prime Minister of the Armenian Republic in April 2018, in what political opposition and non-supporters termed a “hold onto power” (Gritz 2018). Less than one week after assuming his position as Prime Minister, Mr. Sargsyan resigned following the outburst of massive national protests and allegations of tampering with elections and a manipulation of power – even questioning the constitutionality of the elections themselves in light of convenient amendments approved by Sargsyan while he was in office (Gritz,2018).

Nikol Pashinyan has been serving as Prime Minister of Armenia since the 8<sup>th</sup> of May 2018 and had worked as a journalist and editor for years prior (Al Jazeera 2018). Pashinyan was imprisoned for one year for defamation of character against then Minister of National Security, no other than

Serzh Sargsyan – beginning what multiple scholars evaluate as the beginning of budding tense relationship between the two politicians. In close support and identification with former President Levon Ter-Petrosyan, he began his career highly critical of Ter-Petrosyan’s successor, President Robert Kocharyan, as well as then Defense Minister Serzh Sargsyan and their political allies (Demytrie, 2018).

Pashinyan headed an opposition party in the year 2007 throughout the Armenian Parliamentary Elections, gathering a modest 1.3% of the vote (Demytrie, 2018). He has always been an outspoken supporter of Ter-Petrosyan, who was defeated by Serzh Sargsyan in an election popular opinion and various media outlets dubbed as “filled with fraud and violence.” Moreover, Pashinyan had a noteworthy role in the post-election protests which broke out across Armenia, and which were violently halted by government forces on the 1<sup>st</sup> of March 2008 and resulting in the decease of ten individuals (Demytrie, 2018). Pashinyan, accused of “organizing mass and public disorders,” re-emerged in mid-2009 (Demytrie, 2018). He was elected to the Armenian Parliament with the support of the Armenian National Congress, in 2012 (Demytrie, 2018). He was a major leader in the 2018 Velvet Revolution which subsequently resulted in the resignation of Prime Minister Serzh Sargsyan’s government followed by his own resignation. On the 8<sup>th</sup> of May 2018, he was elected to Parliament (Demytrie, 2018).

### **b. Media Effects**

There is an abundance of research that highlights the agenda-setting effect of the media upon social and political realities. In fact, multiple studies have indicated that the simple act of covering topics in the news may immediately introduce those topics into audience discourse, in effect getting people to discuss them or care about them (Belt & Just, 2008). This effect was clearly highlighted by Iyengar and Kinder’s 1987 book *News That Matters*, in which the researchers present evidence



that “[...] *the media actually precedes public agenda*” (Belt & Just, 2008). The research describes an experiment whereby individuals are exposed “*to one of three different presentations of the news over a 4-day period,*” and where “... *the researchers found that the experimental groups expressed greater concern about the issue that had been featured in their respective newscast.*” (Newhagen & Nass, 1989).

The extent of media exposure is also often regarded as a factor in media effects research, as it was for Fridkin, et al. (2008) in their multi-methodological research project with the aim of comprehending the impact of media coverage following the presidential campaign debates in 2004 (Fridkin, et al. 2008). The working group of researchers undertook a content analysis of various media outlets including television, the internet and newspaper coverage in the immediate 24-hours following the 2004 Presidential Debate in the United States (Fridkin, et al., 2008). They contrasted this alongside data from a public opinion survey and tackled the “stability” of attitudes about the running candidates among people who either were or were not exposed to the televised or covered debate. Noteworthy within the context of this literature review is that the extreme and comprehensive level of media saturation during an election season offers very few citizens the luxury of escaping the common news agenda – often having it follow them on their devices, their screens and even in their car radios (Fridkin, et al., 2008). The research then concluded that “[...] *theoretically, the coupling of intense media coverage and a one-sided story should influence citizens’ attitudes of the competing candidates*” (Fridkin, et al., 2008).

Moreover, Hardy and Jamieson (2005) found that specific wording of a published poll and the subsequent report about it by a particular news or media outlet may not only influence the outlet’s audience perceptions of two running presidential candidates, but may even effect the manner through which people vote – a term they call “voters attitudes” (Hardy et al., 2005).

The authors argue that coverage of a poll also sways “the conversation of the nation” – often highlighting realities and statistics which are tampered with or even tailored to subliminally affect voter sensitivity and turnout (Hardy et al., 2005).

On another note, the “Spiral of Silence” theory depicts public opinion as an “essential human trait” that exercises its own influence upon both individuals and the governments in power (Noelle-Neumann, 1991). Noelle-Neumann determined that the very social nature of human beings leads individuals to fear being isolated – a reality propagated by society when one adheres to unpopular “opinions and behaviors” (Noelle-Neumann, 1991). On popular public opinion, Noelle-Neumann affirms that citizens acquire silence and make it part of their daily routine and subconscious approach to delicate matters in order to avoid isolation by a larger group which provides them with security or comfort (Noelle-Neumann, 1991). In her analysis of multiple experiments of this theory by other researchers in the fields of Social Sciences, Noelle-Neumann makes the claim that any failure of the theory has been tested without taking the media into account (Noelle-Neumann, 1991) She asserts: “[...] *Rather than refuting the theory of the spiral of silence, the ‘silent majority’ shows how strongly the mass media must be seen to influence the process of public opinion. The tenor of the media generates a threat of isolation.*” (Noelle-Neumann, 1991).

It is also fundamental to keep in mind that the effects of the media are the product of a delicate relationship between the different forms of media themselves. Before the emergence of the Internet as a leading force in the media realm, Simon made the argument that newspapers, more so than television, radio or magazines, determined the likelihood of whether or not a person will or will not vote (Simon, 1996). Subsequently, Simon created an index which looked into two dimensions: *exposure to the medium* and *intensity of use*. He then went on to analyze voter turnout patterns, looking into demographics, other political variables and the subject’s fluency in personal dialogue

about the ongoing political/presidential campaign. Simon found that only adults who stated they followed the ongoing campaign through newspapers were found to be most likely to turn out during election season and cast their vote (Simon, 1996).

In the age of the internet, Drew and Weaver's stress that attention not to newspapers and printed media, but rather to television, televised debates, and online media and news platforms were "*important predictors of voter learning of candidate issue positions and voter interest in the election campaigns.*" (Drew & Weaver, 2006). On the issue of political involvement among audiences, the research specified a significantly fading influence of newspapers compared to the age before the internet (Drew & Weaver, 2006).

### **c. Political Participation and Voting Trends**

More important than measuring political knowledge is the measurement of when that knowledge influences a political decision or the outcome of a political election – stressing its effects on voting attitudes and trends. Bowen discusses the overwhelming impact of political advertising upon when voters select their running candidate (Bowen, 1994). Utilizing prior research completed by scholars and analysts before him, Bowen determined that voters who decide early-on mostly reinforce existing preferences (Bowen, 1994). On another note, voters who decide later on in the electoral campaign are less likely to be invested in the campaigns, and are furthermore more swayable, gullible and less knowledgeable about political news. (Drew & Weaver, 2006). He stated: "[...] voters who decide during an ongoing campaign, tend to make the most use of the greatest range of political communications." (Drew & Weaver, 2006).

These three areas of literature support the thesis in its three fundamental angles namely: Media, Elections and Politics. The historical trends and the derived literature assist in the development of a timeline which builds up to the current standing of Armenian politics, its media and its influence as well as the electoral procedures. Moving from this point, the theoretical framework will tackle two theories to support the literature: Spiral of Silence and Public Opinion: Fear of Isolation, and Agenda-setting Theory: Public Agenda Setting

### **III. Theoretical Framework**

The research will rely on two theoretical approaches in order to tackle the subject-matter at hand: The Spiral of Silence Theory and the Agenda-setting Theory. Each theory will be applied to the research through a media lens in an attempt to analyze the effects of media perception and media exposure upon the civil and political occurrences following the Armenian Parliamentary Elections of 2018.

#### **a. Spiral of Silence and Public Opinion: Fear of Isolation**

As stated previously, this theory encompasses a political science and mass communication theory which was proposed by Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann. The Spiral of Silence Theory dictates that individuals have a fear of isolation, and that this fear essentially stems from the notion that society generally possesses the tendency to isolate or exclude members of a community simply because of having non-mainstream opinions (Noelle-Neumann, 1991). This fear of isolation accordingly leads to maintaining silence instead of vocalizing what may be deemed as a controversial opinion (Noelle-Neumann, 1991). She essentially stresses that the media is an important factor in relating both the dominant idea as well as in the perception of this dominant idea (Noelle-Neumann, 1991). The theory further explains the development of social norms across the micro and macro levels (Noelle-Neumann, 1991).

#### **b. Agenda-setting Theory: Public Agenda Setting**

The Agenda-setting theory depicts the ability of the media to effect the significance placed upon particular topics of the public discourse or of what is referred to as the public agenda (Mccombs, n.d.). With agenda setting falling under the realm of social science, it also aims to predict outcomes through the promotion of a particular item on the “agenda”. Meaning, if a news item is given more

coverage than others, the audience will consequently and subconsciously regard this particular piece of news as more important (Mccombs, n.d.). Agenda-setting theory was officially developed by both Max McCombs and Donald Shaw in their study they conducted upon the American presidential elections of 1968. Following this initial development, multiple studies have found that what the media determines fit for the news in multiple countries directly correlates with their views on matters in the areas of politics, society, economy, norms and culture (Mccombs & Shaw, 1968). Subsequently, countries which tend to possess more political power and leverage are more likely to receive the aforementioned media exposure – as a powerful individual or entity would receive the same type of exposure on a micro-scale (Mccombs & Shaw, 1968). Agenda-setting describes the manner through which the media attempts to influence viewers, and even choose not reflect reality at all, but rather filter and shape it. Moving from this point, the following angles of research will be considered and tackled through the research questions below.

#### **IV. Research Questions**

1. To what extent do various social media outlets affect popular opinion in the areas of political representation in Armenia?
2. What is the theory behind the power of the media influencing public opinion? And to what extent is this power utilized transparently in the areas of covering Armenian elections?
3. Is the media the sole influencer of public opinion in Armenia? And if so, which portals are mostly resorted to in Armenia for political news and opinion shaping?

The aforementioned two theories are directly correlated to the research question in that they assist in understanding two main factors:

- How voters and public opinion is swayed because of a fear of moving against a “reality” such as the hold of a particular political figure to power – making his hold on power a norm in a sense.
- How public opinion is swayed in favor of a particular political candidate when it is not transparent or non-bias – but rather when it highlights the political figure in a portrayal which is inaccurate in order to shape a reality in the minds of voters.

## V. Methodology

This research will be tackled through a Qualitative Approach. Qualitative research is a scientific method of observation to gather non-numerical data. This type of research “*refers to the meanings, concepts definitions, characteristics, metaphors, symbols, and description of things*” and not to their “*counts or measures*”. This type of research answers *how and when* a certain phenomenon occurs contextually – taking into account various specific and incidental approaches which are particular to the subject one is studying (Sauro, 2015).

Qualitative approaches comprise research concepts and methods from multiple established academic fields – most of which are within the realm of Social Sciences. Qualitative methods are ideal for researching the *why and how* questions of human experience and have assisted strongly in the field of Sociology in the areas of understanding governmental and social programs (Sauro, 2015). Qualitative research is mostly utilized by political scientists, social workers, and education researchers (Sauro, 2015). Moving from this approach, the research questions will be approached through conducting expert interviews with political scientists, media experts and civil society activists for their insights on the correlation between the theories used throughout this research and the political framework and occurrences which rippled into civil society and public opinion. The following sample of interviewees was selected due to their multi-disciplinary approaches to the topic. They have extended beyond their discipline in order to work on links between both the theories of politics and media, as well as their association with broader themes such as electoral behavior, electoral processes as well as social and political activism. The sample has been subsequently diversified to include political scientists, activists, academics and media experts in order to tackle the research questions from several angles of expertise and analysis. The request for interviews was sent out to over 15 selected interviewees, most of whom chose to remain



anonymous due to the fact that they are either affiliated to a political movement, broadcasting agency, or an online platform that they do not wish to represent in these interviews.

Through using both interview questions and probes, the interviewees (two from each aforementioned category) were questioned with a series of inquiries revolving around the notions of political participation, the influence of a political figure on the masses through social media, the politicized social media channels and outlets, as well as on the role of lobbying and civil society activism in the electoral process. All major guiding questions as well as the generated probes (each set of probes specific to the flow of the interview and direction of the conversation) generally guided the interviewee to respond openly and freely while remaining anonymous. The general guiding questions were along the lines of:

1. What are the political implications of the resignation of a public servant?
2. What are the major factors which would influence a public servant to resign?
3. To what extent does public opinion matter to a Politician?
4. To what extent is the media capable of shaping the public image of a politician?
5. To what extent is media controlled or bribed in Armenia?
6. Do political parties own any media outlets? Is the media politicized?
7. What is the on-the-ground role of civil society in Armenia?
8. What generally inspires a mass protest or a demonstration?
9. Do Armenian media outlets selectively cover the news during elections?

Some of the major probes in the interviews pertained to discussions about the interviewees' personal experiences with the topic at hand in their work, research and political efforts. The probes generated some interesting findings into cases in the region as well as Armenia but did not necessarily depict a pattern in response to the research questions.

The most fruitful findings from the interviews were derived from the guiding questions as well as the discussion about the selectivity of the Armenian media in particular. The discussions about social media and its emergence in Armenia proved to be very helpful in answering the research question as well.

The data collected from these expert interviews, coupled with the comprehensive desk research conducted in the literature review, laid the foundation for answering the research question and complement the literature and applied theory in answering it. The Qualitative Approach used in this thesis will assist in gaining insight into the psychology behind the applied theories, as well as into on-the-ground realities which cannot be concluded from solely resorting to desk research or a literature review.

## **VI. Social Media, Public Opinion and Politics**

### **a. Social Media in Politics**

The use of social media in politics refers to the utilization of various online social media platforms in the political processes and activities of a particular campaign and for a particular candidate. Social media platforms subsequently include online platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn, Snapchat, Pinterest, Viber, and WhatsApp. Political processes and activities encompass all the activities which correspond to the governance of a country, region or autonomous area. This includes political structure/organization, global politics, all notions pertaining to political corruption, the hierarchy and functions within political parties, as well as political norms, processes and value systems.

Subsequently, the World Wide Web has expanded and improved over time, and has also gone on to generate a means of communication which plays central roles in delivering and distributing news. Social media, naturally in this development, has gained the power to alter not only the message being delivered, but also, the dynamics of political realities, corruption, morals, values, and the dynamics of conflict and competition within the political "game" in countries all over the world. Because of the use of social media in the electoral processes, the emergence and reporting of international conflicts, as well as in diplomacy in Armenia and all over the world, it has become increasingly difficult to ensure any form of privacy. This has also made absolutely everything susceptible to the opinion of the general public locally, regionally and internationally - further allowing for the change in public perceptions of political realities and understandings.

Social media has been celebrated as a mean for communication which allows anyone with an Internet connection to become not only a recipient of media, news and the latest in local and

international realities, but also as a mean which allows each and every one of us to become a "content creator" and often a "generator" of the news and the information we spread. The notion of "new media populism" depicts the manner through which citizens themselves may allow the general public to have an engaged and active participatory role in swaying and altering the political discourse in the modern era as social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, continue to enhance people's access to information about political processes and political discourse no matter what age they are and from what background they are from.

These platforms have in turn facilitated the dissemination of political information which may at many instances counter the messages disseminated on mainstream media, and in turn also counter the tactics that are often centralized, and include high barriers to entry and manipulation before a message is dispersed to the public. Writer Howard Rheingold characterized the community that social media creates in the following manner (Rheingold, n.d.):

*"The political significance of computer mediated communication lies in its capacity to challenge the existing political hierarchy's monopoly on powerful communications media, and perhaps thus revitalize citizen-based democracy."*

On another note, Derrick de Kerckhove describes the new technology and emergence of new trends in social media as follows (Rheingold, n.d.):

*"In a networked society, the real power shift is from the producer to the consumer, and there is a redistribution of controls and power. On the Web, Karl Marx's dream has been realized: the tools and the means of production are in the hands of the workers."*

The two aforementioned scholars point at one fundamental thing: the role of social media in democratizing media participation. This phenomenon which these scholars attribute for aiding in

the development of a new era of "participatory democracy" (where all users capable of contributing to the news and expressing their opinions publicly and immediately), may fall short of the ideals that this form of communication was set to live up to.

Multiple scholars argue that the effect of social media as well as its influence upon political discourse and aspects such as the outcomes of elections, vary from one country to another, with domestic political structures playing a greater role than social media in influencing the manner through which citizens express their opinions on current political affairs involving the state.

### **b. Social Media and Political Communication**

A clear example of how this works prior to the research delving into the Armenian case, is the case of the electoral and political processes in the United States, where adults who have access to the internet are increasingly receiving political news and political information through various social media outlets at almost every moment of the day. A Pew Research study from 2016 found that 62% of American adults receive all their information about politics and the electoral campaign, especially the Presidential one, from social media (Pew Research Center, 2016).

Additionally, Twitter and Facebook quite expectedly lead the social media platforms on which the majority of these users' log on in order to receive this information. They use the platforms to acquire news on everything from leisure, to entertainment, to personal interests, but mostly use these platforms for the latest in political news and realities in a concise and "straight to the point" manner - often simplified for the average reader/citizen to understand no matter what kind of educational, social or professional backgrounds they come from (Pew Research Center, 2016).

According a Reuters Institute Digital News Report from a research series they published in 2013, the percentage of "online users" that express sentiments about news-related subject-matters across

the globe spans between 1 and 5%. On another note, significantly larger percentages of users utilize social media platforms in order to comment on already developed or shared news, with this participation ranging from 8% in Germany to 38% in Brazil and other countries of Latin America (Reuters Institute, 2013).

The rapid spread and dissemination of news information via social media platforms, which is then subsequently circulated by "word of mouth", can most definitely influence the perception of political figures rapidly amidst the spread of information about these particular political figures which may or may not be true depending on the political affiliations/agendas/alliances of particular individuals and agencies using these outlets (Reuters Institute, 2013). When political information is attained in this manner with intention, the spread of information on social media for political means may or may not in fact benefit the ongoing political campaigns of major political figures. It is for this reason that one of the major aspects of running a political campaign in the modern age is the "control of the information" and not so much the political campaign and promises themselves (Reuters Institute, 2013). On another note, the word-of-mouth dissemination of negative information regarding the "public image" of a political candidate or a serving political figure who is already in office, can be damaging not only to the public perception of this figure, but may often generate permanent stigmas this particular figure cannot escape (Reuters Institute, 2013).

### **c. Social Media in Sparking Attention**

Social media, particularly the news that is spread through them, directly feeds into the notion of an "attention economy". The notion of "attention economy" highlights the fact that the content which attracts or subsequently generates more attention will ultimately be viewed, shared, and dispersed quicker than news content that does gather as much attention or interest from the general

public (Kane, 2019). Prof. Tim Wu from the Columbia Law School in the United States coins the definition of attention economy as “the resale of human attention.” (Kane, 2019)

Communication platforms such as social media have proven to be incredibly persuasive. They mostly are successful in changing or influencing or reinforcing opinions in the areas of political views mainly due to the fact that they encompass an overwhelming number of ideas, personal opinions and thoughts, as well as political news on their platforms. Despite the fact that the majority of people online only follow political pages which reflect their own political opinions, the very ‘nature’ of the online space will almost definitely present the conflicting and different opinions of people within their networks – whether they share them to their timelines directly, publish particular pages or photograph themselves at particular political rallies and events. Moving from this point, even if an individual chooses to box themselves within one political view point, what the online space does is ‘necessarily’ expose them to a diverse audience of friends, followers and other sponsored or boosted posts which would make them not only ‘aware’ of the opposing view point’s stance, but also subject to a shift in opinion for example. According to Professor Wu, the use of “news” leads to political persuasion, and thus the more people use social media platforms as their main source of news, the more social media acts as a main catalyst in shaping their political opinions and the more this "attention economy" will be able to harbored, manipulated, and often shaped (Kane, 2019). Social media, and other forms of news media, both play an important role in democratic societies especially, mainly due to the fact that they are widely accessible, widely open and "free" and moreover widely popular - setting a "stage" for anyone with a political opinion, statement, or political analogy.

Furthermore, and in direct relation to the aforementioned, younger generations are also becoming progressively politically “aware” and alerted to political trends and behavior, as well as

increasingly involved in the political scene (political and civic participation), essentially because of the fact that political news is being posted on various types of social media and among younger ages than in recent years. Due to the heftier resort to social media among the younger generations, they are not only exposed to political news more frequently and easily, but they are also often exposed to it in a manner which is combined with their online virtual lifestyles and patterns of behavior online (Abdul Hamid, 2015). While informing younger generations of the political realities and the latest trends in political news is essential for them to develop into aware social citizens, there are numerous biases within the realms of social media which can perpetually hinder, alter or “damage” political perceptions that could be potentially increasingly challenging to change or develop in them as they become adult voters - often sticking to political views and assumptions which do not adapt with timely political developments and realities among particular political parties and even in countries such as Armenia, particular politicians (Abdul Hamid, 2015).

#### **d. Social Media as a Means of Public Influence**

A major debate in recent years, and following the obvious role of social media in political influence, following realities such as the Arab Spring, the election of Donald Trump, as well as the revocation of laws, political lobbies, and the increase of popular pressure upon political structures around the world, is whether or not social media is a public good based on the notions of non-rival and non-excludable consumption. According to the Reuters 2013 aforementioned report, “[...] *social media may be considered an impure public good as it can be excludable given the rights of platforms such as Facebook and Twitter to censor content, disable accounts, and filter information based on algorithms and community standards.*” (Reuters, 2013).



On the topic, Benjamin Barber in *The Nation* famously states that:

*"For new media to be potential equalizers, they must be treated as public utilities, recognizing that spectrum abundance (the excuse for privatization) does not prevent monopoly ownership of hardware and software platforms and hence cannot guarantee equal civic, educational, and cultural access to citizens."*

In compliance with the aforementioned statement by Barber, Zeynep Tufekci further stresses that online services are "natural monopolies" that promote the "privatization of our publics", as well as the manipulation of users' data for all types gain - mainly political.

Moving from this reality, social media has given the political elite and political campaigning a "gold mine" when it comes to the ability to not only put any message they want out there for the masses, but also to utilize algorithms, personal data, as well as social media behavior in order to manipulate public opinion in their favor, and in turn win entire campaigns in the process.

According to Christopher T. Marsden in his 2010 article published in the *International Journal of Communication*:

*"Aims for regulation of social media are growing due to economic concerns of monopolies of the platforms, to issues of privacy, censorship, network neutrality and information storage. The discussion of regulation is complicated due to the issue how Facebook, and Google are increasingly becoming a service, information pipeline, and content provider, and thus centers on how the government would regulate both the platform as a service and information provider. Thus, other proponents advocate for "algorithmic neutrality", or the aim for search engines on social media platforms to rank data without human intervention." (Marsden, 2010).*

Imposingly, the opponents to the campaign promoting the regulation of social media platforms make the argument that the platforms in question do not resemble any form of traditional public utilities, and that regulation would damage consumer welfare as public utility regulation may restrict and demise innovation and positive competition among users. Limiting social media in any form would not serve the general public any more than the current manipulation of data does according to this school of thought. They rather believe that the "open" nature of social media serves to counter the manipulation of users in that they have the ability to counter the information which is being fed to them - drastically different than the times where more traditional media/print media dictated information to the general public which they could not refute or counter in the area of politics or political campaign information (Marsden, 2010).

#### **e. Social Media and its Role in Social Conflict: Case Studies**

As stated previously, social media is revolutionizing the manner through which the world communicates and shares information, as people from every corner of the globe are capable of lobbying, finding like-minded individuals on the web, rallying for a cause, and even starting an online revolution through the touch of a button and from behind a screen. There are three ways through which social media plays a significant role when it comes to the eruption of almost every type of conflict - and especially political conflicts through the political propaganda and cause-oriented content associated with them:

- Social media enables the news to go viral within minutes. This may lead to misinterpretations and the "twisting of information", and this can cause conflict.
- The strategies and the adaption of social media to the "demands" of the general population has developed a shift in the focus amongst political leaders from administrative dynamics

to new media technology - a reality which allows them to manipulate public opinions in their campaigns, without particularly living up to campaign promises.

- The technological advancements in the sphere of communication is able to increase power of persuasion and often enough lead to corruption, scandals, and violence on social media platforms and distracts from the “real issues” in question - this often distracts the general public from conflicts and issues of graver concerns as they "drown" in social media debates (Zeitsoff, 2017).

Technological advancements and developments in the areas of online forms communication and social media platforms have successfully led to everything from political, to economic, and to socio-cultural conflicts mainly due to its uncensored nature, accessibility and mostly "free and open" interface. The following section will depict a timeline of incidents where social media affected politics in order to gain the proper foundation for the introduction of the Armenian case:

- **Egypt and Political Revolution:** During the peak of the Egyptian Revolution of 2011, the Internet and social media played a major role in the facilitation of the flow of information. During that period, President Hosni Mubarak had headed the regime in a dictatorship for almost thirty years. Mubarak was reportedly so alarmed by the possibility of the influence of the Internet and the platform social media gave the individuals to voice their opinions across Egypt, that the government effectively shut down the Internet completely and used Ramses Exchange for a period of time in February 2011. Following this government initiative, the Egyptians resorted to Facebook, Twitter, and other platforms such as YouTube as the main tools to communicate and subsequently organize demonstrations, protests and mass gatherings aimed at overthrowing President Mubarak. Studies have shown that during this time the rate of Tweets from Egypt increased from 2,300 to 230,000

daily, and that the protest videos shot from people's phones and uploaded onto YouTube had approximately 5.5 million views.

- **Canada and Political Terrorism:** As the world continues to become increasingly connected, political movements, including militant and terrorist groups, have resorted to social media as a major tool for the organization, promotion and recruitment within their political movements. The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, also known as ISIL, ISIS, and more commonly Daesh, has used social media quite popularly in order to promote its cause and harbor support from other radical extremists from all over the world. ISIS produces an online publication called the “Islamic State Report” in order to recruit fighters as well. In Canada, two young women who lived in Montreal reportedly left their hometown in order to join ISIS in Syria after exploring the terrorist organization on their various social media platforms and were eventually recruited (McIntosh, 2015). Other militant groups such as al-Qaeda and the Taliban are also resorting to the use of social media in order to raise funds, recruit individuals from all over the world, and this has become quite effective (McIntosh, 2015).
- **The United States and Political Campaigning:** During the ever-so-popular 2016 United States Presidential Elections, the Russian government utilized disinformation and "fake news" in order to warp the truth and depict the American Western powers in a negative light. As will be discussed about the Armenian case throughout this research, the US Presidential race is a vivid depiction of how though fake news is capable of generating some utility for consumers, in terms of confirming far-right agendas as well as spreading propaganda in favor of a particular presidential candidate in the running, it is also capable of imposing private and social costs.

For instance, one social cost is the spread of dis-information, now popularly referred to by American President Donald Trump as "fake news", which is capable of making it more difficult for consumers to attain the truth and, in the case of the 2016 Election, for the consumers in question to adequately vote for an electoral candidate who shares their actual belief system or who's agenda they actually support. As stated in a Congressional Research Service Study from 2017: "*[...] cyber tools were also used [by Russia] to create psychological effects in the American population. The likely collateral effects of these activities include compromising the fidelity of information, sowing discord and doubt in the American public about the validity of intelligence community reports and prompting questions about the democratic process itself.*" (McIntosh, 2015).

#### **f. The Politico-Media Complex**

The politico-media complex, often referred to as the *political-media complex*, is term that has been used to describe the close, systematized, symbiotic-like network of relationships between a given state's political/ruling classes, its media industry, and interactions with or dependencies upon interest groups with other domains and agencies, such as law and its enforcement through the police, corporations and the multinationals (McIntosh, 2015). According to a Forbes article from 2017 by Contributor Ralph Benko, "*[...] the rise of a politico-media complex is even more worrisome than the military-industrial complex.*" (Benko, 2018)

The term is often used to name the collusion between governments or individual politicians and the media industry in an attempt to manipulate rather than inform the people - a reality, this research finds, Armenian politics has been successful in doing consistently in its political history.

According to the Forbes article, there is developing evidence which points to the fact that more "recent" media outlets, more readily resort to PMC framework in their critical analysis and interpretation of media behavior - a 'weapon' that political propaganda has become well-aware of (Benko, 2018).

Moving from this reality, the marginal social cost of "fake news" is massive, as the very first article shared on a particular subject-matter or particular candidate is capable of affecting a small number of people to begin with, and once circulated more throughout modern social media outlets such as Facebook and Twitter, is capable of multiplying its negative effect indefinitely (Benko, 2018). As a result, in the case of the Armenian Elections as in any elections throughout the world, the quantity demanded of this news escalates and readers seek to find "correct news".

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights clearly states:

*"Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and impart information and ideas through any media regardless of frontiers"*(United Nations, 1948).

Most of the international papers circulating among readers on the international scene today are national papers which circulate to an international audience. Subsequently, this does not isolate them from the possibility of being tainted with biases based upon nationality, political standing, socio-cultural norms, as well as paper's source of funding and readership. According to Professor Christopher Taylor, in any publication, there is a form of bias just from which particular news pieces are covered and which stories make it to the forefront of the publication - similarly, this is the case in politics and most specifically in the period building up to, and the period of, a political campaign and election (Taylor, 2019).

Although print media in the developed world has witnessed a decline in popularity in recent years with the development of online platforms, multiple newspapers and magazines in the Developing world continue to be quite popular among the older generations, and among the citizens who are yet to become "tech-savvy" (Taylor, 2019).

Moving from this reality, the independence from political influence, and dependability of newsprint is still debatable in many countries, with the Reporters Without Borders Press Freedom Index suggesting that even in several countries of the Developed world, that the rights of the press are not fully respected, and that the press is not entirely independent and permitted to investigate or criticize the government, though the situation is far worse in developing nations (WPFI, 2019). Armenia, currently ranks 61/180 nations on this index, and has moved up 19 spots since 2018 (WPFI, 2019).

The Reporters Without Borders (RWB) report on Armenia suggests:

*"The new media served as an echo chamber for the "velvet revolution" in the spring of 2018 that brought a former journalist to power. The media landscape is diverse but polarized and the editorial policies of the main TV channels coincide with the interests of their owners. In other words, journalistic independence and transparent media ownership continue to be major challenges. The new government must try to recover the opportunities that were lost in the transition to digital TV, which has paradoxically restricted the number of regional channels. And it must refrain from any excesses in its attempts to combat "fake news". Its use of the security services for this purpose, followed by a social network user's arrest, prompted concern. Investigative journalism, which is flourishing online, is well placed to play a major role in a national offensive against corruption." (RWB, 2019)*

Although multiple scholars have speculated that the youth today are more "visually inclined", and are therefore less likely to be influenced by written political news or propaganda, Harvard Professor Thomas Patterson finds that this generation is susceptible to a little of both: *"What's happened over time is that we have become more of a viewing nation than a reading nation, and the internet is a little of both. My sense is that, like it or not, the future of news is going to be in the electronic media, but we don't really know what that form is going to look like."* (Patterson, 2013).



## **VII. Cultural Politics and the Media as a Means of Propaganda**

### **a. Propaganda**

Propaganda is a term used in order to depict the manner through which politics may be represented and manipulated in multiple forms of written, visual and audible media outlets disseminated to the public. Propaganda is a form of persuasion that is mostly utilized in the media in order to further any kind of agenda, might be personal, political, or a business agenda, through evoking an emotional or other "obligation-oriented" response from the target audience in question. It may subsequently include the intentional sharing of realities, views, and philosophies intended to alter a pattern of social behavior and/or stimulate people to act in a specific manner or perform a one-time action (Hobbs, 2014).

Social media has since, become an increasingly powerful tool for a propaganda-oriented agenda, as the Internet is unprecedentedly not only accessible to each individual from the comforts of their own home, but also, interactive social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter and others, provide a wide platform for public opinions, debates and exchanging political views and understandings. Propaganda, in the form of a video on YouTube, a post on Facebook or tweet on Twitter, currently possesses an undeniable ability to disseminate values and beliefs, as well as to depict a reality, a political figure, a movement, or any other social concern in a new favorable/unfavorable light (Hobbs, 2014).

Another aspect which makes social media so effective in the sharing propaganda is that it is capable of reaching masses of people with minimal effort, and users are able to filter the content and retain what they would like to see on their social media "feeds" (Hobbs, 2014). This simple interface can be utilized by absolutely everyone, from ordinary people to government agencies and politicians,

who now have the ability to take advantage of these online platforms in order to spread all kinds of news, true or false, in favor of their campaigns, political agendas, public images/perception or causes.

### **b. Political Media**

Access to the Internet has given the world a tool for everything from education, to communication, and has also acted as a tool in the access and participation in disseminated political information and political campaigns. Subsequently, its use by individuals and organizations has ultimately increased and continues to increase immensely. This rapid increase in internet use, often compared to the boom of television as well as its impact on the political landscape and 'political game' as a form of media which was unprecedented, currently acts as the sole source of information on politics in Armenia and around among many particular groups of people and ages around the world. What the Internet and political campaigning through the internet has also introduced, is the world of commentary, debate, inquiry and criticism, which in turn permits for new and improved opinions on political debates and elections to circulate amongst the general public (Fares, 2017). Moreover, it gives multi-directional communication, which allows people to stay connected with political organizations or the politicians in question more easily and instantly. Moving from this point, the controversy surrounding the Internet with respect to the PMC lies in its ability to be manipulated by the political elite, in that it can encourage and facilitate the practice of providing information from a biased political group often leading to public cynicism toward the media when it is made clear that the public opinion has been swayed or manipulated. This is particularly evident in the last US Elections of 2016 which elected President Trump into power for instance (Fares, 2017).

The influence of the internet on politics has been more than notable, as this particular form of media has more "current" information than others (often even in real time) since it is constantly being updated automatically. Another advancement the internet provides in the realm of politics is its capacity to harbor an array of extensive information in one place, such as voting records, periodicals, multiple press releases, even opinion polls, policy statements, political campaign speeches, etc. It even has the ability to attach information about the candidate in internet searches such as personal information on them, on their families, lifestyles, personality - often all used in an individual's assessment of whether or not to vote for them (Fares, 2017). Obtaining a comprehensive understanding of an ongoing electoral process, for example, is more convenient than it has been in the past - as is a candidate's ability to put out the information "they choose" in order to win a designated campaign (Fares, 2017). Although political information is readily available on the internet covers every major activity of Armenian politics and the political campaigns leading up to major elections. Users, nonetheless, like in every part of the world, remain vulnerable to bias, especially on websites that represent themselves as objective sources but are run, funded, or in-support of a particular political entity or running candidate (Krikorian, 2012).

### **c. The Power of the Media in Shaping Public Opinion During Elections**

As stated in Professor Maxwell McCombs' paper entitled 'The Agenda-Setting Role of Social Media in the Shaping of Public Opinion': *"The power of the news media to set a nation's agenda, to focus public attention on a few key public issues, is an immense and well-documented influence. Not only do people acquire factual information about public affairs from the news media, readers and viewers also learn how much importance to attach to a topic on the basis of the emphasis placed on it in the news."* He goes on to elaborate: *"[...] In other words, the news media can set the agenda for the public's attention to that small group of issues around which public opinion*

*forms. The principal outlines of this influence were sketched by Walter Lippmann in his 1922 classic, Public Opinion, which began with a chapter titled "The World Outside and the Pictures in Our Heads." As he noted, the news media are a primary source of those pictures in our heads about the larger world of public affairs, a world that for most citizens is out of reach, out of sight, out of mind" (McCombs, 2011).*

Moving from this concept, McCombs argues that what we know about the world of today, especially in the area of politics and public policy at large, is mostly rooted in what the media decide to inform us about, and the manner in which it wishes to frame it. Moreover, the result of this "mediated" and manipulated view of the political landscape is that the priorities of the media as well as their sources of influence strongly influence the priorities of the public and their interests and interpretations. McCombs states: "Elements prominent on the media agenda become prominent in the public mind," as the agenda of a news organization is evident in its pattern and areas of coverage on a variety of public issues over a given period of time. Over this period, select issues are emphasized, some receive relatively less and inconsistent coverage and many others are often not covered at all (McCombs, 2011).

Furthermore, the images that the media create must take into account the weight of social responsibility and the "right side" of social value. The general public gets informed and often generates its political views from reading and listening to the political analysis and evaluation provided to them online and through the media. Mass media is a powerful guardian of proper political behavior because the general public tends to "trust" the media to inform them of the truth about government wrong-doing and political non-bias realities. New media including online newspapers, blogs, social media and various online platforms currently have the greatest impact on people. Politicians who now take these realities into account, notice new media is the most

effective way to relay their messages and political agendas, and they utilize it in order to attract supporters. This is the case particularly among younger voters, who largely use these types of mediums, this opens up a new voter base for politicians to appeal to directly (Mcombs 2011).

## **VIII. Social Media Reshaping Political Campaigning in Armenia: Is the Media Free?**

### **1. Facebook Live and the Armenian Elections**

According to an article published in popular online news outlet Armenian Weekly, Facebook Live emerged as a major campaigning tool in the last Armenian elections, challenging more traditional approaches the country has resorted to in recent years. The online platform, which Facebook launched in late 2015, became popular among Armenia's activist network, which used it to share footage of the demonstrations and electoral violations while they were taking place (Elliott, 2018).

According to this article, Facebook Live most definitively shaped the Armenian political landscape when Nikol Pashinyan, leader of the Yelq Alliance opposition group at the time, commenced live broadcasts in order to coordinate the protests which eventually culminated in what was famously known as the Velvet Revolution. He has been broadcasting live since July 2016 building up to these events (Elliott, 2018).

Pashinyan's consistent utilization of the platform assisted him in maintaining the image of a 'relatable' politician, in drastic contrast with his predecessor, Serzh Sargsyan, who was known to have boycotted appearances in the media in general (Elliott, 2018). The daily and live broadcasts harbored thousands of live viewers, who often sent him direct messages of support or messages inquiring about important political issues and his positions on them (Elliott, 2018).

Other Civil Contract politicians adopted this style of operation as well. Andrey Ghukasyan, Governor of the region of Lori, and Tigran Petrosyan have both garnered a massive following on both their public feeds and social media platforms. Victor Yenikibaryan, the candidate of the *My Step* alliance has publicly said in an interview, "*The platform's spontaneous nature gives voters a*

*‘face-to-face’ relationship with their candidate, making the candidate feel more relatable. The electorate can peer into the everyday lives of their representatives” (Elliott, 2018).*

According to Professor Katy Pearce of the University of Washington, in her research on social and political uses of digital technologies within the South Caucasus, there were approximately 1.4 million Facebook subscribers in Armenia who logged on in any capacity to follow the latest elections (Elliott 2018). That accounts for almost half of the Armenian population. Among the country’s 15-24-year-old age range, the number jumps to 87% within that group specifically (Elliott 2018). This level of engagement permits candidates to attract larger audiences with more ease, efficiency and adequacy. According to her research, Prof. Pearce, some 200 thousand new users subscribed to the social media platform during the Velvet Revolution (Elliott 2018).

Facebook Live has also been utilized as an important outlet for the Republican Party. In their effort to appeal to a younger demographic and in turn become more 'relatable' to this age group, a new generation of Republican leaders has used the platform as a means to attract voters. Arpine Hovhannisyan, the former Minister of Justice under the Armenian Republican Party, and Eduard Sharmazanov, a senior Republican official have also used several broadcasts in order to highlight what they referred to as the “corruption by the new administration” (Elliott, 2018).

## **2. Armenia’s Democracy vs. Its Media: How Free is Either One?**

In their Armenia Country Report, the organization Freedom House's brief reads as follows when discussing the democratic nature of political processes in Armenia as well as the 'freedom' of its media:

*“While Armenia’s constitution and laws ostensibly enshrine the principles of democracy; autocratic practices pervade governance in practice. National governance in 2017 was*

*generally stable, with ruling elites focusing on solidifying Armenia's constitutional transformation—a plan, approved in a 2015 referendum, to change the country from a semi-presidential system to a parliamentary one. The most significant step of the year in this transformation took place in April, when parliamentary elections were held under the country's new electoral system. The Ruling Republican Party of Armenia (HHK), which controls all three branches of government, comfortably retained its dominance in the elections and throughout the year" (Freedomhouse.org, 2019).*

Their analysis of the electoral process stated that it is "neither free nor fair," attributing their analysis to a number of factors including:

- Incumbent forces abusing administrative resources to their advantage;
- Opposition parties being at a disadvantage in seeking to gain power through formal mechanisms;
- Parliamentary elections held in April as well as the local elections held throughout the year exhibited a wide range of loopholes in Armenia's electoral process, including the abuse of state resources, buying votes, as well as intimidating voters (Freedomhouse.org 2019).

Despite the fact that there were elevated levels of outreach conducted by the running candidates, the campaign was largely "superficial" according to the interpretation of most news sources, with candidates placing little focus on policy or ideology and rather resorting to superficial and social media "savvy" promises in order to gain popularity among younger voters and attract a new demographic (Freedomhouse.org, 2019). The Armenian Central Election Commission (ACEC) reported a turnout of 61% of voters (Central Election Commission, 2017). Reportedly, both the campaign and the election day itself, featured relatively low public protest which is often



interpreted as a sign, according to socio-political analysts, of low rates of public trust in the electoral system and the running candidates - particularly if contrasted with the mass demonstrations that accompanied the 2015 constitutional referendum (Dalton, 2005).

In its final observation mission report, the OSCE highlighted the close to complete lack of public trust in the reliability of the elections as a huge problem, and also noted that nationwide allegations of vote-buying as well as voter intimidation, and further recorded "inadequate response" to complaints by the political elite contributed to this phenomenon (OSCE, 2019).

Despite the fact that television remains the most popular source in Armenia for both news and general information, online media outlets are continuing to grow in both popularity and social influence - in that they have become a major deal-breaker in the areas of influencing public opinion (Pearce, 2011).

According to the Armenian International Telecommunications Union, approximately 67% of the general population accessed the internet in 2016 - an unprecedented high for Armenia (AITU 2016). In their report, the Union states that the gradual shift from television to online sources of media is mainly due to the fact that young people feel that television stations face significant influence from their "owners" or political influencers, while online and print media have greater levels of editorial and personal freedom to express opinions, debate and refute arguments with other users (AITU, 2016). Young people in Armenia tend to view the internet as largely "beyond the control of the authorities" and as a source of alternative and increasingly popular source of information as well as an influential tool on politics. They have stated according to the aforementioned report, that they used the internet in order to sway and cast their vote, often resorting to internet searches and about the candidates as well as clicking on shorter articles on various social media outlets such as Facebook and Twitter (AITU, 2016).

That said, worrying signs emerged in 2017 about manipulation of the country's online information landscape throughout the country's elections and amidst its electoral reform (AITU, 2016).

The Committee to Protect Freedom of Expression (CPFE), a local Armenian media rights group, called the year 2017 a “complicated” year for journalism in Armenia, in reference to heightened political pressures surrounding the parliamentary and local elections (Committee to Protect Freedom of Expression, 2017). While fewer media outlets faced violence and threats in 2017 than in 2016, the CPFE documented approximately twice as many cases of pressure including legal intimidation to cover particular pieces of news, particular candidates and to run stories which could sway political opinion.

Media professionals were able to report multiple instances of violence, obstruction, and interference against the press during the parliamentary elections as well as local polls. Sisak Gabrielyan, a correspondent for Radio Free Europe (Radio Liberty), and Shoghik Galstyan, a reporter for Araratnews.am, were assaulted during the National Assembly Elections while investigating suspected corruption and bribery at the headquarters of a Republican Party of Armenia candidate (RWB, 2018). Gabrielyan was also similarly assaulted during the Yerevan Municipal Elections in May while investigating similar signs of corruption in the electoral process - inquiring about activities at one of the Republican Party's offices in Capital (RWB, 2018).

According to *Reporters Without Borders*, judicial and law enforcement bodies in Armenia are prejudiced in tackling cases which involve the independent media, as they often belong to a particular political party, or agenda which a specific news outlet “covers” (RWB, 2018).

Investigations into violence against journalists in 2015 during the #ElectricYerevan demonstrations and 2016 throughout the ongoing protests surrounding the Sasna Tsrer crisis have been either completely absent or entirely ineffective. The legal processes in these cases tend to move slowly.

In the period building up to the Armenian Parliamentary Elections, several online “watchdogs” highlighted efforts from the political elite to manipulate, control and distort the online information landscape in favor of them gaining the vote (RWB, 2018). Reportedly in March of the same year, suspicious Twitter accounts shared fake emails from “USAID”, the United States Agency for International Development of the United States federal government, in attempts to sway the vote towards the opposition. The U.S. Embassy in Yerevan quickly made a public statement denouncing these messages as spam and fake (RWB, 2018).

According to the Atlantic Council’s Digital Forensics Lab:

*“[...] the circulation of the email bore typical signs of a coordinated effort by bot accounts, likely originating in Russia. Bot activity was also suspected of triggering the temporary suspension of four influential Twitter accounts of well-known journalists, political analysts, the media organizations, and investigative journalism networks on the eve of the election.”* (RWB, 2018).

The accounts were all restored within hours of this incident, but arguably, for those who did not follow up on the news update, the damage to the electoral process as well as to the reputation of the running mate had been done.

## **IX. Data Collection and Analysis**

### **a. Data Collection:**

Parliamentary Elections held in 2018 were a significant test for Armenia's Democratic process. Particularly, with the escalating rates of Social Media users in Armenia as discussed in a previous section, there has also been much conjecture regarding the role social media can play in electoral and political processes. According to Dr. Rania El Mohanna, Social and Political Expert and active member in the independent lobbying campaign "Beirut Madinati", social media and political uprisings associated with a will to change are one in the same in our modern age. Moving from this point, the use of Facebook in order to mobilize citizens on electoral and politicized issues around the world in recent years has escalated drastically, and the role of social media has become the "sole role to consider" according to Dr. El Mohanna. She goes on to elaborate:

*"In the elections in Lebanon for example, online tools proved to be incredibly viable as a means for registering and reacting to any forms of reported electoral violations and other concerns - the case is no different in Armenia, where internet use is on the rise, and appealing to a younger demographic of voters is almost impossible without resorting to the use of the popular social media platforms they use every day in order to share and receive information."*

Despite Armenia's dwindling economy, Internet influence continues to increase. Statistics and research produced by the Caucasus Barometer from the Caucasus Resource Research Centers in 2018 indicates that approximately 67% of Armenians have access to the technology which allows them to get online every day (Caucasus Resource Research Centers, 2018). Although the research from CRRC's 2018 household survey indicates that this figure increased further during election season, whereby users wanted access to the Internet in order to "get news" on their favorite running

candidates and even needed the online access to various social media platforms in order to "make the decision" - a relatively new phenomenon in a country where a shocking 60% of the population had never accessed the Internet at all just a few years ago in the year 2010 (Caucasus Resource Research Centers, 2018).

When asked about this phenomenon, Dr. El Mohanna stressed:

*"There is a need among people today to fall in-line with trends and the latest sources of information, as they are consistently fearing the possibility of seeming outdated or uninformed - nothing scares people more than feeling uninformed. This is what they believe will allow them to be abused and taken advantage of. The Armenian Elections are a major indication of this need to retrieve information from the fastest, easiest and most accessible source: social media. And this is what multiple candidates running in the elections that time around focused on - how to get people to see them in a different light, how to get them to sway towards their agendas, and how to make themselves more relatable and more appealing to voters of all ages."*

Of arguably more importance, however, is the manner through which social media giant Facebook has been capable of empowering at least some of those in-between the polarized government and opposition camps. A clear example of this was the successful use of social media in more traditional campaigns and among the Republican Party in Armenia in order to engage citizens in non-politicized/non-opposition activism in general (Caucasus Resource Research Centers, 2018). Moving from this political and social media driven landscape, it was only natural to expect a visible increase in the use of social media in the latest Armenian Elections. A 2017 Media Public Opinion and Preference Survey by the CRRC found that 87% of Armenians rely on television for their daily

news and information, and that 65% rely on their various social media platforms in order to do so (Caucasus Resource Research Centers, 2018).

Less than a month before the final vote, various news and online media outlets reported the sighting of a flag with the Facebook logo among the more traditional Armenian tricolors waved at an opposition campaign rally in the capital's Liberty Square. International campaign donors were also highly interested in the use of social media and enhancing their online endorsements and presence, a reality independent journalist and social media activist Nada Al Ali depicts as *"the political weight of media exposure"* in that *"the donors, candidates, as well as the political commentators and even the voters, feed into a political process through social presence, public image, and immediate positive reinforcement from supporters and citizens - whether through comments, likes, reactions or re-tweets"*. In the past we have seen this in cases such as that of Laura Baghdasarian, head of the Region Center, who had been funded by the Open Society Foundations-Armenia to monitor the use of Facebook during the pre-election campaign - one of their biggest projects and exposures in Armenia to date. Of her previous and ongoing evaluations of social media presence among politicians, Ms. Baghdasarian has stated that several politicians and parties register accounts on Facebook and activate them during election season. According to her this is mainly due to the fact that *"it is interactive, and through reactions, shares and even the little comments, no other tool in electoral history has been capable of providing such an opportunity to understand an audience."*

She went on to elaborate in her writings with fellow researcher Zaruhi Batoyan about political elections in Armenia stating: *"[...] political parties are waging a battle not to gain citizens' love and trust and to acquire new followers, but to speak more, shout louder and disseminate more information than their opponents. In this sense, all the online platforms become not opportunities for dialogue or for establishing contact but simply ordinary platforms."*

Ararat Magazine, a local popular magazine across all of Armenia, noted the major escalation in the use of online campaign advertisements by the political parties across Armenia, even though throughout Armenia many traditional billboards for running political leaders were scattered across the highways, Facebook admittedly allowed for the analysis of more real-world observations of the general public and was most definitely more able to designate the direction in which the elections were swaying (Caucasus Resource Research Centers, 2018).

Moreover, Facebook was useful for activists, especially in highlighting their observations and concerns about the pre-election processes, transparency and the overall electoral environment.

Perhaps the most promising development in the "political social media phenomenon" in Armenia's last elections, was the development of an online election monitoring site, iditord.org, based on the popular Ushahidi platform (Iditord, n.d.). This platform allowed citizens to submit electoral code violations via phone, SMS, Twitter, or its own website, harboring over 1,000 reports registered from the day the site was launched two months before the elections to the end of the polling on Election Day.

The resort to online social media platforms and online news websites was more evolved and widespread in the recent elections in Armenia and became a vital and indispensable means for combating fraud as well as engaging the electorate. Conclusively, as Ms. Ali insists:

*"[...] social media must be become part of the wider and traditional campaign strategy resorted to by both civil society and political parties alike if they wish to succeed in gaining the right kind of attention and reaching the right kind of audience.*

*The results of the Armenian Elections as well as other cases such as the US Elections for instance, are a clear indication of the weight social media should be given when it comes to a political campaign."*

Focus groups conducted in coordination with a group of Professors and students from the American University of Armenia (AUA) through a video Zoom call during his Media Studies graduate class, stressed the importance and influence of social media as well. The Zoom call brought together approximately 15 students from either political science or media studies backgrounds in order to engage in a fruitful open discussion on the research questions and hypothesis of this thesis. The research questions were given to the room as guiding questions only, and an open discussion took place to address the main themes. The focus group unanimously highlighted the use of both Facebook live and YouTube live options by the current Prime Minister of Armenia in order to spread messages to his followers. They further stressed that younger people, namely those of voting age, participated through social media and followed the election through their own personal social media profiles. "Students were seen live on their Facebook account at every corner," one student added.

With social media laying the foundation for strong participation among youth, the interviewed sample from the AUA stressed that young people feel more empowered than ever – as they see even the most "traditional politicians" resorting to social media to influence a new demographic. The sample went on to elaborate that although social media is not as popular in Armenia as it is in the United States per say, that they see the importance of social media headed in that direction.



A senior student of media studies from AUA stated: *“Social media has been a part of our lives as young people for years, but politicians are just getting in on this game. They know how we spend our days and also know that if they want to reach us, that we will most likely have our heads in our phones.”*

As social media continues to make its way into the sphere of political influence, it subsequently as the theories selected suggest, to create a space where people fear isolation, where people wish to engage and participate, as well as a space where people are not afraid of confrontation when it comes to expressing their social views. It makes people’s political engagement more comfortable and informed. They can express themselves freely, follow what they please, as well as be selective in the manner through which they follow their desired political parties and running candidates.

As a Professor of Media Studies from AUA who wishes to remain anonymous depicts from his work on a running politician’s political media campaign, *“We were well-aware that the traditional means of media would not work solely. While a large number of people in Armenia do watch television, and while TV still influences a significant demography, social media was our main focus. This was increasingly evident, and its importance in attaining young voters’ attention was pivotal.”*

## **b. Data Analysis**

The field work conducted delves into the research questions across multiple angles. This is how it addresses each specifically:

- **Various media outlets in Armenia effect popular opinion directly:** They further instill multiple perceptions in the minds of voters about their running candidates, their intentions, promises and political agendas. This is more specific for social media when it comes to youth – and the political elite are well-aware of this. This fact has been factored into political campaigning at all levels, and sources who have worked on these campaigns have

informed the research that social media is “inescapable” and a major consideration when it comes to swaying the opinions of young voters, as well as swaying their vote.

- **Theories surrounding the media as deeply rooted in both Spiral of Silence and Public Opinion: Fear of Isolation as well as Agenda Setting Theory:** The sample depicts that it is an interplay between these two theoretical approaches which allow political analysts, political elite, as well as even lobbyists and campaign managers to utilize the power of social media in order to derive the desired results. This is also used in the rationale upon which political campaigns are developed, political agendas are set out, as well as political advertisement is put out.
- **Media is the major influencer of social perception in Armenia:** For decades now, and even before the age of the internet, media has impacted generations in Armenia as well as their voting trends, public perception of their politicians and has also impacted socio-political movements. It has laid the foundation for the swaying of mass opinion as well as predicting voting trends. This also holds true with the introduction of social media to a new and upcoming generation of politically aware and active voters. Whereby social media platforms, mostly Facebook in Armenia have been at the heart of political activism, polls, opinions and political commentaries alike.

The three aforementioned points support the literature review directly. Not only do they respond to each research question directly, but they further verify the hypothesis on the role of the media in the political and electoral processes in Armenia.

The literature review of this thesis found that media outlets have been emerging steadily and strengthening their influence upon the political scene increasingly in recent years. This has proven to be true in Armenia’s latest elections – whereby even the most ‘traditional’ political parties opted for social media and online platforms in an unprecedented manner.

Beyond this point, the field work is a direct indication that social media and its presence have infiltrated even the most traditional and developing communities – and that they further cement their influence among young voters and among politically aware and civically engaged individuals more specifically.

Although the field work resulted in a homogeneous analysis and response across the board – this was not the initial intention. The interviews were not conducted with a seemingly homogeneous group to yield a unanimous opinion, but rather diversified across different sectors and age groups in order to induce the potential for divergent arguments. The research, coupled with the literature review as well as the press monitoring for this thesis, found that social media and the online media scene are indispensable and inescapable tools in the political and electoral processes. Particularly, this needs to be the case if political running candidates wish to appeal to a wider demographic and to what is referred to ‘fresh voters’.

On another note, the research has found in its comparison of Armenia to other cases in different countries (in an earlier section of this thesis), that the Armenian case typically follows a ‘natural progression’ in the manner through which it has reached this point. States around the world, and Armenia is no different, have made the gradual and ultimately inescapable move toward moving electoral campaigns online, making them accessible and relatable to younger voters, as well as migrating away from more traditional mean of communication which were used formerly such as television and the radio. They are simply not as effective, not as visually pleasing and concise, and do not cater enough to a society which has now become online all day essentially – whether they are working or not.

Another fundamental and pivotal issue the research concluded was the fact that young people are essentially ‘only’ influenced by social media trends. In the interviews (focus group) conducted

with the students from the American University of Armenia, they explicitly expressed that social media is where they go to hear about anything – they have access to the news, the visuals, the polls, the videos, and they are all organized in a fashion which is catered and tailored to their demographic. They can access anything, anywhere and at any time from their mobiles on the go – and this is exactly how and where they want to have the ability to access this type of information about an otherwise complex political and electoral system. Furthermore, the creation of a network of likeminded people and demographically similar people across young people’s social media platforms, allows them to receive the news about essentially ‘what is going on in the country’ from a relatable source which often speaks the same language. They are also more likely to get politically engaged if they find their peers are doing the same – and that politics is no longer reserved for the older and more ‘politically aware’ generation of voters.

Moving from this point, the sense of empowerment social media provides young people as well the sense of their own vote’s value, is not paralleled across any platform – and most definitely not paralleled across the evening televised news. Young people are related messages about the elections in a simplified, visual and often even comedic and relatable manner which develops their own confidence in what they are discussing, who they are voting for, and what they demand from a running candidate, government institutions, as well as the future adopted policies which concern them.

## **X. Conclusion:**

The media has played a vital role in shaping public opinion and in its misinformation in multiple instances which most definitely include political elections and perceptions of governance and authority. It is utilized by governments and political figures in order to warp and shape public opinion and even at times present distorted and false information about individuals, realities or facts. With the emergence of social media as a trend in Armenia and all over the world, its weight and ability to sway public opinion and shape public perception needs to be regarded as one of the most fundamental and important tools in the success of a political campaign, as well as the success in "branding" a political figure.

Moving from this reality, there is a need to pay more attention to the vital role of media in not only shaping opinions, but in shaping reality as we know it. The emergence of multiple new forms of media each and every day (mostly Facebook live and YouTube live in Armenia), as well as the ever-growing and uncontrollable force of the Internet, has an immediate effect on public awareness, morality, norms, perceptions and the very notion of "belief" that the news presents you with the truth.

### **Recommendations:**

In light of this research, the following recommendations and conclusion may be drawn:

- The media, in all its forms, plays a vital role in shaping and molding public opinion and most definitely does so within political realms - this has been the case in Armenia's latest elections as well as the case in multiple instances around the world where political activism and the use of social media collide in order to create movements, change, reform, and even to create false images, false perception and "fake news".

- Emerging forms of media such as alternative media or citizen journalism play an important role as tools which may counter the already-existing forms of media which are already tainted or swayed in particular political directions - this is the case heavily in Armenia, as the research pointed out a major shift in the source of news the general population is resorting to in order to make decisions about who to vote for and why, with a shift from more traditional sources of information such as television to more modern online platforms not only among youth, but also among almost 67% of the population according to some statistics.

In the areas of the Armenian Parliamentary Elections, these two conclusions not only hold strong, but are also the direct result of the application of the two prevailing theories associated with this research, as well as the patterns in social behavior that they stand for and produce.

Corruption is rampant through the government and remains a significant point of tension with the Armenian public. Despite promises by Prime Minister Karapetyan to curb corruption, very little has been made. According to Transparency International's 2018 Global Corruption Barometer, which examined 120 countries, corruption and distrust of the Armenian government's ability to address corruption claims remains a major concern for the Armenian public.

Interesting enough though, Armenia is yet again another country which tends to re-elect a particular political elite and particular political circle, a factor generally attributed to the influence of the media on public opinion, the rebranding of a politician's image, as well as the media allowing these political elites to harbor support and frame themselves in a particular light in order to render themselves more relatable, more "current" and more accessible to the average citizen - no matter what age they are. Another factor discussed as part of the focus group from the American University of Armenia is a simple fact that the general population simply "does not trust in younger

politicians.” They even stressed on a personal note that they believe replacing a large portion of the political body with younger inexperienced members of society just because they have experience “assisting the Prime Minister” for instance, can lead to more harm than good. In 2019, the matter of the fact is that almost "nothing" happens without the media, making the media the most powerful political and campaigning tool there is. In Armenia, this is no different, as young people, politicians as well as the general public are picking up on the ability to make communication "instant" and impulsive - and to render commentary and criticism more instant and direct as well.

Running politicians and candidates no longer need to wait for the election itself to take place in order for them to be just as surprised as us with the results, they are now capable of picking up on trends, measuring their popularity, making changes before the elections take place, making shifts in their policies and agendas before the election makes that final determination, and even change their public image and the public's perception of them with just the right wording, the right visuals, and the right campaign manager.

In the years following this election in Armenia, the research concludes, the trends towards media influence and social media in particular will not only increase but also spread across borders, and foresees a reality where the President and Parliament of Armenia will be Tweeting foreign policy statements with countries around the world, just as Developed nations have made it the trend in the manner through which they conduct politics today.

### **Limitations:**

The research posed multiple limitations that are both specific and non-specific to the Armenian case.

One of the fundamental difficulties the research faced, as in the case of multiple developing states, was garnering official state statistics and official government numbers beyond large and general themes. Although governmental sources accessed did present broad numbers in the areas of voters turn out, as well as voting statistics. It did not publicly present any particular statistics in the areas of voters' ages, trends among youth, nor was any official data reported on the use of social media by political parties beyond the sources which were utilized for this research.

The sources used were namely interviews with experts and lobbyists, which were indeed substantial and helpful toward answering the research questions, and did so successfully, but there was a significant lack in Armenian government efforts to generate any real reports when it comes to demographics of elections and voting processes.

On another note, the research was confronted with political sensitivities, as multiple interviewees, particularly those from the American University of Armenia, insisted their identities remain anonymous - particularly if the thesis is to be published on an online university platform. Political sensitivity is alive and well in Armenia, and students and academics alike are still pressured for being out-spoken against a serving government official or leadership.

A final limitation was a bit of a language barrier and some translation difficulties, as most of the information on Armenia is predominantly unavailable in English, this rendered the true grasp of some sources a bit difficult. Nonetheless, through the administration of linguistic tools, multiple sources were translated and utilized accordingly.





## References

Abdul Hamid, N. et al., (2015). Social Media and Youth Online Political Participation: Perspectives on Cognitive Engagement. *New Media and Mass Communication Journal*, Vol. 44.

Aljazeera, (2018). Armenia: Nikol Pashinyan elected as new prime minister, Retrieved from: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/05/armenia-pashinyan-elected-prime-minister-180508094813146.html>

Armenian International Telecommunications Union (2016). Retrieved from: [http://hti.am/main.php?lang=3&page\\_id=659](http://hti.am/main.php?lang=3&page_id=659)

BBC (2018). Armenia profile – Media, Retrieved from: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-17404535>

BBC (2018). Serzh Sargsyan: Armenian PM resigns after days of protests, Retrieved from: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-43868433>

Belt, T. L. & Just, M. R., (2008). The Local News Story: Is Quality a Choice? [Article]. *Political Communication*, 25(2), 194-215

Benko, R. (2017). The Politico-Media Complex Is More Dangerous than the Military-Industrial Complex, Forbes, Retrieved from: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/ralphbenko/2017/06/29/the-politico-media-complex-is-more-dangerous-than-the-military-industrial-complex/#4e726cd967ac>

Caucasus Resource Research Centers (2018). Armenia Statistics of Internet Use, Retrieved from: <https://www.crrc.am/>

Central Election Commission (2017). Retrieved from: <https://www.elections.am/>.

- Committee to Protect Freedom of Expression (2017). Retrieved from:  
<https://khosq.am/en/?s=2017+elections>
- Dalton, R. J. (2005). The Social Transformation of Trust in Government. *International Review of Sociology (Revue Internationale de Sociologie)*, 15(1), pp. 133- 154
- Demytrie (2018). Why Armenia 'Velvet Revolution' won without a bullet fired, Retrieved from: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-43948181>
- Drew, D., & Weaver, D. (2006). Voter Learning in the 2004 Presidential Election: Did The Media Matter? [Article]. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 83(1), 25-42.
- Elliott, R. (2018). Facebook Live Reshapes Election Campaigning in Armenia, The Armenian Weekly, Retrieved from: <https://armenianweekly.com/2018/12/05/facebook-live-reshapes-election-campaigning-in-armenia/>
- Eurasianet (2019). In the new Armenia, media freedom is a mixed bag, Retrieved from: <https://eurasianet.org/in-the-new-armenia-media-freedom-is-a-mixed-bag>
- Faris, R. et. al. (2017). Partisanship, Propaganda, and Disinformation: Online Media and the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election, Berkman Klein Center for Internet and Society at Harvard University, Retrieved from:  
<https://cyber.harvard.edu/publications/2017/08/mediacloud>
- Freedomhouse.org (2019). Armenia Country Report, Retrieved from:  
<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2019/armenia>
- Fridkin, K. L., Kenney, P. J., Gershon, S. A., & Woodall, G. S. (2008). Spinning Debates: The Impact of the News Media's Coverage of the Final 2004 Presidential Debate. [Article]. *International Journal of Press/Politics*, 13(1), 29-51.

Gritz, E. (2018). Armenia in chaos as ruling elite clings to power, NBC News, Retrieved from: <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/armenia-chaos-ruling-elite-clings-power-n870646>

Hardy, B. W., & Jamieson, K. H. (2005). Can A Poll Affect Perception of Candidate Traits? *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 69(5), 725-743.

Herszenhorn, D. M. (2013). Incumbent Wins Easy Victory in Armenia, NYTimes world news, Retrieved from: <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/20/world/europe/president-sargsyan-wins-easy-victory-in-armenia-election.html>

Hobbs, R. & McGee, S. (2014). Teaching about Propaganda: An Examination of the Historical Roots of Media Literacy. *Journal of Media Literacy Education* 6(2), 56 - 67,

Kane, L. (2019). The Attention Economy, Nielson Norman Group, Retrieved from: <https://www.nngroup.com/articles/attention-economy/>

Krikorian, O. (2012). Social Media in Armenia's 2012 Parliamentary Elections, *Caucasus Analytical Digest*, No. 39, Retrieved from: <https://css.ethz.ch/content/dam/ethz/special-interest/gess/cis/center-for-securities-studies/pdfs/CAD-39-9-11.pdf>

Marsden, C. T. (2010), Net Neutrality: Towards a Co-regulatory Solution, *The International Journal of Communication*, Vol. 4, Retrieved from:

<https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/953>

Mccombs (n.d.). The Agenda Setting Theory, Retrieved from:

[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/28194425\\_The\\_Agenda-Setting\\_Theory](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/28194425_The_Agenda-Setting_Theory)

McCombs, M. (2011). The Agenda Setting-Role of the Mass Media in the Shaping of Public Opinion, University of Texas in Austin, Retrieved from:

[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/237394610\\_The\\_Agenda-Setting\\_Role\\_of\\_the\\_Mass\\_Media\\_in\\_the\\_Shaping\\_of\\_Public\\_Opinion](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/237394610_The_Agenda-Setting_Role_of_the_Mass_Media_in_the_Shaping_of_Public_Opinion)

McIntosh, A. & Felix, S. (2015). Two Montreal women left to join ISIS: Police, The Toronto Sun, Retrieved from: <https://torontosun.com/2015/01/23/two-montreal-women-left-to-join-isis-police/wcm/6ff7c5fa-785d-42de-8f88-10d3d238f24a>

Newhagen, J., & Nass, C. (1989). Differential Criteria for Evaluating Credibility of Newspapers and TV News. [Article]. *Journalism Quarterly*, 66(2), 277-284.

News.am (2018). "Armenians head to polls in first ever snap parliamentary election ", Retrieved: March 11, 2019, from: <https://news.am/eng/news/485009.html>

Noelle-Neumann, E. (1991), The Theory of Public Opinion: The Concept of the Spiral of Silence. *Communication Yearbook*, (14), 256-287.

Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (2018), Elections in Armenia, Retrieved from: <https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/armenia>

Patterson, T. (2013). "Informing the News: The Need for Knowledge-based Journalism", Vintage Edition 1, pp. 45-69.

Pearce, K. (2011). *Armenian Media Landscape*, Eurasia Partnership Foundation, Retrieved from: <https://mediainitiatives.am/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Armenian-Media-Landscape-in-English.pdf>

Pew Research Center (2016), *Social Media Update 2016*, Retrieved from: <https://www.pewinternet.org/2016/11/11/social-media-update-2016/>

Reporters Without Borders (2019), *Armenia*, Retrieved from: <https://rsf.org/en/armenia>

Reuters Institute (2013), *Digital News Report 2013*, University of Oxford, Retrieved from: <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/our-research/digital-news-report-2013>

Rheingold, R. (n.d.), Howard Rheingold's Five Literacies for Effective Social Media, Retrieved from: <https://klarkea.wordpress.com/attention-participation-collaboration-network-awareness-and-critical-consumption/>

Reporters without Borders (2018), Mounting Concern about Press Freedom in Armenia, Retrieved from: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/5b8504ada.html>

Satariano, A. (2019), Facebook Identifies Russia-Linked Misinformation Campaign, NYTimes, Retrieved from: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/17/business/facebook-misinformation-russia.html>

Sauro (2015), 5 Types of Qualitative Research, Measuring, Retrieved from: <https://measuringu.com/qual-methods/>

Simon, J. (1996). Media use and voter turnout in a presidential election. [Article]. Newspaper Research Journal, 17(1/2), 25-34.

Taylor, C. (2019), How to Recognize Bias in a Newspaper Article, Retrieved from: <https://www.wikihow.com/Recognize-Bias-in-a-Newspaper-Article>

United Nations (1948), United Nations, Retrieved from: <https://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/index.html>

Welt, C. (2017), Russia Background and U.S. Policy, Congressional Research Service, Retrieved from: [www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R44775.pdf](http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R44775.pdf)

World Press Freedom Index (2019), Retrieved from: <https://rsf.org/en/ranking#>

Zeitsoff, T. (2017), How Social Media Is Changing Conflict. Journal of Conflict Resolution, 61(9), 1970–1991.