

Armenia

Freedom of Expression Project



In December 2008, EPF began the *Institutionalizing Freedom of Expression in Armenia as a Right Enjoyed by the Public and Upheld by the State* project. It focused on increasing public and government understanding of international standards of Freedom of Expression and worked to remove the current limitations on the Armenian media, such as a prevailing culture of self-censorship and government control of broadcast media. The right to Freedom of Expression is guaranteed in the Armenian Constitution. The country is also a signatory to a number of international and European conventions on human rights. Nevertheless, a clear understanding of Freedom of Expression and how it should be protected and exercised is practically absent in Armenia. With support from the British Embassy in Yerevan and USAID, EPF conducted research on Freedom of Expression, censorship and self-censorship, funded production of six documentary films on Freedom of Expression-related topics, screened three foreign documentaries and conducted a series of TV talk shows on the subject.

Impact:

- The project contributed to a broader understanding of standards of Freedom of Expression. At every step – discussions, research, films and talk shows – the project confirmed the need for Armenian society to talk openly about sensitive issues connected to FoE. It revealed surprising support for positions that are considered old fashioned in the modern world, such as the custom of the “silent daughter in law” who should remain silent after moving in to her husband’s family’s home. Moreover, self-censorship by media was widely approved of by representatives of police and security forces as beneficial for state security. The project represented a rare opportunity for Armenians to openly discuss these issues.
- Independent filmmakers were given a unique opportunity to gain exposure while grappling with a difficult subject.
- The reactions of talk show viewers led EPF to continue the series, producing thirteen talk shows instead of the eight that

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EPF MISSION STATEMENT

To empower people to effect change for social justice and economic prosperity, through hands-on programs helping them to improve their *communities* and their own *lives*.

“EPF gave me a chance to make the film of my dreams! Me and everyone in this country got an opportunity to deliberate notions of individual freedom, traditions and choices, visible and invisible boundaries. In other words – Freedom of Expression at large.”

TIGRAN PASKEVICHYAN
Columnist and script writer

had been originally planned. By the end of the series, 78 calls had been received from viewers; many callers proposed topics for future films and talk shows.

- The project's series of talk shows brought new faces to TV, including students, people from outside the capital city, and intellectuals. The shows demonstrated that it is possible in today's Armenia to discuss difficult issues in an interesting and engaging way, and that the public is able to come on TV and talk about issues they are concerned about. This is remarkable: respondents to the project's qualitative research said they consider individuals that dare to express themselves publicly as “crazy,” “kamikaze” or “drunk.”
- The talk shows helped EPF explore and push the boundaries of what is considered “acceptable” on TV in Armenia. Despite refusing to show one documentary early on, *Yerkeir Media* later aired documentaries on politically risky topics

(such as the destruction of the Teghut forest by mining) which they and other channels had previously refused to show, an apparent shift in self-censorship practices.

- *Gala TV* in Gyumri and *Lori TV* in Vanadzor also challenged the boundaries of censorship by airing all six documentaries twice, at the request of viewers, despite receiving calls from local authorities warning them against doing so.
- Interest in the documentaries was substantial; public screenings were organized at the *Narekatsi Art Center* and at *Mkhibtar Sebastatsi* educational complex (Yerevan) as well as in *Cinema-club* and *Asparez Journalists Club* (Gyumri) and in ten communities of Ararat Marz. In all, EPF has distributed about 500 copies of all six films in Armenian and in English.
- Government and political party representatives were invited to participate in all of the project activities, including the TV talk shows. Some initially refused to take part, but eventually many accepted the invitation. Thanks to the professionalism of show's anchor, all participants were able to express their points of view. Showcasing opposing points of view like this, including by challenging and engaging government and civil society in a civilized dialogue, is unusual for Armenian television.
- The project, including the qualitative research on Freedom of Expression and censorship, generated 36 recommendations for ways the public, the media and the government can ensure that Freedom of Expression is better upheld in Armenia; 10 are already in the process of being implemented. The report is available on EPF's website.



Consultations on FoE: Group Discussions