

**American University of Armenia**



***Mass Media and Social Movements: Electric Yerevan***

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## **Abstract**

This master thesis focuses on some principles and patterns concerning the interaction between mass media and social movements because mass media and social movements can both support or hinder each other. Particularly it was examined and analyzed how the social movement Electric Yerevan is discussed in the Western and Russian mass media. Content analysis of the news articles and focus group sessions with active members of Electric Yerevan are the two primary methods. The argument of the thesis is that there are differences in the coverage between the Western and Russian mass media over Electric Yerevan. The analysis revealed that the Western and Russian mass media portrayed the movement from two distinct perspectives: the Western media described Electric Yerevan as a fight for a social issue, injustice, and corruption. There are differences in Russian mass media in portraying the movement. Pro-government channel described the movement as political while the opposition channel described it as both political and social struggle. This evidence concerning the differences between two mass media is supported by the results of the focus group discussions.

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## Introduction

There was a new wave of civic activism since 2007 in Armenia. It included various “civic initiatives<sup>1</sup>”: environmental, social, labor and employment, etc. Though few of them reached their goals and were mainly not so significant in numbers, their emergence brought a new lively wave of civic activism. Armenian citizens started to raise their voice and express their dissatisfaction with the decisions made by the government. No longer are NGOs considered as the only sign of the existence of civil society; small-scale protest activities resembling mini-social movements, organized mainly by young and active people are now also visible as elements of civil society. One of the significant sustained protest campaigns in Armenia was Electric Yerevan, a nascent social movement against the electricity price hike. Due to its huge number of participants (almost 20,000 in Yerevan, and 10,000 in marzes) and also context and activism, it gained a substantial mass media coverage. However, mass media had different reflections over Electric Yerevan. The main contrast is between the Western and the Russian mass media; the two introduced Electric Yerevan from different perspectives. Russian media is dominated by political rhetoric while in the Western media the emphasis is on violated human rights.

Literature suggests that mass media and social movements are often used as tools for changing domestic politics. Thus, both can be manipulated by the various groups both in the society and also outside of it. Mass media coverage can change the sentiments of the protestors: it can shape the demands of the movement. Also, mass media can be used by governments to manipulate participants of a movement and eventually disunite them. Thus, it is vital to examine

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<sup>1</sup> The term “civic initiatives” was coined by a group of activists in Armenia, who were initiating small scale social movements, accompanied by protests, demonstrations, sit-ins, etc.

the relationship between mass media and social movements for revealing the possible outcomes and patterns of their relationship.

The purpose of the thesis is to examine Western and Russian media coverage of the Electric Yerevan protests in summer 2015, discuss the differences between Western and Russian mass media coverage, and to explore which media coverage was perceived as “objective” or “subjective” by active movement participants. Thus, the qualitative method was used for analyzing the mass media coverage: the content analysis of the news articles from Western and Russian media, and also focus group sessions with active participants of Electric Yerevan were used in the course of the analysis.

## **Literature Review**

### **Social Movements**

Social movements are considered as a way to express the right to the freedom of speech, and freedom of expression. They arose where the young, oppressed and powerless challenged the authority of the experienced (Das 1981). Pickvance (1997) defines “social movements as partially institutionalized collective activities that have a structure but where no formal membership is necessary, unlike political parties” (Pickvance 1997, 37). Das (1981) also states that social movements are traditionally viewed as collective behavior. Moreover, social movements seek to provide collective goods (Stern et al. 1999). Besides, broad participation is in tune with the openness of ideas and recruitment (Pickvance 1997). Social movements connect people to their interests. The activities of these movements are in diverse spheres of discourse, which means they target different issues. Social movements serve for self-identity and self-representation (Cahalen 1994). The other explanation is that social movements are committed to public actions intended to have an impact on the behavior of the policy system and of the wider population (Stern et al. 1999).

Social movements are an integral part of civil society and democracy. According to Cahalen (1994), the growth of social movements in areas like environmentalism, healthcare, the press and underground economy, widens the space for civil society. Occurrences of social movements are an example of a process of rising, development and improvement of civil society. Social groups with goals in civil society are not intended to threaten the legitimacy of the regime but “to create change from within” (Cahalen 1994). Some groups in civil society are active in the political sphere whereas others are functioning within the non-political sphere.

According to Romano (2012) social movements and civil society are the building blocks of a democratic state (Romano 2012). Bringing an example of anti-water privatization, social movements in Nicaragua, he claims that it expanded the current democracy by promoting the accountability of existing institutions of government and by building civil society directed democratic practices. In addition, social movements redefine politics, participation and citizenship, usage of public space for public purposes, and the strengthening of democratic participation (Stahler-Sholk and Vanden 2011). As well, social movements develop citizenship: civil, social and political rights; eventually social movements strengthen the society, increase social solidarity, and reduce class conflict (Betances 2015).

In contrast, there are scholars like Medearis (2005), who mention that social movements change the character of conflict and create a crisis. The author mentions that movements do not address a particular public, and they do not follow the plurality that exists in specific public (Medearis 2005). In this case, social movements are aimed to realize the goals of actors who occupy different structural positions and use the public for realizing their goals



## **Social Movements and Mass Media**

According to Gamson and Wolfsfeld (1993), the relationship between social movements and news media is a transaction between two complex systems of actors with complicated inner relationships. Moreover, media and movement are dependent on each other but not equally (Gamson and Wolfsfeld 1993). Movements are much more reliant on media than the vice versa which gives more power and privilege to media. Media is important for movements, first of all, for mobilization. Movements expand their population with the help of media discourse. Secondly, media ensures the legitimacy of the movement and the fact that they are a crucial player (Gamson and Wolfsfeld 1993). Thus, movements dependent on media for gaining public sympathy. Mass media is also a powerful tool for disseminating the change to public sphere by using the preferred rhetoric for describing the event (Gamson 2004). Rohlinger (2002) also mentions that social movements and media are indispensable for each other. Media has an ability to broaden the scope of the movement, energize the movement by organizing the population, and also increase the legitimacy of the movement in the public sphere (Rohlinger 2002). Media has a big role in establishing communications networks because it frames the ideals of the movement which could be harmonious with the logics of society. Also, it mobilizes masses, consequently a huge support to the movement can be provided (Hroch and Stoddart 2015).

King and Haveman (2008) suggest that the development of media led to the establishment of social movements. Social movement activists rely on two dominant organizing structures such as communications networks and social institutions. Accordingly, media is considered as an indispensable part of social movements. Authors mention the critical role of the media on social movements which led to social, political and economic upheavals that influenced the American society. Civil wars, two world wars, and other crucial events were not held without

social movements and, more importantly, the media (King and Haveman 2008). Hroch and Stoddart (2015) posit that the mass media helped environmental movements to intervene in networks to involve opponents and governments into the public debate. Social movements, in this case, is highly dependent on the mass media for reshaping and reconstructing the society (Hroch and Stoddart 2015). Instead of direct engagement of governing officials with movements' demands, protest actors achieve media access. Also, the mass media outlines both the views of policymakers and the public. According to Koopmans (2004), it is in the mass media that mutual observation and interaction takes place between protestors and authorities. Authorities react to a social movement by how it is covered by the mass media. Also activists of social movements know about political opportunities and the general atmosphere through the mass media (Koopmans 2004). Therefore, the mass media is considered to be more reliable and stable. Thus, by presenting a plurality of perspectives, mass media have the prospective to supplement citizen participation and to promote democratization (Kowalchuk 2010).

In contrast, Smith et al. state that although the mass media has vital influence on policy building, however, social movements are not wholly dependent on it. Social movements use other sources also, for instance by communicating directly with other influential groups in the society. Authors posit about media's role in covering social movements. However, mass media reports portray social movements in a way that can even destabilize them (Smith et al. 2001). Mass media tends to focus on the ongoing issues rather than on the details of a demonstration that takes place. Media coverage is mostly episodic, instead of thematic. However, the aim of social movements is a media reportage that mentions the problems that they target. Social movements can impact the context in which the news is interpreted (Smith et al. 2001). In addition, Robins (2014) mentions that mass media illustrations rarely show the protests inside

historically particular struggles and traditions of political mobilization and fail to demonstrate local specificities.

Moreover, mass media coverage can destroy social movements (Boykoff 2007). The state uses the mass media to repress the social movements and uses specific values and norms during the work with journalists. For instance, journalists consider some sources as official and they unintentionally disseminate the states' preferred coverage. Therefore, in this case, the state benefits and the movement impedes (Boykoff 2007).

Thus, many actors use the mass media as means for having influence and getting information. Koopmans mentions that reliance of social movement activists on the mass media makes movements dependent on what others consider important. On the other hand, strategic models, social and organizational networks which transfer movement messages may be slower and not easy to reach (Koopmans 2004). Di Cicco states that the media has a tendency to present social protests as “troublesome, unpatriotic and ineffective” (Cabalin 2014, 485). Thus, conservative media tries to inhibit the spread of social movements by falsifying their purposes (Cabalin 2014).

Many authors mention that framing should be taken into consideration when discussing the relationship between social movements and mass media. Rohlinger (2002) brings an example of National Organization for Women, a social movement which was fighting for legal abortion. They framed the issue in terms of “rights” and thus they had success (Rohlinger 2002). Movement and media are in the relationship of interpreting events: it is a fight over framing. Gamson (2004) in his book also mentions that mass media is the major field for a contest, and all players recognize the role of its inescapable impact. All players look at mass media coverage for measuring their effectiveness by observing whether their speeches are in the leading newspapers

(Gamson 2004). Brinson (2006) also posits about the critical role of media framing. The tactic by which social movements try to acquire positive media coverage is significant not only for participants of the movement but also for the outcomes of the movement (Brinson 2006).

Framing is used by the social movements' activists in order to motivate and legitimate their steps (Boykoff and Laschever 2011). As for journalists, framing is used by focusing people's attention on specific issues, ideas, and individuals. They use selection and emphasis for interpretation and evaluation of particular events (Boykoff and Laschever 2011). Moreover, the actors of social movements work on the framing because many parties are engaged in the framing issues. Activists frame issues, use strategic discourse for attaining sympathy of the large audience for supporting their position (Kowalchuk 2010). Kowalchuk (2010) importantly mentions that even though the news media does not fully cover the movement it does not mean that the movement has failed to impact news framing. Also, social movements use different tools like dramatic protests or civil disobedience for gaining media coverage (Hroch and Stoddart 2015). Thus, the media is not empty channels that should be filled but lively shapers of the content (Hroch and Stoddart 2015).

There are other authors like Stoddart and MacDonald (2011), who mention that mass media is crucial for social movements to attain the visibility of issues, to attract more supporters, and engage governments. However, in this case, the social media has a more important role. Social media is less costly in terms of time and money. Also, the relationship between mass media and social movements is changing because of generational change among news workers who are more concerned with covering social movement goals (Stoddart and MacDonald 2011). On the other hand, mass media allows interested persons to find more detailed coverage of the

events. Sometimes, the web content of specific movements is very poor, and the mass media is a very efficient tool for adding to it (Owens and Palmer 2003).

On the other hand, there is an opinion that it is not right to exaggerate the role of social media because sometimes it is used as a tool for government surveillance and provocation (Ishkanian 2015). Thus, even though it helped to gather people, the main actions took place outside the social media. Thus, we can explain how they were uniting, but we cannot explain why they are gathered on the streets (Ishkanian 2015).

## **Methodology**

This research uses qualitative methods: content analysis of news articles and focus group discussions with active participants of Electric Yerevan.

For analyzing news articles four mass media agencies have been chosen: two Western (BBC and Euronews) and two Russian media agencies (1 TV and TV Rain). These were chosen because they had the most amount of coverage of the Electric Yerevan protests. In case of Russian media agencies, 1 TV was chosen as a pro-governmental news agency and Rain TV as an opposition channel. Both Western and Russian sources were selected to provide diversity of coverage and to contrast these two types. Content analysis of all news articles published during two weeks of protests, from June 22 to July 6, 2015 was conducted to identify the differences between two kinds of media agencies: Western and Russian. Also, it helped to find how the goals of the movement were portrayed, and what the patterns of news coverage were. The information collected and analyzed during content analysis was used for developing questions for focus groups. A total of 75 news articles were analyzed.

Two focus group discussions were organized: one group consisted of seven people, and in the second group ten people were included. During focus groups an experiment was conducted. Two news articles, one from Western media, the other from Russian, were chosen for discussion. These articles were translated to Armenian for avoiding language issues. Focus group participants were given the articles at the beginning of the discussion and were asked to read them. The participants were then asked to discuss their experience with the media coverage of the movement, and their reflections on the news articles provided. Besides, this experiment helped to explore, which news agency was perceived by movement participants as being more “objective” and representing the views and goals of the movement more “accurately”.

Two elements of qualitative data, content analysis of news articles and focus group analysis were combined to determine a pattern and to accept or reject the proposed hypotheses.

H1: There are differences between Western and Russian media coverage.

H2: Russian media portrayed the movement as an anti-Russian.

## **Electric Yerevan**

### **Armenia: A Short Introduction to the Current Situation**

According to Freedom House, Armenia is a semi-authoritarian country. Soviet heritage, the Nagorno-Karabakh war, and economic problems brought political apathy and social exclusion. Now, the country has a very low level of public trust, and according to CRRC, Armenian citizens indicated the highest level of distrust in government in comparison with its two neighbors; Georgia and Azerbaijan (CRRC 2015). One of the main challenges to Armenia's economic development is a high rate of corruption. According to Transparency International, from 175 countries Armenia is 95<sup>th</sup> ("Transparency International - Country Profiles" 2016). Thus, corruption remains dominant in almost all spheres of public and political life.

Armenia's political system is semi-presidential; the ruling party is Republican Party of Armenia (HHK), which is a majority in the Parliament and has supremacy over other parties. The opposition is weak because of ideological and financial problems. However, on December 6, 2015, a referendum was held in Armenia, where 63,35% of voters say 'yes' to the parliamentary system of governance ("Հայաստանի Հանրապետության կենտրոնական ընտրական հանձնաժողով" 2015).

In the late 1980s, the social movements and mass mobilization were highly visible in Armenia. However, in the next decades those declined, the concept of civil society became fashionable but was predominantly associated with NGOs which were the indispensable part of it. Since 2007, an active wave of civic activism emerged in Armenia: civic initiatives are growing in number and have successes in influencing government decisions in Armenia ("No 73, Caucasus Analytical Digest: Civil Society" 2016). Since 2010, the most active civic initiatives



were in the capital of the RA, Yerevan. Also, re-emergent small social movements started to be an integral part of the civil society. The largest and the most recent one is Electric Yerevan.

### **Electric Yerevan: Short Chronology of the Events**

“No to Plunder” civic initiative was created in 2014. It was not very visible, until the events of summer 2015, when it formed the core of protests that became known as Electric Yerevan.

A decision by Armenia’s Public Services Regulatory Commission (PSRC) to raise the price of electricity by 16.7% from August 2015 provoked demonstrations in Yerevan. On June 19 people gathered at Freedom Square. Demonstrations became a sit-in at Baghramyan Avenue on June 22, nearly hundred meters away from the Residence of the President. On June 23, police dispersed the crowd by using water cannons. However, this brought a huge wave of demonstrators to Baghramyan Avenue, almost 20,000 people. Protestors demanded that Serzh Sargsyan, the President of the RA, cancel the price rise. Sit-in continued until 6 of July when the police dispersed the crowd. It is important to mention that Armenia’s electricity company is the property of Russia’s state-owned energy holding Inter RAO. It is worth to mention that the fact that Electricity Company is a Russian one convinced many authors to believe that a decision of price hike partly came from Russia because during this period Russia had its domestic currency depreciation.

Many people saw the movement as a chance to express their discontent towards the decisions made by the government. Electric Yerevan was not led by any political party, association, or leader. It was a movement led mainly by young people, who were self-organized. The participants mainly used slogans like “Stop Corruption”, “No to the Price Hike”, “High Voltage”.

The government of Armenia resolved a problem temporarily by calling an audit of Electric Networks of Armenia. Also, the government decided to subsidize the increase in electricity price. Audit was conducted by the international audit company Deloitte & Touche on October, 2015, which revealed that the energy rate hike is justified. The reason mainly is that the company stands at the edge of default; it did overestimated forecasts and mismanagement. However, the participants of Electric Yerevan consider that the government's promise to subsidize the added price means that tax burdens will compensate it. During public hearings of Electric Yerevan on October 2015, one of the representatives of the movement mentioned that the best solution at this stage is the nationalization and privatization of the electricity company.

From the perspectives of cultural and social change, the movement can be considered as a success. It united people from various layers of the society who had different kinds of occupation. These events in the summer of 2015 can serve as sources of encouragement and strength for the participants of the movement, and raise participants' prospect of future mobilization when the time comes. Electric Yerevan's demonstrations have provided a chance to link individual identities to collective ones.

## **Mass Media and Electric Yerevan**

Due to its huge numbers, Electric Yerevan gained mass media's attention immediately. Not only local mass media agencies covered it wholly, but also many channels outside Armenia; many Russian channels, channels from Europe and the USA. It was also covered very thoroughly by Al Jazeera. Thus, the event is unusual for a small country such as Armenia, and it is one of the reasons for gaining so much attention.

The hashtag Electric Yerevan became one of the favorites in social media during the two weeks of non-stop protests. . Recently, the worlds' largest international multimedia news agency

Reuters has included Armenian photographer Vahram Baghdasaryan's photo from Electric Yerevan in its 2015 Pictures of the Year.

Various media reactions to the events in Yerevan, however, were not all of the same kind. For the Western community, Electric Yerevan was largely seen as a peaceful movement where protestors occupy themselves by playing chess, dancing national dances, and cleaning up after themselves. Russian channels and social media, unlike most of the Western media, interpreted Electric Yerevan as a re-play of the Ukrainian Maidan. Russian mass media alleged that Electric Yerevan was orchestrated from the outside of Armenia. Thus, they interpreted it as the USA propaganda. Also, according to Russian mass media, it can be understood as a challenge to the government who joined the EEU, instead of an Association Agreement with the EU (Coalson 2015).

Mass media and also social media had a very crucial role in organizing people and bringing them to Baghramyan Avenue. As most of the protestors were between ages 20 to 30, they mostly were informed about the event and gathered at Baghramyan with the help of Facebook or Twitter. "Mass media helps to disseminate the raised issue. When something needed to be published, news media covered it without any problem. Not always in the context we needed, but they were publishing" – Vaghinak Shushanyan, one of the main activists of the Electric Yerevan.

The movement was mainly covered by Civilnet and Liberty radio station during two weeks of demonstrations. Radio Liberty was broadcasting the movement live, and the number of viewers reached up to 280,000, in a population of 3.2 million (Daly 2015).

## Content Analysis

In order to find out the main differences that exist between various mass media agencies, several descriptors were determined and analyzed. The choice of the descriptors is based on the literature review which already helped to understand the relationship between the mass media and social movements. Content analysis includes news articles of mass media agencies which covered Electric Yerevan frequently. Two Russian channels were chosen; 1TV - a pro-government channel and TV Rain, which is an opposition channel. Also, two Western mass media agencies, Euronews and BBC, were chosen.

The analysis of the descriptors comprises of two parts. First, the frequency of the descriptors is given, which means how often each descriptor or the equivalent (by meaning) of the descriptor emerges in the text. The second part of the analysis covers the intensity measurement, which means the significance of the descriptor mentioned every time. The intensity is done primarily to find out the real causes, because, from time to time, the most frequent descriptor appears to be the least important reason in the context. The intensity was measured according to description in the [Table 1](#).

***Table 1 Intensity codes for content analysis of news***

<b>Codes</b>	<b>Description of the Intensity Levels of Codes</b>
<b>0</b>	Mentioned once or twice in passing, not at all important or central for the article's argument
<b>1</b>	Varying importance at different stages, sometimes not important at all
<b>2</b>	Very important, but not dominant
<b>3</b>	The key argument/focus of the article

The descriptors were derived from the literature review and also during the readings of the articles concerning Electric Yerevan. The frequency of coverage of Electric Yerevan in Russian media is more than the Western one. The 1TV and TV Rain covered the event every day from the start of the demonstrations, June 22. The number of the news articles varies from five to fifteen for one day, but they are mainly one paragraph texts. Western media covers the event not very frequently, but the texts consist of three to seven paragraphs. Word count of BBC news articles is 1,137, Euronews 1,126, whereas for 1TV it is 5,516, and for TV Rain it is 4,595 for texts only. TV Rain also has many videos on Electric Yerevan where the whole count of minutes is 126.

Table 2 shows the frequency and intensity of each descriptor that appeared in the text during the content analysis of the news articles from Western mass media. Content analysis of the Western media showed that they covered Electric Yerevan as a fight for human rights and social issues. However, there are points in the Western news media that are discussed broadly, which are the existence of ‘Russian military base’, ‘the economic situation in Russia’, and the evidence that ‘the Electricity Company in Armenia is owned by Russia’. Thus, almost in every news article, these three points are in place. By mentioning these descriptors, the Western mass media agencies mainly emphasized the dependency of Armenia on Russia and also that Armenia is Russia’s strategic ally in the region.

***Table 2 Frequency and intensity of each descriptor or equivalent of the descriptor that appeared in the text in the Western media***

Descriptors	Frequency		Intensity	
	Euronews	BBC	Euronews	BBC
Corruption	3	3	5	2

<b>Fight for Human Rights</b>	4	3	5	3
<b>Social Issues</b>	2	3	2	2
<b>Russian Military Base</b>	3	3	4	3
<b>Russian Electricity Company</b>	3	3	5	3
<b>Russian Economic Situation</b>	5	3	2	3
<b>Anger</b>	5	2	3	2
<b>Clashes with the Police</b>	2	2	4	2
<b>Violence</b>	3	1	3	1
<b>Anti-Russian</b>	2	1	3	2
<b>Comparison with Maidan</b>	0	0	1	0
<b>Anti-Government</b>	0	0	1	0
<b><u>Total word count</u></b>	<u>1,126</u>		<u>1,137</u>	

The other descriptor that should be discussed is ‘corruption’. In the news articles it is shown that people also gathered at Baghramyan Avenue for showing their overall dissatisfaction with the injustice and also corruption that exist within the system. Also, it was mentioned that corruption exists within the Electricity Company of Armenia, too, and it is one of the reasons for making a decision about the rise of the electricity price.

The next crucial point in the news articles is ‘fight for human rights’ and ‘social issues’. It was mentioned that protests are only for a social issue, the price of the electricity. Also, news articles pointed out that it is the right of the people to fight for their rights and hold peaceful demonstrations. The descriptor ‘social issue’ was mentioned many times by emphasizing that the

motive of the movement is not a political one, but it is social and economic. Besides, people are gathered there on their own and not at an initiative of a specific political party.

The next descriptors that should be discussed are ‘anger’, ‘violence’, and ‘clashes with the police’. The analysis of descriptors mainly showed that there was anger among the people towards the government decision. Thus, the decision made by the government to raise the electricity price was the main reason for people to organize demonstrations. ‘Violence’ and ‘clashes with the police’ are primarily referred to the incident with the water cannons for dispersing the crowd.

The descriptor ‘comparison with Maidan’ was only mentioned one time for showing that Russian media presents the protests as a part of Maidan. Thus, this descriptor is not crucial in the Western media.

Two Russian mass media agencies, 1 TV and TV Rain, were discussing the protests starting from June 22, 2015. A big difference can be noticed between the two by analyzing descriptors. 1 TV always mentions in all news articles that the President of the RA Serzh Sargsyan wanted to meet with protestors but the latter rejected it. However, TV Rain states that protestors have designated some members of the group, who were supposed to meet with the president but the president did not approve it and the meeting was canceled. Also, 1 TV frequently mentions that the people who participated in the protests are members of NGOs who are financed and received grants from the American organizations. Moreover, in one of the news articles journalist of 1 TV referred to fact that “people who gathered in Baghramyan Avenue do not know what they want, in spite of the fact that the US Embassy of Armenia knew what they want.” It was mentioned that these NGOs were for the promotion of the democratization process but their main purpose was making Armenia a pro-Western country.

In contrast, TV Rain presented the events of Electric Yerevan as a fight for social issues where no political party or other organizations were engaged. They held interviews with political scientists of Armenia who told that it was a protest for a social issue, and it was not triggered by any political organization or party. Besides, it was mentioned that the protests started spontaneously which means that the youth were self-organized. However, from time to time TV Rain also was drawing parallels with the Maidan and the anti-government sentiments.

Table 3 shows the frequency and intensity of each descriptor that appeared in the text during the content analysis of the news articles from Russian mass media. The analysis of descriptors in the news coverage of TV Rain showed that the descriptor ‘corruption’ appeared not very frequently but it had important implications in some news articles. It was mentioned that both the rise in the electricity price, and the protests were because of corruption in the electricity company and in the country in general. However, in case of 1 TV the descriptor ‘corruption’ had no importance.

***Table 3 Frequency and intensity of each descriptor or equivalent of the descriptor that appeared in the text of Russian media***

Descriptors	Frequency	Intensity	Frequency	Intensity
	1 TV		TV Rain	
<b>Corruption</b>	1	0	13	2
<b>Fight for Human Rights</b>	0	0	12	2
<b>Comparison with Maidan</b>	7	2	10	1
<b>Violence</b>	8	3	33	3
<b>Anti-Russian</b>	6	3	3	1
<b>Anti-Government</b>	4	1	13	1



<b>Anger</b>	4	1	21	3
<b>Russian Military Base</b>	0	0	0	0
<b>Russian Electricity Company</b>	1	0	9	1
<b>Social Issues</b>	6	0	48	3
<b>Clashes with the Police</b>	17	3	39	3
<b>Russian Economic Situation</b>	0	0	1	0
<b>Unauthorized Rally</b>	16	3	0	0
<b>Color Revolution</b>	5	2	2	1
<b>Civic Initiative</b>	0	0	22	3
<b>Absence of Strong Political Opposition</b>	3	0	11	2
<b>Total word count/Count of minutes</b>	5,516		4,595/126	

The next descriptor ‘fight for human rights’ does not appear at all in case of 1 TV. Thus, 1 TV has no implication that the protests are a part of a fight for human rights. Yet, in case of TV Rain, the movement was seen in the framework of ‘fight for human rights’.

‘Violence’, and ‘clashes with the police’ had a crucial role both in case of 1 TV and TV Rain. Both channels mentioned during the two weeks of protests that there was always a danger of clashes with the police. The descriptor ‘violence’ was mentioned mainly to emphasize in all news articles the usage of water cannons by the police to disperse the crowd, as a reminder that people were angry because of that incident. The descriptor ‘anger’ also had an implication to the occasion with water cannons in case of TV Rain, but 1 TV did not mention it as an essential component.

The descriptor 'comparison with Maidan' had a key role in case of 1 TV because in many news articles Electric Yerevan was seen as a continuation of Ukrainian Maidan, which was a fight for political orientation. In case of TV Rain 'comparison with Maidan' appeared in the news coverage for sometimes reminding the reader that it could be a part of the Maidan, but the emphasis was not as huge as for 1 TV.

The 'anti-Russian' descriptor could have been found almost in every article of the 1 TV. They introduced the movement as a fight against Russia such as in Ukraine. This descriptor sometimes was accompanied with the 'anti-government', which is also connected with the idea that the government was a pro-Russian but the protestors are against it.

The statements such as 'Russian military base', 'Russian electricity company' and 'Russian Economic situation' are not discussed in the Russian mass media. Only TV Rain sometimes mentioned about the 'Russian electricity company' but it has no influence on the context of the news.

There are many differences between the statements of 1 TV and TV Rain regarding other descriptors. For instance, in the case of Rain TV 'social issues' are emphasized many times in the sense that the protests are for solving the social issue which is electricity price hike. In case of 1 TV they considered the movement as an 'unauthorized rally', by mentioning that the people were gathered without official permission. On the other hand TV Rain considered demonstrations as a 'civic initiative' by young people who just want to fight against injustice, etc. Besides, 1 TV sometimes considered the movement as a part of the 'color revolutions' which took place in the Post-Soviet area. Finally, TV Rain pointed about 'the absence of strong political opposition' which is a prerequisite for the youth to solve the issue by themselves.

Consequently, there were both similarities and differences between the context in 1 TV and TV Rain. 1 TV considers Electric Yerevan in the framework of politicized movement, whereas TV Rain as both social and sometimes connected with political sentiments.

In conclusion, Western media portrayed Electric Yerevan as a fight for a social issue and human rights. Thus, for Western media the real reason for protests is the electricity price hike. On the other hand, there is a difference between two channels of Russian media: 1TV showed Electric Yerevan as an issue of political orientation and a movement financed by American organizations. Whereas, TV Rain presented Electric Yerevan both as a movement for a social issue and also sometimes it did comparisons with Maidan.

## Focus Group Analysis

Focus groups were conducted with active participants of the Electric Yerevan. The discussions incorporated a small experiment. Two articles were chosen by the researcher, one from the Western media the other from the Russian one. The participants were asked to read the articles and the discussion followed. Also, they shared their ideas about Electric Yerevan and goals connected with it.

Focus group sessions found that all the participants at first glance could tell which of the articles is from the Western media and which one is from the Russian. They stated that the article from the Russian media has many biases and sentences that do not fit with the reality. However, the Western one also has inconsistencies connected with the numbers. Overall, the majority of the participants considered that the Western mass media illustrated the events from the perspective of the protestors: “They [western media] covered what they were seeing not what they wanted to see” – stated one of the participants of the focus group.

As for the Russian mass media, participants noticed that during the protest there were many journalists from the Russian media. Demonstrators were engaged in systematic attempts to convince Russian news media agencies that it is not Maidan,

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*“During the protest there were two young journalists from Saint-Petersburg who were representing one of the local press companies. They approached to the protestors and ask them who is funding them” – told one of the participants during the focus group session.*

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and it is a fight against injustice and electricity price hike. Moreover, participants pointed out that in the case of the Russian media they presented assumptions about the reasons of the movement, but they were not providing information about the events.

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*One of the participants of the Electric Yerevan had an experience with Russian media: During demonstrations, there was a boy who had three balloons for the Armenian flag colors. When the red balloon blew up, only blue and yellow remains and all the media's attention was suddenly on the person, because of yellow-blue combination, which is the Ukrainian flag. It is an illustration of media bias and "seeing what they want to see"*

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Focus group sessions also showed that many participants had an experience with the journalists from the Russian channels who were trying to convince participants to confess that it is a Maidan. Thus, they wanted to see the protests as an anti-Russian, like it was in the case of

Ukrainian Maidan. Moreover, Russian channels wanted to see protest as an issue of political orientation: the West or Russia.

Most of the participants considered Electric Yerevan as a unique social movement as it created a lively civil society. Also, it is a new phenomenon in Armenia when all layers of the society participated in the movement against electricity price hike. The participants of Electric Yerevan mention that it is the civil society that raised the question of Electric Yerevan. "We can say that everybody was interested in it, both political and civil societies." They also mention that NGOs were largely engaged in the movement for resolving the question. Thus, political parties have been eliminated in the sense that they could not influence the movement.

The participants saw a movement as a fight first of all against violation of human rights, mainly they mentioned the incidence connected with water cannons. Besides, they were complaining about the inability of the public to have their participation in the decision-making process. Many participants of the focus group session mentioned that they also joined the movement after seeing what the government was doing to the citizens. Moreover, they mentioned that citizens just wanted the government to cancel the price hike, and it is not a reason

for treating them brutally. Thus, many of them were there for expressing their overall dissatisfaction and also complaints towards injustice.

“It is a dissatisfaction that accumulated over the years: dissatisfaction towards the policy of the authorities and corruption and injustice that exists in the country” – mentioned one of the participants.

As for the canceled meeting with the President of the Republic of Armenia Serzh Sargsyan the reasons for which varied in various news articles, focus group participants mentioned that it was cancelled because of their demands. They mentioned that before meeting they demanded three live streams; one of which should be owned by themselves, the other one by the government and third should be an independent news agency’s live stream. However, the President refused their request and consequently they refused to go to the table of negotiations. Therefore, in this case also we have biased and unclear news coverage by both the Western media and the Russian.

In addition, participants posit, that overall, the Electric Yerevan was about a fight against electricity price hike, but during the last days of the demonstrations seeing the inactivity and the inability of the government to satisfy the needs of the protestors, most of them had political demands in their minds. However, most of the participants mentioned that they allowed many mistakes to happen which brought to the division of the movement. The authorities managed to split the movement and convince people that the issue would be solved by the government’s subsidies. There were also people who were trying to convince the protestors not to politicize the movement. Political demands were not connected with political orientation: there were political demands to the president to solve the issue or to retire.

Overall, focus group analysis showed that there is first of all more coverage of the movement by the Russian journalists. However, they were asking about the sources of financial resources for organizing the movement, and also about whether it was a Maidan or not. Also, participants mentioned that the Western mass media agencies covered the movement more objectively than the Russian one which tried to politicize it.

## **Discussion of Results**

Content analysis of news articles and focus group analysis revealed that there are differences between the coverage of Electric Yerevan by Western and Russian mass media. Mainly, Western mass media agencies illustrated the movement as a struggle over violated human rights, corruption, and overall dissatisfaction of people with the current situation in the country. Besides, Western mass media stated that the motive behind protests is the hike in electricity price. Also, they mentioned many times about Armenia's dependency on Russia, by emphasizing that the Electricity Company in Armenia is owned by Russia, and also about the economic situation in Russia as a prerequisite for the hike in electricity price. Moreover, they stated about Russian military base in Armenia, which is also an important point in Russia-Armenia relations.

In contrast, Russian mass media agencies explained the movement as a re-play of Maidan that took place in Ukraine. They mainly pointed out that Electric Yerevan was financed by American organizations, which had a tendency to make Armenia a pro-Western country. Thus, 1 TV mostly interpreted the movement as an anti-Russian. TV Rain, which is an opposition channel emphasized that the movement is organized by active young people who were fighting for their rights and against the electricity price hike. However, they also sometimes had an impression that the movement is a part of Maidan.

Focus group analysis also showed that participants noticed different approaches between the Western and Russian mass media. Notably, they considered Western mass media coverage as relatively "objective," whereas for the Russian one they mentioned that "it portrayed the movement as it wanted to see it." They stated that the Russian media has many biases and



sentences that do not fit with the reality. Overall, they considered that the Western media's coverage met with their objectives more than the Russian one.

Therefore, there are obvious differences and inconsistencies between the news coverage by the Western mass media and the Russian one. Besides, there are some variances between the coverage of two Russian channels which sometimes had diverse approaches towards Electric Yerevan. However, 1 TV apparently illustrated the movement as a fight against Russia.

Taking into consideration the above-mentioned discussion of results, hypotheses are addressed in the following way:

H1: There are differences between Western and Russian media coverage-Accepted

H2: Russian media portrayed the movement as an anti-Russian-Partially accepted

## **Conclusion**

Social movements and mass media are in a specific interaction: the latter one can either support the movement or destabilize it by interpreting the movement as it wants. In the case of Electric Yerevan, different mass media agencies portrayed the event in different ways.

Electric Yerevan is a social movement which took place in summer 2015 in Armenia. The movement had a huge number of participants, and it was comprised of almost all layers of society. Consequently, it gained the attention of foreign mass media agencies, mainly the Western and Russian.

The analysis of the media coverage content revealed that there were visible differences in the context of news articles about Electric Yerevan: Russian coverage different from the Western coverage. Within Russian media coverage there were differences between governmental and oppositional media channels.

Russian media covered the events more frequently than the Western one: in this case, it could be noticed that Russian mass media were more interested in the coverage of the movement. However, Russian mass media tried to politicize the motives of the movement and put it in a political context. Russian mass media portrayed the movement as a continuation of the Ukrainian Maidan and a fight against Russia. There were differences between governmental and oppositional Russian mass media. The pro-government mass media channel presented the movement only in the context of political confrontation between (pro-Russian) government and Western-oriented and Western-funded protesters. The opposition channel considered the reasons behind the movement as both political and social.

The Western media tried to give it a social context: people gathered in the streets for demanding justice and respect for human rights. The Western media mentioned about the

existence of the corruption in the government and the electricity company itself as the other reasons for starting a protests. Also, the fact that the Electricity Company in Armenia is owned by Russia and the existence of Russian military base in Armenia was emphasized many times. The purpose of mentioning is to show Armenia's dependency on Russia and also to show the evidence that Armenia is a strategic ally of Russia.

Also, active participants of Electric Yerevan mentioned that they had to convince journalists of Russian mass media agencies that the movement is not a part of Maidan, and is not financed by anyone. Participants of Electric Yerevan wanted a change of the decision which would supposedly bring justice and satisfaction and also engagement of the citizens in the decision-making process.

Thus, there are clear differences between media coverage of Electric Yerevan by Russian and Western media. These differences are evident from content analysis and are also pointed out by protest participants: they could identify the difference in the stories presented to them during the experiment and shared their own curious experiences with Russian media attempts at misrepresenting the situation on the ground.

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## **Appendix**

### **Focus Group Questions**

1. What are the similarities between these two news articles? Please share your impressions.
2. What is Electric Yerevan: a movement for a social issue or for a political change?
3. What is the goal of the movement?
4. Overall what can you say about the work of the mass media during Electric Yerevan?
5. Please share interesting stories and incidents connected with the mass media.