

"Cool Heads in Hot Times: Reporting Trauma During Political Controversy"

A half day conference took a place on April 14, 2010 at the Club of Georgian Institute of Public Affairs. The event was a joint effort of Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma, Georgian Institute of Public Affairs, Georgian Society of Psychotrauma and Global Initiative on Psychiatry.

Meeting brought together representatives of leading media companies and the professional community of psychotraumatologists. The meeting examined the relevance of trauma science for the practice of journalism and other modes of public and political communication. The event explored the further steps for information sharing between media professionals and trauma experts.

The special guest of the meeting was Robert van Voren, Secretary General of the Global Initiative on Psychiatry, who has shared his experiences both as a former journalist and mental health expert. He has talked about the importance of the independent judiciary system as a guarantee and basis for the independent and professional journalism, he has demonstrated a case which highlighted that in democracy, when it comes to the right of respondent as an individual and the public interest, the courts decision was to serve the best interests of the society.

Nino Makhashvili, president of Georgian Society of Psychotrauma stressed that there is a stigmatizing attitude towards mental health problems as well as mental health professionals in the society: mental health related diagnosis are often used as swearing words; mental health professionals are viewed as the ones who should label the society and this or that public figures on whether they are normal or not. This attitude prevents both society and media to acknowledge existence of mental health problems within the society such as societal trauma developed as a result of military conflicts experienced in the country since early nineties, including the recent war with Russia. "The Imedi mock report was a trigger for retraumatization our population, which revealed itself as panic which we observed on 13th of April" said Makhashvili.

According to Jana Javakhishvili, Dart Center contact person for South Caucasus, there are three risks/challenges which media faces in reporting on conflict, violence, catastrophes: witnessing human tragedies could traumatize journalist himself which on the one hand will badly influence his professional performance and on the other hand could dramatically change his life; journalist can potentially traumatize the audience if the coverage does not correspond to the certain professional standards based on "do no harm" principle, and finally – journalist can potentially harm respondent if does not care his/her dignity, burden of traumatic experience and current emotional state. "There is an evidence based knowledge how to prevent these three risks, and our interdisciplinary cooperation and affiliation with Dart center on Journalism and Trauma serves exactly to build this capacity in Georgia", said Javakhishvili.

Nino Danelia, Professor of GIPA talked about the spin, she has defined a term and pointed out the ways and forms of its existence and the ways how media is reacting to it. Overall it was emphasized, that the spin doctors use very sensitive and advance techniques to manipulate the public opinion, while media is not strong enough not to swallow everything and provide the public with the fair and truthful information.

Tiko Tsomaia, GIPA Professor, stressed on the importance of the editorial independence as a core for press freedom which means independence from forces both outside and inside the media, specifically from: Government, political party's interests, business and commercial interests and journalists own prejudices and biases. It was noted that in Georgian reality it is possible to prevail over the last point and the way of doing it is the training and education of journalists and editors.

Representatives of leading media outlets, international organization and NGOs have contributed to the discussion: Maia Mikashvidze, GIPA dean, Marina Vashakmadze, the director of Radio Liberty Tbilisi Bureau, Paata Veshapidze, editor in Chief of daily newspaper 24 hours, Nino Japiashvili, editor of magazine Liberali, Elene Kvanchilashvili, editor of magazine Tabula, Tamar Mikadze, Press and Information Officer of the Delegation of the European Union to Georgia, Lela Tsiskarishvili, director of Georgian Center for Rehabilitation of Torture Victims, Nata Zazashvili, NGO against domestic violence Sapari director, Nana Agapishvili, chair of NGO of psycho-social services Ndoba, Manana Gabashvili, Norwegian Refugee Council deputy director, Davit Chaganava, journalist at Radio Liberty and other participants have expressed their points of views. It was admitted that the problems related to media are complex and elates to not holding the democratic values and insufficient education, whereas it can be approached by strengthening civil society, and educational system. It was said that skills of critical thinking and media literacy should be taught at all levels of education starting from schools to graduate programs.

In sight training programs for different media outlets, specifically for broadcast media should be developed and offered. The hosts and producers of the talk shows should be approached directly to raise the awareness on the importance of trauma science for different modes of communication.

The formula for trauma sensitive reporting is the journalist who follows the professional code of conduct and at the same time has an elementary knowledge in trauma science.