

ARMENIA



MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX 2018

Tracking Development
of Sustainable
Independent Media
Around the World



ARMENIA

AT A GLANCE

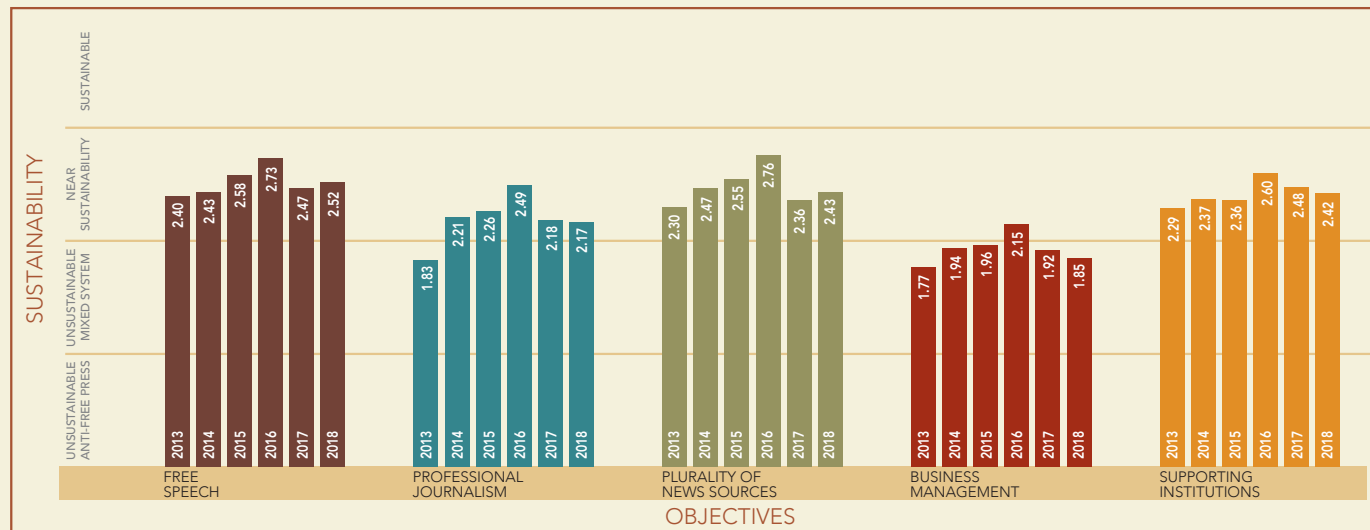
GENERAL

- **Population:** 3,045,191 (CIA World Factbook, July 2017 est.)
- **Capital city:** Yerevan
- **Ethnic groups (% of population):** Armenian 98.1%, Yezidi (Kurd) 1.1%, Russian 0.5%, other 0.3% (CIA World Factbook, 2011 est.)
- **Religions (% of population):** Armenian Apostolic 92.6%, Evangelical 1%, other 2.4%, none 1.1%, unspecified 2.9% (CIA World Factbook, 2011 est.)
- **Languages (% of population):** Armenian (official) 97.9%, Kurdish (spoken by Yezidi minority) 1%, other 1% (CIA World Factbook, 2011 est.)
- **GNI (2016 – Atlas):** \$11.006 billion (World Bank Development Indicators, 2017)
- **GNI per capita (2016 – PPP):** \$9,000 (World Bank Development Indicators, 2017)
- **Literacy rate:** 99.7% (male 99.7%, female 99.6%) (CIA World Factbook, 2015 est.)
- **President or top authority:** President Serzh Sargsyan (since April 9, 2008)

MEDIA-SPECIFIC

- **Number of active print outlets, radio stations, television stations, Internet news portals:** Print: over 36; Radio Stations: 20; Television Stations: 17 (nine channels in Yerevan, capital, including two Russian relay channels and CNN, seven stations with nationwide coverage, including one public station and MIR, intergovernmental television of CIS); 22 television stations in regions (nine digital, 12 with analogue licenses extended until next license tenders, and one public station in Shirak region); Internet News Portals: over 200
- **Broadcast ratings:** Most popular television stations are Armenia TV (private), Shant TV (private), A TV (private), H1 (public) (assessed by the panelists)
- **News agencies:** ARKA, Armenpress, Arminfo, MediaMax, Photolur
- **Annual advertising revenue in media sector:** \$30–40 million (estimated by the panelists)
- **Internet users:** 1.78 million (CIA World Factbook, 2016 est.)
- **Newspaper circulation statistics:** Average reported circulation is between 1,000 and 3,000.

MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX: ARMENIA



SCORE KEY

Unsustainable, Anti-Free Press (0-1): Country does not meet or only minimally meets objectives. Government and laws actively hinder free media development, professionalism is low, and media-industry activity is minimal.

Unsustainable Mixed System (1-2): Country minimally meets objectives, with segments of the legal system and government opposed to a free media system. Evident progress in free-press advocacy, increased professionalism, and new media businesses may be too recent to judge sustainability.

Near Sustainability (2-3): Country has progressed in meeting multiple objectives, with legal norms, professionalism, and the business environment supportive of independent media. Advances have survived changes in government and have been codified in law and practice. However, more time may be needed to ensure that change is enduring and that increased professionalism and the media business environment are sustainable.

Sustainable (3-4): Country has media that are considered generally professional, free, and sustainable, or to be approaching these objectives. Systems supporting independent media have survived multiple governments, economic fluctuations, and changes in public opinion or social conventions.

Scores for all years may be found online at <https://www.irex.org/msi>



All 2018 objective scores for Armenia only fluctuated slightly from last year's scores. The business management objective score of 1.85 significantly pulls down the overall score due to the lack of media outlets that function as sustainable businesses with consistent funding. The objectives of free speech and plurality of news sources slightly improved this year with less violence against journalists and the ability of citizens to access many news sources. Although there are still challenges to overcome in all objectives, Armenia's media sector overall score of 2.28 puts the country in the near sustainable range.

Two historic political events shaped 2017 in Armenia. In April, the first parliamentary elections after the 2015 referendum on constitutional reforms ushered in the country's transition to a parliamentary system of government, making the prime minister the head of the country. As expected, the ruling Republican Party of President Serzh Sargsyan won the majority (54 percent) of seats in the parliament, followed by Tsarukyan Alliance (led by wealthy businessman Gagik Tsarukyan, leader of the former Prosperous Armenia Party), the opposition Yelk (Way Out) alliance, and the government-loyal Dashnaktsutyun Party (ARF). At the time the Media Sustainability Index (MSI) panelists met, the president had not officially declared intent to run for the prime minister's office, but most citizens expect he eventually will. In the unlikely scenario that he does not, he will surely remain in power in some capacity.

The signing of the new Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA) in late November, on the margins of the Eastern Partnership Summit between the European Union (EU) and the Republic of Armenia, marked the year's other major historic event. It made Armenia the only country with both an EU partnership agreement and Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) membership. Many were forecasting its failure, referring back to 2013 when a different, more comprehensive and binding Association Agreement was aborted

following Sargsyan's sudden announcement of Armenia's plans to join the Russia-initiated EEU. Many others were sure the new agreement would be signed, because they believed the agreement was unofficially "cleared" by the Kremlin. The signing was preceded and followed by accounts of hostile and unethical coverage of Armenia's step in Russian mainstream media outlets (which are believed to be under the tight control of the Russian government), using highly offensive, inappropriate language and hate speech. Officially, however, Moscow expressed respect for Armenia's decision. According to Edgar Vardanyan, a freelance journalist and political analyst, Russia was sending a message with the negative coverage, marking a line that the Armenian government should not cross.

The signing of the agreement is a significant step, but it will not resolve all issues with media freedom and human rights overnight.

Less violence against journalists in the past year, despite the fact that there were two major elections (city council elections in May, along with the April parliamentary elections), could be taken as a sign of progress, but it could also be due to a lack of protests that tend to invite such confrontation.

The panelists also voiced concerns regarding a proposed legislative change: a new Law on Freedom of Information, which has not been discussed with the representatives of civil-society and media organizations.

**OBJECTIVE 1:
FREEDOM OF
SPEECH**

2.52

Armenia's constitutional provisions guarantee free speech, but enforcement remains a major issue. Obstacles to enforcement of these laws, ironically, include the lack of independence of the courts in dealing with free-speech issues, crimes against journalists, and other violations. Avetik Ishkhanyan, founder and president of Helsinki Committee of Armenia, observed that journalists have no faith that any case will be ruled in their favor, and this often deters them from turning to law enforcement and filing cases. The violations stir public outrage, but this outrage remains almost exclusively confined to indignant Facebook comments.

No journalists went to prison this past year for refusing to reveal their sources. However, the panelists suggested that the mere possibility that sources might be targeted creates an atmosphere of fear. "Even if the journalists get away [with not disclosing their sources], the sources [themselves] might exercise caution and withhold information," assumed Ishkhanyan. "Another issue is, what is a state secret? Is it clearly defined? I think it's not," Vardanyan said.

Licensing, required only for broadcast outlets, has never been apolitical, the panelists agreed—and nothing has changed in this regard: To become or remain a broadcast outlet requires loyalty to the government and its (unofficial) approval. Even if dissenting views are given air, it is understood that there are lines they should not cross. Today, some online casts attract more viewers than certain traditional outlets, but older generations in particular still consider the traditional broadcast

media, television especially, most trustworthy. The picture is the opposite for younger people, who no longer view television outlets as a credible information source and favor online sources instead. "It's either government or pro-government circles that push their agendas through television, and the whole spectrum of society is not represented through television outlets," Vardanyan maintained. "I haven't seen any research on this, but I believe the majority of the population still turns to television for information, especially so in *marzes* [administrative divisions]," Ishkhanyan said.

Market entry and tax structure for media are comparable to other industries, as has been the case for many years. There greatest legal restrictions are those for non-media businesses (other than licensing for broadcast outlets). Setting up an online media outlet today is as easy as "a click away." Newspapers are exempt from value-added tax for distribution.

Compared with the previous two years, which were marked by violent crimes specifically targeting and injuring media professionals, this past year proved less violent. The panelists ascribed this comparative drop in the intensity of violence to the absence of serious protests threatening the regime, rather than an improvement in the media landscape. Still, panelists noted that incidents occurred during the 2017 parliamentary elections on April 2 and the city council elections in May. For example, on April 2, Sisak Gabrielyan (a correspondent for RFE/RL's Armenian service [Azatutyun.am]), Shoghik Galstyan (journalist with araratnews.am online outlet), and videographer Hayk Petrosyan were covering the parliamentary elections and filming outside one of the ruling Republican Party's (HHK) campaign offices. Gabrielyan noticed that before entering the polling station, voters first visited the HHK hub—and that some exited carrying cash in their hands. When

Gabrielyan entered the office to investigate, the HHK staff insisted that they were distributing salaries, not bribes for votes, to their local activists. Some people in the office attacked Gabrielyan and grabbed his mobile phone; a brawl ensued, and Gabrielyan suffered a minor injury.

In another incident at the same campaign office, people who were gathered in front of the office spotted Galstyan and Petrosyan and demanded that they stop filming and leave. When Galstyan persisted, a woman insulted and assaulted her, pulled her hair, pushed her, seized her device, and forced her to leave. Another person assaulted

Legal and social norms protect and promote free speech and access to public information.

FREE-SPEECH INDICATORS

- ▶ Legal and social protections of free speech exist and are enforced.
- ▶ Licensing of broadcast media is fair, competitive, and apolitical.
- ▶ Market entry and tax structure for media are fair and comparable to other industries.
- ▶ Crimes against journalists or media outlets are prosecuted vigorously, but occurrences of such crimes are rare.
- ▶ State or public media do not receive preferential legal treatment, and law guarantees editorial independence.
- ▶ Libel is a civil law issue; public officials are held to higher standards, and offended parties must prove falsity and malice.
- ▶ Public information is easily accessible; right of access to information is equally enforced for all media and journalists.
- ▶ Media outlets have unrestricted access to information; this is equally enforced for all media and journalists.
- ▶ Entry into the journalism profession is free, and government imposes no licensing, restrictions, or special rights for journalists.

Gabrielyan, who was also on the scene, attempting to film the incident.

Two cases were filed; however, the first one was later closed on the grounds that Gabrielyan was not supposed to enter the campaign headquarters, and because of HHK claims that it was paying salaries not bribes.

Gabrielyan experienced a similar incident while covering Yerevan's municipal elections in May. Government loyalists assaulted him after he witnessed alleged cash payouts to voters outside an HHK campaign office. Gabrielyan saw people receiving money upon confirming that they voted for Yerevan's incumbent HHK-affiliated mayor, Taron Margaryan. Gabrielyan entered the office to question HHK activists working there. Clearly taken aback, they immediately hid papers resembling lists of names. One claimed that they were sharing pastry recipes with local residents. Shortly after, some young men verbally abused and roughed up Gabrielyan, who was forced to stop filming with his mobile phone.

Citing an "absence of crime," the authorities closed down the case filed over the incident. The same day, a man assaulted another journalist, Tatev Khachatryan of armtimes.com, while she filmed the polling station with her mobile phone, which is not prohibited under law. When she refused to stop filming, the man covered the lens and tried to seize the phone. Two days earlier, Khachatryan and her colleague Tirayr Muradyan were assaulted trying to follow up on a tip they received about vote buying near a Margaryan campaign.

Article 26 of Armenia's Law on Television and Radio protects the editorial independence of public media. However, the president of Armenia appoints the five member council exclusively for a period of six years; these members then elect the head and the deputy from among themselves. These political

appointments undermine the public broadcasters' ability to be truly public, apolitical, or independent of the government. "The appointment mechanism nulls the theoretical independence [of public television] envisaged by the law," Ishkhanyan said.

Libel is a civil law issue; however, attempts to oppress freedom of speech through this tool have cropped up since the decriminalization of libel in 2010. In one case that occurred in April 2017, 30 school principals sued Daniel Ioannisyanyan, program coordinator of the Union of Informed Citizens nongovernmental organization (NGO), claiming that their reputations had been damaged through a story published in his periodical, sut.am. In addition to a

"It's either government or pro-government circles that push their agendas through television, and the whole spectrum of society is not represented through television outlets," Vardanyan maintained.

retraction, they demanded ADM 2 million (\$4,270) each as compensation for moral damages for the alleged defamation. This coverage stemmed from an investigation exposing abuses of administrative resources by the ruling Republican Party during the parliamentary election campaigns. According to the investigation, the principals of 84 public schools and 30 kindergartens unlawfully helped recruit potential voters, mainly parents of school-children. The investigation was based on a total of 114 undercover recordings of conversations with principals who (involuntarily) admitted to recruiting voters and putting together lists of their personal data. This occurred after the NGO representatives called the principals, acting as if they were from the Republican Party campaign headquarters and were checking on details of the lists. Later, the court ruled

to dismiss the cases on the grounds of the plaintiffs' withdrawal of the claims.

Access to information has improved overall, the panelists believe. However, as Gayane Abrahamyan, reporter for factor.am and eurasianet.org, noted, "This is not due to the fact that the government bodies have become more transparent, but rather that the journalists have become more active and persistent in obtaining the information. The journalists can force the officials to cooperate through being more proactive and perseverant."

Government representatives often refer requests for information to their official websites, which are "sometimes so chaotically organized that one needs a guide to find the required piece of information," observed Suren Deheryan, chair of Journalists for the Future NGO. "It is really a serious problem. I recently needed to retrieve some financial information on the state budget; you cannot claim it isn't there, but to retrieve it takes persistence and days [of work]," Abrahamyan agreed.

As anticipated during the previous year's MSI study, there was an amendment to the Law on State Procurement, which made representational expenses (travel, entertaining official guests and delegations, receptions/banquets, etc.) of Armenia's top three officials (president, prime minister, and National Assembly speaker) a state secret. According to the panelists, while logical in some way, it in fact exempts the three officials from public accountability for these types of expenditures.

The media community felt blindsided by the new draft Law on Freedom of Information bill, one of the few functioning laws embraced by the media community. They did not see a compelling need to change the law passed in 2003, beyond minor updates. However, there were several changes in the new law that raised concerns. First, it calls for the formation of a new freedom of information board

within the Human Rights Defender's office, which will handle freedom of information violations. The media community is concerned that this board, instead of resolving freedom of information violations, might in fact stifle cases previously won in courts of law. It is yet unclear whether claimants can turn to both the board and the court at the same time, or whether turning to the board will be the first and/or only option. The composition of the board—whether the members are going to be appointed or elected, and paid employees or volunteers—is also unclear.

Second, the unofficially circulated bill contained several prohibitive clauses; for example, if the state body has fewer than 50 employees on its staff, it can refuse to provide a piece of information, or if the information is deemed (by the official responding to the request) not of public interest, or if the information volume is excessive, the official can block release of the information. None of this, however, is contained in the official draft law officially published for familiarization, and the Ministry of Justice, the author of the bill, denied having anything to do with the variant of the unofficial bill. "Perhaps they were trying to 'test the waters' before coming up with the official bill," suggested Vardanyan. "Other times, they would call and say, 'The draft is up; take a look at it, come up with suggestions, objections,' but this time they didn't; they just uploaded it to the draft legislation website without notifying the media community," said Deheryan.

Armenian law does not restrict media outlets' access to and use of local and/or international news and news sources, as has been the case since Armenia won independence from the Soviet Union. Journalists and editors are able to use the Internet to access any news sources. As in previous years, the language barrier remains the only practical barrier, forcing a large array of Armenian journalists and

political analysts to use Russian-language sources over western-language alternatives. There are, of course, Russian-language services of western media, such as BBC, DW, and Reuters; however, these provide more local than international news.

Intellectual property violations persist, with media outlets often lifting content with no reference whatsoever to the original source.

Entry into the journalism profession is still free, and the government imposes no licensing or other restrictions for practicing journalism. Accreditation is required to cover parliamentary sessions.

OBJECTIVE 2: PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM

2.17

There are journalists conscientious enough to do their best to adhere to high journalistic standards. They try to verify and fact-check all the information they present, consult a wide variety of relevant sources, and conduct the necessary background research. Nevertheless, the journalism profession also abounds with reporters who ignore such steps in pursuit of fast news, stories, and as many clicks, views, readers, comments, etc. as possible. Ishkhanyan said he once asked one journalist why, and got this response: "If I fact-check and verify the information, I will lag behind, and all the others will have posted it." This kind of race "is one of the most vulnerable spots [of Armenian journalism]," he said. "My own experience comes to prove that most of the time [during press conferences], they [reporters] are not particularly interested in the essence; they just need to write something quickly and post it," he added.

Rare interviews are conducted professionally and are rather, again, just to fill in the "air" or (more often now) the space (online), to just generate content that would bring in more views, hits, and readers. However, sometimes there is also a different, intentional bent, "where journalists try to distort your speech to serve their ends—often through headlines which sound as if taken from your interview, but are taken out of context, and sometimes say the opposite of what you've said," Vardanyan said. Ishkhanyan agreed, explaining, "I gave an interview on the topic of shutting down the [Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)] office in Armenia, and the headline read: 'Ishkhanyan is for the shutdown,' whereas I said that I was for shutting down the OSCE office in Armenia if and when Armenia corresponds to international standards." The preoccupation with sensational news is most evident in online media. The broadcast media, in turn, have a different problem. "They don't present different viewpoints. In a recent example, public television, during its newscast discussing the signing of the Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership Agreement with the EU, invited just one expert commenting in line with the same opinions voiced by the government many times before," Vardanyan said.

Many media outlets and media-related organizations have developed and try to adhere to their own (often unwritten) journalistic standards. For example, the Yerevan Press Club (YPC) developed the Code of Conduct of Media Representatives a decade ago. Around 48 outlets signed this code of ethics, but they are not the problem. Those who have not signed it are, Deheryan observed, concluding: "The problems most often arise with those outlets involved in internal political processes ... they do not task themselves with adhering to ethical standards; they have an agenda, and they have to follow it." Still, Abrahamyan maintained, "There are subtler issues,

those dealing with human rights, that are omitted even by many of those 48—for example, showing/posting photos of children, minors, convicts, etc. without consideration for their rights.”

It is increasingly difficult to distinguish between real news and paid advertorial placements; today’s media seldom highlight the distinction for their audiences. Advertorials increasingly feature the opening ceremonies of new branches of banks or telecommunications companies, presenting their new services and promotional offers in the form of news events. Less savvy viewers and readers might struggle to discern the real news.

Journalists show some growth in awareness of conventions against plagiarism. Largely self-regulating, media now generally reference original sources; however, it is not always immediately clear when content is copied from other sources. By the time readers realize they are reading an excerpt, they have already drawn the main idea and are unlikely to bother to find the original.

“Self-censorship is systematic in Armenia; it is institutionalized,” Vardanyan said. Fear of offending certain political circles or officials and the need to conform to certain business interests are the main drivers of self-censorship. “I will find a way to air this or that [potentially troublesome] interview/vox pop, whereas another reporter might self-censor it to be on the safer side,” said Armine Gevorgyan, a journalist for Armenian Public Radio, emphasizing the fact that reporters have come to self-censor even more zealously than their editors. “They [the journalists] are not censored from above [the government]; they are not censored by the editors, because everyone knows the allowed boundaries, the respective roles, the rules of the game, and this stagnation is way more dangerous. They no longer think about resisting, protesting; they no longer think it’s not good, it’s not normal,” Abrahamyan observed.

Ishkhanyan shared that as a guest on a television show, he criticized different political forces, including the one affiliated with the station. “The aired version, however, left that out, thus putting me in an awkward situation, because it appears as though I criticized everyone except their owners.”

At times, editors, too, exercise their censorship “rights.” Pap Hayrapetyan, editor-in-chief of Sevan, gave an example: “We had a growing scandal in a Sevan school about unlawful collection of money [by school teachers from parents], and a reporter from Yerevan arrived to cover the story. He wrote up the article—a good one; I read it. Then we waited for it to be published, but it never came out. I called the reporter, and he said that the editor blocked it.”

“If I fact-check and verify the information, I will lag behind, and all the others will have posted it.” This kind of race “is one of the most vulnerable spots [of Armenian journalism],” Ishkhanyan said.

Although journalists cover most key events and issues in the country, the angles vary depending on the ownership/affiliation of different outlets. “Even before watching/reading the news, based on the ownership/affiliation of the outlet, I already know the angle, the modality with which the piece of news is going to be covered and presented,” Ishkhanyan said.

“When you watch the television outlets and the online media, the feeling that we live in different ‘Armenias’ persists,” Vardanyan said. On the other hand, this year, unlike the previous two years, has not brought many severe protests that make the discrepancies painfully clear. “For example, Azatutyun [RFL/RE Armenian service, azatutyun.am] might be streaming live [the protests], but if you

turn on the traditional television [stations], they are unflappable,” Gevorgyan observed.

Online media provide more varied viewpoints than the television outlets. “They have come to understand that not covering [certain events] doesn’t make sense, and they will lose out to their competition if they ignore stories. There is another problem here: The news feed, and the flow of fake news is so abundant that a public with quite low media literacy levels becomes ripe for manipulation,” Abrahamyan said. “The approach of the government has changed. If previously they were saying ‘don’t print this, don’t print that,’ now they have come to realize that to outweigh this, they can flood the information feed with different pieces of distracting news and information,” she added.

Pay levels of journalists are low, but on the whole, they are comparable to most other professionals in Armenia. This forces journalists to work for multiple outlets to be able to stay afloat in the profession.

“I think it’s a matter of principles, and low or high pay levels will not discourage or encourage corruption for journalists with integrity,” Gevorgyan asserted. Ishkhanyan disagreed: “While high pay levels will not eradicate corruption, they will certainly serve as a preventive measure to a great extent. It is an axiom.” Abrahamyan suggested that this might just raise the amounts of bribes. Gevorgyan offered an example from her practice: “The phenomenon [of accepting pay for favorable coverage] exists, and unfortunately journalists with a high degree of integrity are adversely affected, because people think all journalists are corrupt. I go to the regions to cover stories, and the head of the village administration approaches me and asks, ‘How much should we pay?’ ... when I protest, they say, ‘Why are you offended? The other day this person from this outlet came and wanted money.’ The journalists

Journalism meets professional standards of quality.

PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM INDICATORS

- ▶ Reporting is fair, objective, and well sourced.
- ▶ Journalists follow recognized and accepted ethical standards.
- ▶ Journalists and editors do not practice self-censorship.
- ▶ Journalists cover key events and issues.
- ▶ Pay levels for journalists and other media professionals are sufficiently high to discourage corruption.
- ▶ Entertainment programming does not eclipse news and information programming.
- ▶ Technical facilities and equipment for gathering, producing, and distributing news are modern and efficient.
- ▶ Quality niche reporting and programming exists (investigative, economics/business, local, political).

themselves know who accepts bribes, and then how much these same journalists speak about justice.”

Vardanyan emphasized that higher pay levels would also elevate the professional quality of journalists, because the field would attract and retain more professional people who currently leave for other, more lucrative fields.

Many outlets struggle or are unable to retain higher-paid, experienced journalists. “Instead of one experienced journalist, the outlets would rather hire and keep several low-paid workers who are more compliant than the seasoned journalists who require higher salaries,” Gevorgyan said. Gayane Mkrtchyan, a reporter for iwpr.net, affirmed the reality: “After the shutdown of Armenianow.com, I tried to seek employment in different outlets, but after hearing the salary amounts and the scope of work I had to accomplish, I realized that it is not feasible for me

and decided to stay a freelance journalist.”

As for balance, “[it] would be safe to say that entertainment has swallowed information programming. The television has been turned into a total entertainment source, with news and information programming a tiny accompaniment—and I believe this is intentional,” Vardanyan observed. Soap operas, sitcoms, and game shows flood the air, particularly during prime time.

Facilities and equipment for gathering, producing, and distributing news are, for the most part, modern and efficient. The exceptions are those television outlets that have not yet been able to switch to full HD-quality video. The problem is more acute in regions. However, with low-cost, HD-quality equipment capable of capturing news becoming increasingly available, the main problem relates to airing full HD-quality videos.

Quality niche reporting and programming exists but at a minimal level. There are very few niche reporters specializing in issues such as health, business, education, etc. Most journalists cover a wide array of issues in (at times diametrically) different fields. The quality of such reporting is also a problem: More often than not, these “versatile” reporters lack depth of knowledge on their topics. “I don’t remember having a professional sports commentator for years,” Ishkhanyan said.

The major constraints remain the prohibitive financial, time, and human resources needed to produce well-researched, thorough niche reporting. Outlets, for the most part, are understaffed, with overstretched reporters caught up in daily tasks that prevent them from producing stories that call for longer-term dedication and involvement. Most mainstream managers and editors see this as too expensive and with too little return on their investment. They know they can spend less on scandalous, popular content that brings far more

clicks—which translates into advertising revenue.

More professional, investigative-style content, as a rule, is also lengthier and demands more time from readers and viewers. It is becoming increasingly difficult to retain the average audience member’s attention in the reality of today’s information influx and shortened attention.

OBJECTIVE 3: PLURALITY OF NEWS

2.43

There are myriad news sources that people can access to get a wider perspective on issues and multiple points of view. While there are outlets which present differing viewpoints within their coverage, they are very few. Because a vast array of media outlets has political strings attached—many exist for the sole purpose of supporting a specific political force or figure—it would be naïve to expect that they would even try to achieve objectivity and impartiality by providing different viewpoints. “Real plurality means the existence of different viewpoints in commensurate, comparable media outlets in terms of their coverage and audience size, whereas if one opinion is featured in an outlet with a large audience, and the differing, alternative views are featured in a newspaper with a circulation of 5,000, it’s not real plurality, because the impact of the latter is much weaker,” Vardanyan added.

There are many different types of media, far more than would be sufficient to meet citizens’ needs. “The field is [intentionally] flooded with news, and for people with poor media literacy it is very difficult to discern propaganda from real news. Thus, the

Multiple news sources provide citizens with reliable and objective news.

PLURALITY OF NEWS SOURCES INDICATORS

- ▶ A plurality of affordable public and private news sources (e.g., print, broadcast, Internet) exists.
- ▶ Independent broadcast media produce their own news programs.
- ▶ Citizens' access to domestic or international media is not restricted.
- ▶ Transparency of media ownership allows consumers to judge objectivity of news; media ownership is not concentrated in a few conglomerates.
- ▶ State or public media reflect the views of the entire political spectrum, are nonpartisan, and serve the public interest.
- ▶ A broad spectrum of social interests are reflected and represented in the media, including minority-language information sources.
- ▶ Independent news agencies gather and distribute news for print and broadcast media.
- ▶ Broadcast ratings, circulation figures, and Internet statistics are reliable.

multitude of news sources, the multiple viewpoints can do harm in this context," Abrahamyan maintained. "There are a number of online media that provide mostly quality news reporting, and they do that intentionally to create a positive image, building trust in their media organization to be able to service their hidden agenda when needed," Vardanyan said.

Ordinary people increasingly rely on social networks, with Facebook on top of the pyramid, for news and information. Few people type direct links of media outlets, but rather follow their Facebook pages and get the stories within their Facebook accounts through feeds, and even more through their friends' shares.

By law, access to domestic and/or international media and news is not restricted; it has not been since the collapse of the Soviet Union. The natural restriction here is the language barrier, putting access to western media and news out of reach for most of the population. On the other hand, most Armenians know enough Russian to read articles or watch television programs, making an average Armenian more likely to read Russian than English-language media. "Most of the Russian-language news sources, especially international newscasts, are propaganda," Vardanyan noted. Poor Internet coverage in rural areas and smaller towns amounts to another restriction. While there is the 4G mobile Internet, it is not unlimited, and data restrictions can make watching videos a challenge.

Public television has undergone huge changes as compared with five or six years ago, when seeing an opposition figure on the screen was highly unusual, and the Armenia portrayed on public television differed dramatically from the Armenia seen in online media. Today's public television is open to alternative views and comments, with some reservations.

Over the years, the panelists have maintained that it is still not a genuine public service-model television run by independent, apolitical managers. Public television remains under the full control of the government and the alternative views currently available on it could be curbed immediately should the need arise. Although Armenia's public television tries to project the image of an outlet serving the public interest in a nonpartisan way by presenting differing viewpoints, it often gives itself away with a whiff of the party line.

Public radio, in contrast, comes much closer to serving the public interest in a nonpartisan way—but its audience is smaller.

The panelists agreed that public television and

radio today do seem to fill a gap left by commercial broadcasters by offering educational, cultural, and social programming that private media usually bypass.

News agencies, in their traditional meaning, are nearly extinct in Armenia. One exception is Photolur, which provides only images. Television stations turn to international agencies, like AP and Reuters, primarily for video footage.

"Real plurality means the existence of different viewpoints in commensurate, comparable media outlets in terms of their coverage and audience size, whereas if one opinion is featured in an outlet with a large audience, and the differing, alternative views are featured in a newspaper with a circulation of 5,000, it's not real plurality, because the impact of the latter is much weaker," Vardanyan added.

Private media produce their own news and information programming, and almost all television outlets produce their own news. The content does not dramatically differ from that produced by public media. "The style is different, but the content is not," Ishkhanyan observed. Online media offer more options, providing wider angles, more views, timelier stories, and a greater range of topics. Online media, however, also amalgamate news and information from a variety of other sources.

Media ownership in Armenia maintains opaque, leaving the true ownership a matter of speculation. "If for television outlets you more or less know who the owners are and what to expect, the online field is absolutely indefinable," Abrahamyan said.

Media ownership can no longer be deduced from content; owners have sharpened their sophistication on that front. "Two different outlets, with opposing views and policies, might be affiliated with one and the same figure," Gevorgyan said. People in the media community might be aware of the real owners, but most ordinary readers have little idea. "At times, when you learn that a specific outlet belongs to a specific person, you are flabbergasted, because the content would make you think the opposite," Ishkhanyan said.

Over the years, the panelists consistently have reported no difficulties covering ethnic minorities. Moreover, the public radio has been airing programs in 14 minority languages—Russian, Ukrainian, Greek, Kurdish, Assyrian, and others. Russian, Ukrainian, Kurdish, and Yezidi minorities also publish their newspapers in their respective languages.

Reporting on issues such as sexual orientation or minority religions is minimal on television, though online periodicals provide more coverage. "I would say it's rather a one-sided anti-propaganda," Ishkhanyan said. "The television hasn't changed a lot in this respect, but the print and online outlets have; offensive labels are less common now," he added. The media still resist including such issues, pressed by society at large, which discourages coverage of these topics.

Citizens are able to find news and information about their hometown, other regions of the country, national issues, and international developments. Media with a nationwide scope report on significant news from regions outside the capital, yet, as panelists have noted over the years, there is still a lack of news from the regions, even though the flow of information from regions has increased in recent years. "Five years ago there was none, but now we see more information from regions," said Samvel Martirosyan, a media and IT security expert.

Local media in regions and small cities provide mainly local-centric news and information. "In any case, from what we get from outlets, television in particular, we cannot figure out what is going on in terms of the broader social, political events," Vardanyan observed. "And even if there are stories from regions, maybe it's not intentional, but they are rendered in an uninteresting, unattractive way," he added.

Media in Armenia provide coverage of international issues, but the quality is mostly poor—typically a compilation, copy, and translation of news from international television channels rather than original content. International coverage is also usually a bit stale, though that has improved slightly in recent years. As discussed above, the language barrier plays an important role in how media choose the sources for compiling international news, giving Russian sources an edge. However, media have come to recognize the propaganda-laden nature of Russian sources, and show more caution.

OBJECTIVE 4: BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

1.85

For years, MSI panelists have claimed that self-sustainability is more dream than reality for Armenia's media outlets. Outlets functioning as self-sustainable business entities are few. The media, as a rule, are not conceived as commercial enterprises but rather as tools to shape public opinion. There are rare exceptions, such as Photolur, "but it's becoming increasingly difficult because our clients are going through hard times, which in turn affects our revenues," Baghdasaryan said.

Few Armenian media outlets prepare and follow business plans that would help them secure funding, guide decisions on expenditures and personnel, or plan for capital expenditures. Accounting and finance practices are brought in line with state tax requirements rather than international standards. Few outlets hire specifically designated professionals apart from editors and journalists to manage marketing, human resources, or legal functions. "Many print and online outlets don't even have dedicated commercial directors; rather, the editors take up this task as well, which adversely impacts both the business and content sides," said Vahe Sargsyan, a freelance journalist.

As most of the country's media—including online media—were never intended to be successful commercial entities, but rather propaganda tools, there are not many sources of funding. Other than contributions from their founders, advertising is largely the only source of revenue. The panelists feel that advertising impacts media content, as it is used as a tool to deter negative coverage of the advertiser, the affiliated companies, or public figures.

For years, telecom providers, insurance companies, wine manufacturers, banks, automobile dealerships, home-improvement hypermarkets, and lotteries have been the main media advertising buyers. Much advertising has shifted from traditional media to Facebook, which is often viewed as a faster, more transparent, efficient, and effective channel of communication. However, advertising decisions are based on political influence and/or business ties as much as market principles. Regional print and broadcast media, in addition to commercial advertising, also draw revenue from classified ads, congratulatory messages, and holiday greetings. Advertising agencies work mainly with broadcast outlets and the larger newspapers/online media and seldom cooperate with regional outlets.

Independent media are well-managed businesses, allowing editorial independence.

BUSINESS MANAGEMENT INDICATORS

- ▶ Media outlets and supporting firms operate as efficient, professional, and profit-generating businesses.
- ▶ Media receive revenue from a multitude of sources.
- ▶ Advertising agencies and related industries support an advertising market.
- ▶ Advertising revenue as a percentage of total revenue is in line with accepted standards at commercial outlets.
- ▶ Independent media do not receive government subsidies.
- ▶ Market research is used to formulate strategic plans, enhance advertising revenue, and tailor products to the needs and interests of audiences.
- ▶ Broadcast ratings and circulation figures are reliably and independently produced.

According to the panelists, a few players—which nominally function as independent entities but are thought to belong to the same people—have monopolized the media market for years. These include Media International Service (the only media sales house in Armenia, with exclusive rights to advertising inventory in five Armenian channels thought to have the highest ratings: Armenia TV, ArmNews, A TV, Shant TV, and Yerkir Media); Admosphere Armenia (the only television audience measurement organization); and advertising agency PanArmenian Media House.

With advertising as one of their only sources of revenue, media managers feel pressed to use more and more ads. As the effectiveness of regular ads has diminished, media managers have flooded the programs, mainly sitcoms and soap operas, with product placement ads. The effectiveness of

traditionally placed advertising has dwindled due to several factors: Aside from Internet penetration, which lets viewers watch just about any television program free of charge and at times is convenient for viewers, the advent and subsequent penetration of IPTV triple-play services, with features like program catch-up, fast-forwarding, and rewinding, significantly contributed to the devaluation of television ads.

Many television outlets also persist with the archaic practice of many post-Soviet states of raising the volume of the transmission during ads.

“As for online outlets, for some outlets the impression is you have to look for the articles amidst the ads,” Vardanyan said. Martirosyan continued, “And sometimes when you’ve finally found the article and barely started reading, another ad pops in the middle of the story.”

Since 2015, public media have not been allowed to sell advertising, with few exceptions, such as social or commercial advertising in scientific, educational, cultural, and sports programming.

Government subsidies are governed by law and are provided to independent regional and/or minority-language print outlets. These are minimal: AMD 500,000 (\$1,030) is now dispensed in quarterly installments of AMD 125,000 (\$257)—instead of lump sums, as before.

Armenian media have not embraced market research, especially professional third-party research, which could guide their decision-making and planning. Among the reasons, perhaps, are the prohibitive costs. However, since they have come to realize that even quality research, which is very rare and expensive in Armenia, does not necessarily guarantee the desired outcome, they stick to the old trial-and-error approach. At best, they conduct primitive research in-house, using their own personnel resources, rather sporadically. Call-in shows, views, hits, and comments also serve

as the main tools for measuring the success of and demand for specific shows or articles. Gevorgyan brought up the example of public radio’s launch of several new programs based on market research findings that showed a need for specific types of programs—“Ecosphere,” which covers environmental protection issues, “Healthy Lifestyle,” the political show “Crossroads of Opinions,” and others.

Ishkhanyan objected to relying on surveys to tailor products to the interests and preferences of the audience: “If the research shows that the most popular content is low-quality popular music, should we air it all the time?” However, other panelists expressed more faith in audience tastes.

Few Armenian media outlets prepare and follow business plans that would help them secure funding, guide decisions on expenditures and personnel, or plan for capital expenditures.

The only organization that measures television audiences is still Admosphere Armenia, which was founded in 2015. Admosphere has partnered with the Nielsen Admosphere Czech TAM company to transfer its TAM experience using modern technologies and software; it now uses Adwind Kite software. Admosphere has been providing ratings data since April 2016, which includes digital broadcast as well as Internet Protocol Television (IPTV) viewership figures. The data are not publicly available; rather, they are sold to interested parties—television outlets, advertising agencies, and advertisers (mostly banks and telecommunications providers)—on a subscription basis. Admosphere is one of the companies mentioned above that is perceived to be part of a bigger scheme to

monopolize the advertising market.

The panelists again recalled that when viewers switch on U!Com (one of the IPTV providers), the default channel is set to Armenia TV Premium—a different feed of Armenia TV, which airs programs without advertising, and one episode ahead of the regular, free Armenia television feed. This provides an artificial ratings boost.

There are no organizations that track traffic to online media or other resources, and one of the only options here remains similarweb.com. If the website owners agree to connect their Google Analytics accounts to similarweb's account, then the latter can provide publicly available Internet statistics that could also be used for Armenian online media. It is, however, unclear how similarweb collects statistics for those that do not connect their Google Analytics account. Martirosyan also warned that the outlets' own counters below the articles, or share statistics under Facebook posts, are not accurate measures of actual views or shares, either. "I've come across online outlets that change the counter statistics randomly; every time you refresh the page, the counter adds a random number to the previous figure," he observed. "Facebook share figures cannot be taken for granted, either, because most of the shares are by the reporters themselves, when they share their article to hundreds of Facebook groups having something to do with media or journalism. You should look at the ratio of likes to shares—if they are close, it basically means real people haven't even read it. And they don't even suspect that they're actually doing themselves a disservice, because Facebook algorithms punish this kind of behavior by limiting the reach of those types of posts," he added.

OBJECTIVE 5: SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS

2.42

There are no trade associations in Armenia that represent the interests of media owners and managers and provide member services. Attempts have been made before, but so far, apparently, without success.

There are organizations in Armenia that work to protect journalists' rights and promote quality journalism, and the government imposes no legal restrictions. They provide training, legal advice, journalists' rights advocacy, etc. These are the Yerevan Press Club, the Gyumri-based Asparez Journalists' Club, the Association of Investigative Journalists, the Vanadzor Press Club, and others.

Asparez Journalists' Club, in cooperation with Transparency International and with funding from USAID, will continue to implement a five-year project, "Engaged Citizenry for Responsible Governance," which includes a component to help increase citizen access to independent and reliable information through online live-streaming of public discussions organized by the project.

Over the years, the panelists have observed that these organizations largely depend on international donor funding in the absence of other sources, making their effectiveness dependent on these grants. Providing legal assistance is expensive, and without grants it is quite difficult to provide legal support to journalists and media professionals when they need it. The panelists reaffirmed again that after joining the Russia-designed EEU, international donor funding has dwindled—yet, they expressed hope that more (assumedly European) funding might be available after signing the Armenia-EU Comprehensive and Enhanced Partnership agreement.

NGOs work in cooperation with the media sector to support freedom of speech and media independence. These are, among others, Open Society Foundation (OSF), the Committee to Protect Freedom of Expression, Eurasia Partnership Foundation Armenia (EPFA), Media Initiatives Center (MIC), and Journalists for the Future (JFF). EPFA and MIC will continue to jointly implement USAID's five-year media project, "Media for Informed Civic Engagement (MICE)," which was launched in March 2015. The project aims to increase citizen access to independent and reliable sources of information about the government's policies and planned reforms; it also seeks to create a demand for public awareness as a necessary mechanism for participation and involvement through better journalism. Recently, it convened a workshop on humanitarian issues and their coverage in media, in cooperation with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC); a workshop on producing a television series; and a media literacy training for teachers.

"The problem is, many students today possess mobile phones that can produce higher-quality audio visual content than the [outdated] equipment the journalism schools and departments have at their disposal," observed Deheryan.

Ampop.am, a data-driven news website in the genre of explanatory journalism and data visualization, is an initiative of Journalists for the Future (JFF) NGO and Ampop Media (AM) initiative. It is funded by the Armenian Branch of Friedrich Ebert Foundation (FES). The platform consolidates journalist-researchers, data collectors, and

designers to support local media. The US Embassy in Armenia and the OSCE Office in Yerevan also support the project.

Journalism degree programs are abundant both in state and private universities; however, their quality remains low, and the panelists have not witnessed any progress here.

These programs do not include sufficient practical and theoretical training to prepare young people to enter the profession, and the panelists question the soundness of the theoretical knowledge delivered as well. Most schools fail to teach modern techniques and modern channels of communication; they lack modern equipment, laboratories, and studios where they can acquire hands-on, real-life experience gathering, producing, and disseminating information. "The problem is, many students today possess mobile phones that can produce higher-quality audio visual content than the [outdated] equipment the journalism schools and departments have at their disposal," observed Deheryan. The journalism schools are very slow in picking up modern trends, technologies, and equipment, whereas the digital world evolves very quickly. The journalism schools just cannot keep up.

There are very few student-run media. Those that exist are affiliated with universities and are not separate outlets. The number of students who receive journalistic degrees abroad and then return home, bringing new expertise, are minimal, because few people choose journalism as a discipline to study abroad. Of those rare ones who do, very few return and very few of those who return start working as practicing journalists.

The quality of students who enroll in journalism degree courses has also slipped, due to the shortfall of students who want to enroll in such courses, which lowers the entrance passing score—thus admitting less proficient students. "Fourth-year

Supporting institutions function in the professional interests of independent media.

SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS INDICATORS:

- ▶ Trade associations represent the interests of private media owners and provide member services.
- ▶ Professional associations work to protect journalists' rights.
- ▶ Short-term training and in-service training programs allow journalists to upgrade skills or acquire new skills.
- ▶ Sources of newsprint NGOs support free speech and independent media.
- ▶ Quality journalism degree programs that provide substantial practical experience exist.
- ▶ Printing facilities are in private hands, apolitical, and unrestricted.
- ▶ Channels of media distribution (kiosks, transmitters, Internet) are private, apolitical, and unrestricted.
- ▶ Information and communication technology infrastructure sufficiently meets the needs of media and citizens.

students don't know very basic things about Armenia's recent history or political developments. So, three years from now, we're going to be dealing with a situation that is a lot worse," Abrahamyan said.

The majority of instructors are also out of step with modern media needs; they are not, and have never been, practicing journalists. "And they cannot bring in a practicing seasoned journalist with the pay [ADM 1,000–1,500 (\$2–3) per hour] currently fixed for lecturers," Gevorgyan explained. "And on top of it, there's no parking, and you have to spend more on gas trying to find a parking spot," Martirosyan joked. "Many seasoned figures are invited to teach courses occasionally, but on a sporadic rather than systematic basis. Most of the instructors are older people who

deliver outdated courses to these kids," he added.

For years, media outlets have not been satisfied with the quality of the graduates.

"If you don't have a dictaphone, camera, or microphone, no matter how well you deliver the theory, if they [students] can't get a hands-on practical experience, how are you going to graduate journalists?" Gevorgyan explained. "I'm invited to deliver a course on the Internet; I go and find out there are no computers. When, after a few classes, we find one, it's only me "having fun" searching in Google and then watching me do that on the projector screen [as opposed to doing the same practical exercises on individual computers]," Martirosyan said.

Short-term training opportunities exist, mostly set up by international organizations, but they have grown rarer. "The editor will never come and say, 'You know, guys, I have found this wonderful training for you, and I think you should participate.' It's almost solely up to the journalists to search and find training opportunities locally, or abroad, using their own networking skills," Gevorgyan said. Even worse, the prevailing majority of editors are steadily reluctant to let their active journalists attend those trainings because of the compelling need for practical hands that would keep delivering them content. The courses are predominantly organized under the auspices of projects implemented by NGOs with international donor funding, so these are free for journalists. The most popular and needed courses are those teaching modern techniques, such as the use of the Internet and multi-media applications, equipment, etc.

Abrahamyan, however, complained about a lack of motivation on the part of the journalists to get trained: "If you take them [for a training] to Aghveran or Tsakhkadzor [popular resorts outside of the capital], they come with great pleasure; otherwise,

they are not very excited to attend. Acquiring knowledge, learning new things is not sufficient motivation for them." It is very difficult for active, practicing journalists to attend trainings; weekends are probably the only options, but since this is their only opportunity for a day off, they are reluctant to join the trainings. "We often include media components in our [Helsinki Committee of Armenia] trainings, and the journalists are mostly willing to participate, but not during weekdays—unless it is outside of the capital," added Ishkhanyan.

"The editor will never come and say, 'You know, guys, I have found this wonderful training for you, and I think you should participate.' It's almost solely up to the journalists to search and find training opportunities locally, or abroad, using their own networking skills," Gevorgyan said.

Again this year, the panelists acknowledged that there have not been any cases of undue restrictions on importing or purchasing materials that journalists or media need to produce their work. Newsprint, software, and video equipment are all freely purchased and imported. The only problem might be the lack of professional equipment in Armenia, due to the small market size. Almost all new professional equipment needs to be imported from third countries. There are few, if any, printing houses in the regions, so print outlets must travel to the capital to print their newspapers.

The switchover from analogue to digital broadcasting, accomplished in November 2016, left some 12 regional outlets on the brink of extinction because a 2010 amendment to the Law on

Television and Radio stipulated that there should be just one digital television station in a given region.

Later, analogue licenses of those regional outlets that did not win the digital license competitions were extended until the advent of private multiplexers¹. (Another 2015 amendment to the above-mentioned law allowed private multiplexers to accommodate other broadcast outlets not carried by the public multiplexer, which can have only one station from each region). These outlets complain that they are losing audiences, and therefore also advertising, because they are analogue in this era of digital.

This year, the National Commission on Radio and Television re-announced the competition for a private multiplexer (which had failed the previous year due to the absence of interested applicants). This year, too, the competition failed for the same reason—no applications were submitted during the three-month period set by the law. This means that for at least one more year, the only multiplexer, the public one, will remain as a natural monopoly. The problem is that no one wants to invest in setting up a private multiplexer with nationwide coverage (the 2015 amendment to the Law on Television and Radio, which allowed the entry of a private multiplexer, stipulated that the latter should cover the whole country).

The owners of private regional television outlets believe that if smaller private multiplexers were allowed, there would be interested applicants who could afford this. Setting up a private multiplexer with nationwide coverage would mean investing around ADM 4.5–6.5 billion (\$10–12 million), which is not attractive to businesses given current plummeting revenues for television. According to the authors of

the law, when they started designing it years ago, they could not foresee that the private multiplexers would be unattractive for businesses. However, the fast development of ICT infrastructure, Internet penetration, proliferation of online media, and the advertising shift from traditional media to online has rendered it unattractive for businesses. Unless the law is revised to allow for smaller private multiplexers, these regional outlets may be forced to shut down.

ICT infrastructure has developed a lot in Armenia. Digital broadcasting is underway, and people have come to appreciate its quality. Yet, some challenges remain unaddressed in rural areas and cities outside the capital. For most of the rural areas, 4G Internet through mobile phones is the only option, and it can pose a real problem due to the limited data allowance for high-speed Internet, which means that viewers cannot watch an unlimited number of videos because it will drain their limited gigabytes. Currently, none of the three telecom providers offer unlimited Internet options. Broadband, fiber-optic Internet has not fully penetrated the country. The cost of the high-quality, fast Internet is still high enough for today's modern world and information flow.

¹ A multiplexer is a device that combines multiple input signals for transmission into one output.

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