

For Many Armenian TV Stations, Digital Switch Spells Closure

Two out of three local TV stations outside Yerevan won't get channels on public-service digital system.

Many local TV stations will go out of business when Armenia switches over to digital broadcasting next year. The bidding process for channels on the main public-service network is over, and most local broadcasters have lost out.

There are also questions about whether enough digital decoder boxes can be distributed to viewers, and how affordable they will be.

When analogue broadcasts are switched off on July 1 next year, Armenia will have 27 television channels and 16 radio stations. Of these, nine TV and just four radio stations will operate in areas outside the capital Yerevan.

The switchover was agreed with the International Telecommunication Union as long ago as 2006, and initial digital broadcasts will begin in Yerevan in November, together with a campaign to tell viewers and listeners what they need to do to adapt.

The bidding process held in 2010 has come under fire from journalists and media rights groups, which say that there was virtually no competition, with only one company bidding in all but two cases.

"It wasn't natural selection, but instead major state interference in the business. It was an arbitrary carve-up of the market," Nune Sargsyan, director of the Media Initiatives Centre, said.

The main losers are local broadcasters. Of the 26 regional TV stations now operating, nine won spots on the digital network. In one district, Lori, for example, only one out of six TV stations was awarded a digital channel.

Lori TV, broadcasting from the main town Vanadzor, is among those likely to go out of business next year, with the loss of 30 jobs.

"We didn't put in a bid, because we knew the license wasn't going to go to us," station director Narine Avetisyan told IWPR. "It isn't the market that decides these things in Armenia, unfortunately."

Lori TV currently exists on advertising revenues and on the programmes it makes with grants from foreign donors.

Avetisyan said the current plan was to broadcast exclusively on the internet, although it would be hard to pick up an audience that way.

Sos Siradeghyan has a different strategy for his Ankyun+3 TV channel, which broadcasts in the town of Alaverdi and surrounding areas.

"We have decided to join forces with [other] regional TV channels, and we have secured preliminary agreement from members of parliament that they will discuss this," he said.

According to Sargsyan, commercial broadcasters are struggling to survive even without the forthcoming change.

"It is hard to describe commercial organisations as 'businesses' in Armenia's media market," she said. "The money they earn is often not enough to cover their outgoings. Many of them live on money from sponsors, grants, and support from political forces."

Boris Navasardyan, chairman of the Yerevan Press Club, warns that the net result of the switch to digital will be a reduction in viewer choice.

"Viewers in the regions [outside Yerevan] have got used to having two or three local TV channels. Unless some urgent solution is found for companies that didn't win the right to broadcast on the public service network, then there will only be one left, and even it won't be available in every village, as the state digital network won't always be available in remote villages," he said.

For those left out of the main network, the only option is to broadcast on a private terrestrial digital network – but these do not yet exist and no one knows whether they can become commercially viable.

Simon Aghajanyan of the Committee to Protect Freedom of Expression (CPFE) notes that there is no legislation to define how private TV networks should operate, how they should be licensed, and whether

they would need to offer a free service to low-income users. Aghajanyan is part of a CPFE working group that has submitted a whole set of recommendations on this and other issues, including a simplified licensing system for all broadcasters, whether they use public-service or private digital networks, cable or satellite.

Another member of the working group, Mesrop Harutyunyan, says that the current system where broadcasting licenses are difficult to obtain, but once secured, last for ten years, makes it very difficult for newcomers to enter the market.

For digital broadcasting to work, Armenians need to be able to access the programmes. To do this, they must either buy a modern digital TV or a decoder box. A box currently costs between 25 and 50 US dollars, although the price is expected to fall.

The government has promised to provide decoders free of charge to low-income households, of which there are now about 130,000. Deputy communications and transport minister Gagik Tadevosyan has said talks are under way on earmarking 1.3 billion drams (3.25 million dollars) to ease the transition for families like this.

Gayane Mirzoyan is a freelance journalist in Armenia.

Location: [Armenia](#)

Topic: [Media](#)

Focus: [Caucasus](#)

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/many-armenian-tv-stations-digital-switch-spells-closure>