

The Current Situation with Media Audience Measurements in Armenia and Its Impact on The Quality of Public Information:

The Perspective of The Private Sector

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Goal and methodology

In the framework of an initiative by the Center for International Private Enterprise (CIPE) to engage the Armenian private sector in combatting disinformation, the CI studied ways in which the situation with media audience measurements on the Armenian media advertising market affects media quality and the spread of mis/disinformation, and how the private sector can contribute to positive changes.

We surveyed the general situation with advertising across all types of Armenian media except print. The methodology included assessment of existing research and open-source data and data collection by means of interviewing (twenty-two semi-structured interviews). The goal of the interviews was to understand the strategies of the players and the logic of their interactions.

Problems

The most important new trend observed in 2022 compared with previous studies conducted in 2012 and 2016 ¹ is that on the advertising market, social media have become the main competitors of all types of media. Businesses, including large ones, are increasing investment into social media outreach, because social media are cheaper, they are also targeted and controllable, and the impact is measurable. This creates risks to the survival of traditional media and the circulation of information which is professionally gathered, researched and verified.

The main finding of the study is that **lack of trusted measurements of broadcast media audiences** remains a key factor preventing the private sector from contributing to the independence and quality of these media. Trusted data on audiences are needed in order that businesses can place targeted cost-effective

¹ Evelina Gyulkhandanyan, and Nina Iskandaryan, “Media Environment and Attitudes to Media in Armenia,” Caucasus Institute, 2010. <http://c-i.am/wp-content/uploads/2010-evelina-media-eng1.pdf>; Aghasi Yenokyan, *Structure of the Armenian Media Advertising Market and Prospects of Liberalization*, Open Society Foundations – Armenia, 2016. <https://bit.ly/3zS4FMO>

advertising and enable the growth of neutral media that aim for quality reporting and fight against fake news.

With regard to television, an effort to regulate measurements is ongoing. In summer 2022, the Commission on Television and Radio, the state body regulating the operation of TV and radio stations, began a series of discussions with TV station managers about the setup of a state regulator of TV audience measurements. However, in contrast to a Joint Industry Committee, the neutrality of which is ensured by the involvement of players across the spectrum, it may prove difficult to make sure that a state regulator does not favor some players over others, especially given widespread political patronage and the fact that the public broadcaster is back on the advertising market. It is also still unclear if the largest players, especially Armenia TV, will agree to join in the initiative.

In the sphere of radio, in the absence of divisive political interests or competition for huge funds, there is some cohesion and a functioning Union of Armenian Radio Broadcasters, which is advocating for investment in measurements; the main challenge is raising the necessary funds.

The study also found that **political patronage** remains a major concern for Armenian media in 2022. Across types of media, political patronage prevents the emergence of predictable business models, undermining the survival prospects of quality media. Arguably, by ignoring political bias and advertising in politicized media, businesses contribute to the dissemination of disinformation and deprive quality media of the support they need.

Where online media are concerned, audience measurements are not viewed as the main concern. Having a hard time in the competition, on the one hand, against social media, and on the other, against politicized and sensationalist websites that lower advertising prices, Armenia's independent online media increasingly rely on creative alternatives to classical advertising, such as partnerships and special projects. According to respondents of this study, the main challenges to survival of quality online media are **low audience literacy and insufficient responsible investment** on the part of businesses.

Solutions

The success of efforts to combat disinformation in Armenia will require, amongst other things, more investment by the private sector into advertising in Armenia's quality media.

One of the preconditions for such investment where broadcast media are concerned is the establishment of accurate and trusted audience measurement mechanisms in the form of a joint industry committee or similar body engaging the leading advertisers as well as advertising and marketing agencies and the media themselves. While such an initiative cannot come from businesses alone, they could contribute to advocacy in its favor.

Where online media are concerned, businesses have a role to play by adopting responsible policies when designing their advertising strategies and could contribute to an improved media environment and efforts to combat disinformation by, first, avoiding placing their ads in politicized and unprofessional media, and second, partnering with quality media in creative ways.