OSCE Guide to the Digital Switchover

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In March 2010 the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media released a guide to all interested parties among its member states on the switch-over process in broadcasting. The report deals with the following topics: infrastructure issues; competition law and policy; programming; public service broadcasting; the planning process; social and economic issues related to the audience; economic and technical issues of the broadcasters; and licensing issues.

From a freedom of the media point of view, the technology of digital TV would allow audiences to seek and receive more information and ideas via the broadcast media. It could also provide more opportunities for broadcasters to impart information to the public. But - as the report states - unless certain rules and principles are taken into account by national governments and regulators, there is a strong risk of negative effects arising from the digital television switchover, including further monopolization of the media market by the State or other players, less media pluralism, new barriers for cultural and linguistic diversity and implications for the free international flow of information.

In particular, concern is expressed that with the digital switchover, small local private broadcasters that operate over-the-air will not be able afford entry into the market without outside help. Media pluralism is also negatively influenced by the dominance of State broadcasters, when broadcasters are run as propaganda tools, and when they engage in unfair competition with private companies. While a moratorium on issuing licenses for broadcasting is a necessary step in the digital switchover, there are instances when it is used to prevent independent broadcasters from accessing the airwaves.

The report continues to underline that in the digital era, the importance of advertisement-free public-service broadcasting only increases. Indeed, digital technologies provide for the possibility of expanding the spectrum of PSB programmes available. Pluralism, and not just a multitude of channels, is of importance here. Access to information and the reduction of inequalities do not come automatically through a multitude of channels - it is important that there is real diversity. Therefore, providing PSB, with its mandatory internal pluralism, is recommended as an integral part of the digitisation reform.

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Under certain conditions digitisation can lead to cementing or causing the dominance of the transmission facility owner/operator. Rules ensuring access to them are crucial. Their privatisation and structural separation are important, and digitisation should not be used to delay such developments.

For those countries that only take the first steps in the process, that is adoption of a digitisation plan, the guide suggests that prior to its approval, the draft must be open to public, civic and professional scrutiny.

The potential of digital television is to bring the information society into every home. Therefore, it is important to avoid exclusion, and in particular exclusion from free-to-air services and transnational television programmes.

The report has an extensive list of recommendations, an executive summary, a list of relevant European acts, and a glossary.

Report by Katrin Nyman-Metcalf, Tallinn University of Technology, and Andrei Richter, Moscow State University School of Journalism, was commissioned by the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media and published in March 2010

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