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ONLINE MEDIA IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS

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Georgians in the Internet Age: The Profile

By Koba Turmanidze and Mariam Gabedava, Tbilisi

Abstract

Computer literacy and Internet usage have been increasing in Georgia for the past few years. This article looks at the profile of active Internet users based on the 2013 Caucasus Barometer. Specifically, we are interested in describing the social-economic profile of internet users and exploring similarities and differences between the users and non-users in terms of political attitudes and religiosity. We illustrate that the Internet users are more likely to be young residents of the capital, often with higher education. We also show that Internet users are more engaged citizens than non-users: they have a high appreciation for democracy, are critical of the government and display tolerance toward other ethnic groups. At the same time, the Internet users appear to be more religious: they report higher religiosity and observe religious rituals more actively compared to non-users.

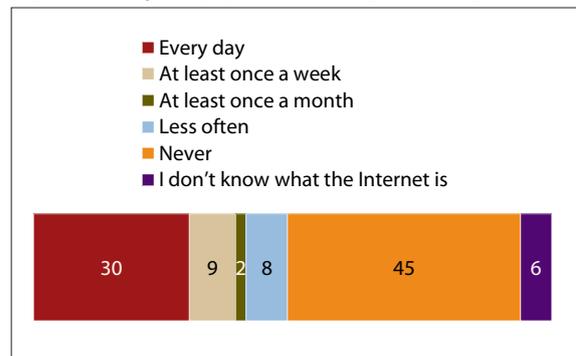
The Connected: Who Are the Users?

This article draws exclusively on the Caucasus Barometer, the annual household survey of the CRRC,¹ which demonstrates that Georgia is steadily catching up in terms of Internet usage. In the past six years, the speed of Georgians connecting to the web has been impressive. While only 13 percent of Georgian households owned a personal computer in 2008, the figure more than tripled to 42 percent in 2013, of which four out of five households are connected to the Internet. Computers are not the only medium for connecting to the web, however, and smart mobile phones are nowadays equally capable devices. Interestingly though, the share of Georgians with activated Internet access on their phones is a mere 13 percent. This low numbers suggests that Internet usage here tends to be more stationary, rather than mobile and portable.

Yet, the high Internet penetration does not mean that every member of a household is equally engaged with the technologies. In the 2013 survey wave, only 47 percent of Georgians report some knowledge of computers, about 39 percent use the Internet at least once a week and 30 percent report using the Internet daily (Figure 1). In the rest of the text we refer to the people, who access the Internet at least once a week, as the Internet users, whereas the rest will fall in the category of the non-users.

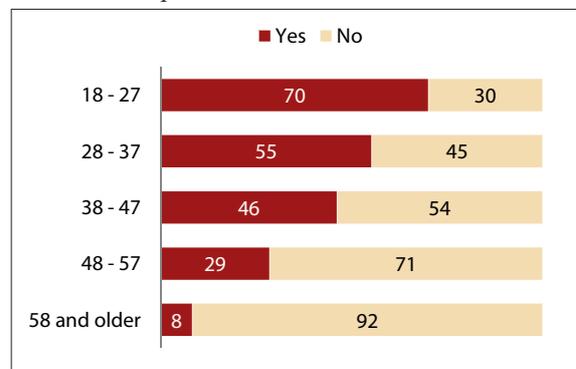
Who are these 39 percent of Georgians? The most common active Internet user in Georgia is an educated young person (18 to 27 years old), belonging to a high social class and living in Tbilisi. Perhaps not surprisingly, 64 percent of Tbilisians use the Internet at least once a week, followed by 49 percent of urban dwellers

Figure 1: Frequency of Internet Usage in Georgia (%)



and a meager 19 percent of rural residents. Moreover, as Figure 2 shows, the younger the respondents are, the higher is the share of active Internet users: 70 percent of 18–27 year olds use the Internet weekly, while the figure declines to 55 percent for those aged 28–37. The activity drops below 50 percent in the next cohort and is a mere 8 percent for those aged 58 and older.

Figure 2: Use the Internet at Least Once a Week? By Age Groups (%)



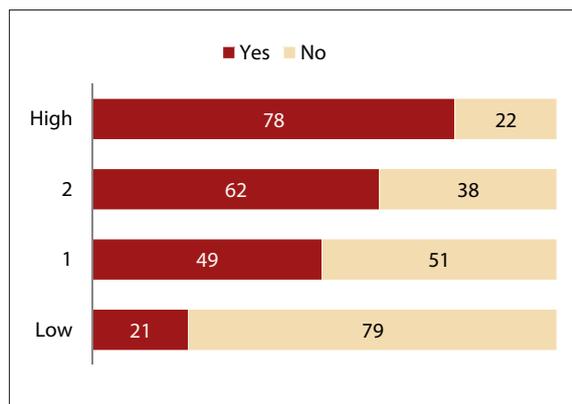
Interestingly, active Internet usage is not contingent on gender, and about 40 percent of both sexes report using

1 The Caucasus Barometer (CB) is a nationwide household survey conducted by CRRC in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia since 2006. Its 8th wave was conducted in Georgia in October–November 2013 with a sample size of 2,133. The CB data is available at <<http://caucasusbarometer.org>>

the Internet at least weekly. Yet, education is an important factor for going online—only 26 percent of those with only secondary education or lower are frequent Internet users, in contrast to 62 percent of those who have higher than secondary education.

There is another interesting trait of the frequent Internet users—they tend to belong to higher social classes. The social class indicator is a composite construct from several variables—education and occupation of the respondent, as well as education of the respondent's parents. Figure 3 indicates that people belonging to a higher social class are more likely to be active users of the Internet: while only 21 percent of the low social class members are the Internet users, among the high class members Internet usage reaches 78 percent.²

Figure 3: Use the Internet at Least Once a Week? By Social Class (%)



Of What Use Is the Internet for Georgians?

Georgians seem to view the Internet as an effective means for connecting with others, mainly with family and friends. The overwhelming majority of the Georgian Internet users are active social networkers, with 72 percent reporting using the sites like Facebook, Google+ and Odnoklassniki to connect with their networks, 33 percent using the Internet for Skype, and 20 percent for e-mail.

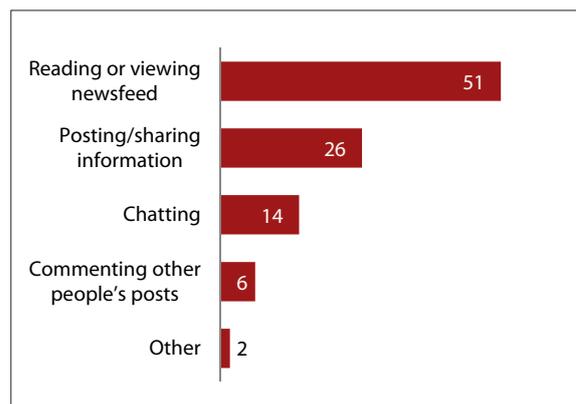
While 53 percent use the Internet to search for varied information, there seems to be little activity in terms of publicly analyzing information and news. Only 3 percent of the Internet users report blogging or being blog readers, and only 2 percent engage in various Internet

2 The social class construct does not incorporate income or any other indicator of material well-being. However, it implies that higher social class means higher material well being. Internet usage seems to be partially influenced by material well-being: out of the 45 percent of the people who never access the Internet, 31 percent mentions no access to a computer, whereas 23 percent say that they do not need the Internet. Only 2 percent reports that Internet cost is the primary the reason for not using it.

discussion fora. Interestingly, however, there seems to be some direct feedback to the information provider, with 9 percent of the Internet users saying they have made a comment on the Internet to a publication.

Georgia does not have a prolific or influential blogosphere and so far the Georgian users do not seem much impressed with twitter either. Instead, Facebook is the digital micro model of Georgia, so much so that the Facebook status updates and discussions make headlines not only in the gossip columns, but also in the mainstream, supposedly more professional media. Based on the Caucasus Barometer data, Facebook is indeed used as an information source—half of the users report that they most frequently view or read newsfeeds, whereas 26 percent of posts or shares information (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Most Frequent Facebook Activities (% of Facebook Users)



The Facebook users are thus an interesting segment of the Georgian Internet users. Their profile is largely the same as that of the frequent Internet users. The level of Facebook activity declines as people age: while 62 percent of 18–27 year olds use Facebook at least once a week, only 3 percent of those aged 58 or older do so. Slightly more females (28 percent) report being weekly Facebook users than males (25 percent), however again, education and social class considerably influence Facebook use. While only 16 percent of those with secondary or lower education are active Facebook users, their number almost triples in the group with higher than secondary education. This difference is even more noticeable when comparing the high and low social class use of Facebook—61 percent of high social class members are active, compared to only 11 percent of low class members.

Connected Citizens are Engaged Citizens

The frequent Internet users have a very interesting profile of political preferences and ideology. One clear difference between the Internet users and non-users is the degree to

which they say they do not know what to answer to various questions when asked about political attitudes. So, the Internet users are more opinionated than the non-users, which we can ascribe to having access to more information. However do their opinions significantly differ from those of the non-users? The short answer is—it depends.

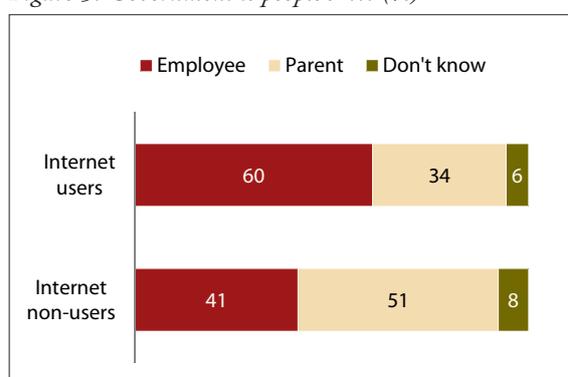
When discussing general issues that assess the current situation in the country, but cannot really be classified as ideological, the opinions of the Internet users are not much different from those of the non-users. There is no significant difference in the shares of the two group members, who think that Georgia's domestic politics is going in the right direction (38 percent of users vs. 34 percent of non-users), or that people like them are treated fairly by the government (54 percent and 49 percent respectively). There is no significant difference between the two groups when it comes to their assessment of how much of a democracy Georgia is currently. A plurality in both groups thinks that Georgia is a democracy with major problems (48 percent of users and 42 percent of non-users), with the second most popular opinion in both groups being that Georgia is a democracy, but with minor problems (29 percent and 27 percent, respectively). It is no surprise then that both groups express willingness to participate in the democratic process in the most familiar manner—they say they would go out to vote if the presidential elections were held next Sunday (72 percent and 74 percent respectively).

However, the avid Internet users are indeed different from the non-users when it comes to more ideologically charged issues. The difference stays significant when we controlled for the influence of the respondent's education and age. The Internet users seem to be considerably more liberal and open. For example, more Internet users approve a woman of their ethnicity marrying an Abkhazian (44 percent) or an Ossetian man (43 percent) than the non-users do (30 percent and 29 percent approval, respectively). Furthermore, the Internet users more often say that Russia is Georgia's main enemy compared to the non-users (48 percent vs. 41 percent). Nevertheless, the Internet users are more inclined towards endorsing marriage with Russians (49 percent vs. 37 percent).

The Internet users appear to be more critical and demanding of the government than the non-users are. They overwhelmingly support the idea that people have the right to openly say what they think (83 percent). The Internet users further believe that people should be critical towards the government (67 percent) and that people should participate in protests against the government to show that they are in charge (52 percent). Correspondingly, 21 percent of the users also believe that supporting the government on every occasion is not important, while only 14 percent of the non-users share this opinion.

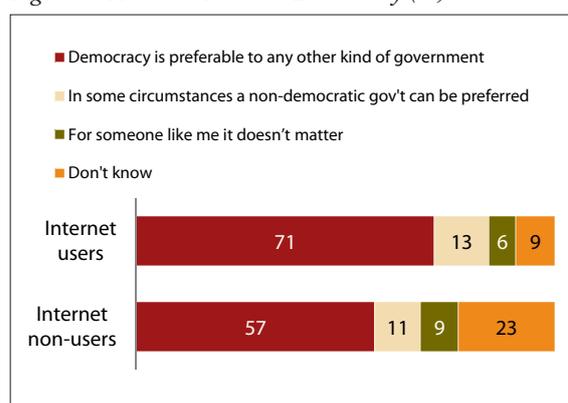
The Internet users seem to be more independent and responsible citizens and consider the government to be accountable to them: 60 percent of the Internet users view the government as their employee, and 34 percent view it as a parent that should take care of its citizens like its children, working to provide for their needs. By contrast, 51 percent of those who do not use the Internet prefer to see the government take care of most of their needs and only 41 percent consider the government as their employee (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Government is people's ... (%)



The Internet users are more loyal to the idea that democracy is the best way of governance, than the non-users are. 71 percent of the Internet users are convinced of democracy's superiority, compared to 57 percent of those who do not use the Internet (Figure 6). One would think that such preference for democracy would also manifest itself in the preferences for foreign policy orientation. While Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations are supported by the majority of the population, the support is more pronounced among the Internet users. Indeed, 67 percent of the Internet users support Georgia joining the NATO and 73 percent support Georgia joining the EU, in contrast to the 53 percent and 60 percent

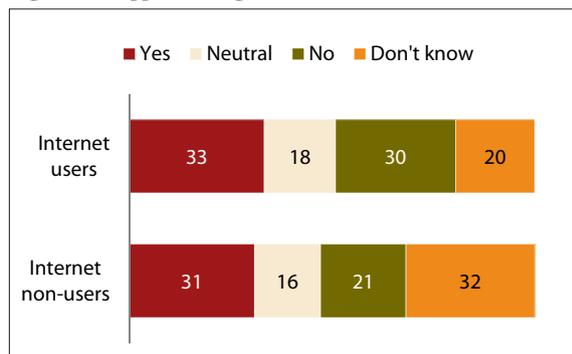
Figure 6: Attitude Towards Democracy (%)



support levels, respectively, among the non-users. Preference for the mandatory foreign language in Georgian schools is an interesting proxy for the political orientation. Here too, there is a consistent preference for English over Russian, but again, this preference is more pronounced among the Internet users.

However, apparently, the exposure to a rich source of information does not necessarily indicate deeper knowledge of the issues. The question regarding the attitude towards Georgia joining the (Russia-led and sponsored) Eurasian Union illustrates this situation. 33 percent of the Internet users report that they support such a move and 20 percent do not approve. Interestingly, a full fifth does not have an opinion, which is a rare exception for this opinionated group of Internet users. The situation is not much different among those who do not use the internet, except that an even larger portion of the group does not know what to answer to this question (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Support Georgia To Join the Eurasian Union? (%)



Is the Internet Connecting with God?

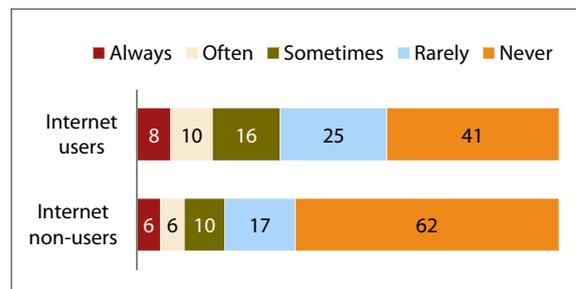
The religiosity of Georgian people should not come as a surprise, given the huge popular trust in religious institutions. The 2013 Caucasus Barometer shows that 72 percent of the population completely trust the Georgian Orthodox Church and over 90 percent state that religion is important in their daily lives. However, one would not intuitively think that a high level of religiosity were contingent with a high level of online activity. The Georgian church is often strict and indeed orthodox in its ways that do not usually espouse progressive ideas and technology. On the other hand, using the Internet and social networking are generally expected to broaden one's horizons and increase the exposure to new ideas and information, rather than just reinforcing existing opinions.

About the Authors:

Koba Turmanidze is president of CRRC-Georgia.
Mariam Gabedava is an independent researcher.

Perhaps unexpectedly, the Georgian Internet users report being considerably more religious and observant of religious rituals than the non-users do. 69 percent of the weekly users consider themselves highly religious (as opposed to just over half of those who are not active Internet users), and 31 percent of them attend religious services at least once a week. Additionally, 51 percent of the users say that religion is very important in their daily lives. 41 percent of the Internet users report that they never fast, as opposed to 62 percent of the non-users (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Frequency Of Fasting When Required By Religious Tradition (%)



So is the Internet bringing Georgians closer to God, or are those already quite religious flocking to the web? It would be misleading to argue either of these positions based on the simple analysis we employ in this article. We observe that the Internet users are more likely to report a higher level of religiosity even when controlled for the influence of education and age. Tracing the causal relations will require further analysis.

To conclude, the Georgian Internet users are more likely to be younger, more educated, and belong to a higher social class compared to the non-users. Yet, combining the seemingly incompatible in the minds of the Internet users remains puzzling: On the one hand, the Internet users have high demand for democracy, are more tolerant to other ethnic groups, perceive the state as serving its citizens, support private ownership and are critical towards the government. On the other hand, the same group shows loyalty to religion in terms of subjective assessment of religiosity and adherence to religious rituals. Considering that the Internet users, due to their exposure to diverse information, have the potential of becoming the drivers of change in the country, it remains to be seen whether democratic values will prevail over traditional norms in the future.

Civic Engagement via Social Media in Georgia

By Lia Tsuladze, Tbilisi

Abstract

This article discusses the specifics of civic engagement via social media in Georgia and inquires whether and to what extent online civic activities translated into actions outside cyberspace. Based on the findings of a nation-wide representative survey among internet users, as well as in-depth interviews with media experts in Georgia, I argue that the frequency and scale of civic activities utilizing social media in Georgia are modest, with a small increase during pre-election periods or when certain sociopolitical issues come to the fore; otherwise Georgian social media does not offer a major platform for civic activities. However, with the growing number of users in Georgia, social media will likely have an increasing affect on the scale of both online and offline civic activities.

Introduction

Recent years have seen a dramatic rise in the popularity of social media in Georgia, which is manifested in the growing number of bloggers and social network users. One of the core advantages of social media is its ability to resist the monopolistic ownership of the communication infrastructure by the political elites and foster high citizen engagement in sociopolitical processes. This strength also affects how power and visibility relate to each other. Social media serves to substantially increase the leaders' "mediated visibility," forcing political leaders to appear in front of their audiences in a manner and scale that was impossible to achieve in the past. Some scholars believe that this ability has transformed today's political communication in its entirety (Negrine, Papathanassopoulos, 2011).

Notwithstanding the fact that politicians started to actively use this new information platform by setting up their own pages in social networks and engaging in various types of activities, such as web conferences, and that there are abundant streams of diverse political information circulating within social media, the rise of social media may not affect decision-making at all. Consideration should be given to the fact that the new media user community is still limited, and even confined to a sort of "cyber sect," which is predominantly inhabited by a small group of "digital natives" in countries like Georgia (Prensky, 2011). On the other hand, Peter Dahlgren's argument that political life in the internet alienates individuals from political life outside social networks has been repeatedly confirmed in reality. Only a small proportion of the civic activities planned within social networks are implemented outside these networks in the real world.

What can we say about civic engagement via social media in Georgia and its influence on real-life sociopolitical activities? In what follows, I address these questions based on both qualitative (40 in-depth interviews with media experts in Georgia, Spring 2012) and quan-

titative (a nation-wide representative survey with 1,000 internet users in Georgia, Autumn 2012) data.¹ The survey was based on a three-stage cluster sampling and conducted in the capital (Tbilisi) and Georgia's six largest cities with the highest levels of internet use (three in Eastern Georgia and three in Western Georgia). For the entire sample, the sampling error did not exceed 4% with a 95% confidence interval.

Goals and Frequency of Using the Internet

Before discussing the internet users' engagement in online civic activities in Georgia, we will briefly summarize their goals and how often they use the internet. As the survey findings show, the frequency of internet usage among the representative sample of internet users is at least 4–5 hours per day for those under the age of 40 and at least 2–3 hours per day for users over the age of 40. No major variances were observed by sex, education and employment variables, which means that they barely have any effect on internet usage frequency.

Even a cursory look at the respondents' answers demonstrates that the majority of internet users, irrespective of sociodemographic variables, go online to interact with friends and acquaintances. This survey question targeted internet usage in general rather than social networks specifically. The findings therefore lead us to conclude that for most of the internet users in Georgia (around 70%) the internet is associated with social networks and is predominantly limited to social interactions. The second most frequent reason for using the internet by men is entertainment, and checking the news by women. It turns out that almost twice as many men (47.2%) as women (24.1%) use the internet for entertainment purposes.

¹ The data were gathered within the Academic Swiss Caucasus Net (ASCN) supported project on the Social Media Development Trends in Georgia.

The survey results show that Georgian users do not use the internet to participate in civic activities, which are equally unpopular with both men and women (1.1% vs. 1.9%). This finding is one more indicator of the poorly developed level of civic culture in Georgia.

An interesting divergence occurs between the patterns of actual social media use and the way that Georgian users view its core functions. Only 32.3% of the respondents consider social interactions as the core social media function in Georgia. 33.2% cite dissemination of alternative information and 20.3% cite improvement of the population's civic culture as its core functions. Thus, more than half of the respondents believe that social media in Georgia contributes to democratic processes. The respondents rarely equate desirable social media functions with actual usage as the research findings illustrate that 80% of Georgian users have never taken part in online civic activities.

Social Media vis-a-vis Political Domain

Despite this reality, the experts we interviewed still talk about social media's rising impact on the political domain, which they mainly attribute to the growing numbers of internet users, including social media users. The mere fact that there has been a growth in internet users in recent years and that Facebook is becoming more and more popular, encourages politicians to establish their presence in this space and to remind the socially networked segment of the constituency of their existence. Most likely, state agencies and politicians create their Facebook profiles to establish their presence, gain exposure, and attract voters. However, the experts believe that such Facebook pages are almost identical to the traditional media products because they mostly display dry, "packaged" information, not being able to create a discussion venue necessary for political communication and for raising the level of society's political culture. Apart from the Georgian internet's inability to stimulate discussions, experts describe a lack of differing and conflicting positions there. In their words, the online conferences organized by Georgian politicians are substantially similar to such events in the traditional media, as all sorts of undesirable questions are removed and it is impossible to voice differing opinions (this was also demonstrated by the 2012 report on Electronic Engagement in Georgia produced by the Institute for Development of Freedom of Information). Therefore, the experts conclude that neither the politicians' Facebook pages nor their web conferences generate interest among the electorate.

Indeed, the quantitative data confirm this argument. In response to whether the respondents ever check the Georgian politicians' Facebook pages, more than 2/3 cite

that they never do (68.7%). The findings illustrate that most respondents (72.3%) have never followed web conferences organized by Georgian politicians. Even among those observed such events, only 2.5% were actively engaged and asked questions. Furthermore, it turned out that more than half of the respondents do not read any electronic publications with political content. Hence the assumption that interest is low because the information available through social media is often similar to that offered by traditional media outlets, especially television, may apply to all sorts of political information.

Participation in Online Civic Activities

What about user-initiated online civic activities in Georgia? Which activities are characterized by the highest involvement? To begin with, the nation-wide survey reveals that 43.7% of the respondents have a positive attitude towards participation in civic activities online as opposed to 50.3% who have a negative attitude. Opinions therefore are rather polarized. The findings are quite interesting by age distribution, since the respondents aged 18–22 find it more acceptable to participate in protest actions compared to other age groups. This might be explained by the recent political developments, specifically those leading up to the October 1, 2012 elections, where the youth, especially students, were most active both online and offline.

However, when asked about their personal engagement in civic activities, such as protest actions via social media, only 20% claim they have ever participated. Although social networks embolden users and it is indeed easier to participate in civic activities online, the responses once again support our assumption that social media does not offer a platform for sociopolitical activities in Georgia. Civic activities via social media are at their height only during the pre-election periods or when certain sociopolitical issues come to the fore, resulting in the polarization of society. This result is confirmed by the findings of the content- and discourse-analyses of the social blogs and electronic publications that we carried out semi-annually, which coincided with the pre-election and election periods. In terms of participating in civic activities, young people aged 18–22 are most actively engaged with 34.4% taking part while for other age groups, this figure is within the 15% range. The finding becomes even more robust when one takes into account education. 39.8% of the surveyed students claim that they have participated in online civic activities, considerably outnumbering the respondents with secondary and higher education (9.8% and 19.2% respectively).

In response to a question as to which online civic activities our respondents have participated in, it turned

out that they were most active in voicing political protest (59.4%), which is quite interesting in light of the gender distribution of the results. Men tend to voice political protest more often than women, whereas both men and women are almost equally active in participating in human rights protection and cultural activities, with women taking a slight lead. An interesting pattern is observed when examining the findings by age distribution. The respondents of both sexes below 30 are almost equally active in various online civic activities, be it voicing political protest, protecting human rights, or cultural activities. As for the respondents above 30, they predominantly voice political protest. However, keeping in mind that these conclusions are derived from that small portion (20%) of the population which has participated in civic activities online, they seem rather insignificant.

The interviewed experts note that although the scale and frequency of civic activities via social media in Georgia is rather modest, it is gradually rising along with the overall use of social media, which is increasing its influence on citizens' social and political activities. As an example of an activity planned in the social networks, Tbilisi State University provides a good illustration: hundreds of students gathered to rally when a few students were attacked by local government representatives and the resulting video was actively circulated in the social networks. The same thing happened after the May 26 (Independence Day) violence, when many people rallied to protest within 24 hours. The experts also recalled

when the Ministry of Environment announced a competition and several bloggers uploaded photos showing how Kikvidze Garden was being logged, which resonated with many people. Additional well known examples include protests planned via Facebook just before the October 2012 elections (which ultimately resulted in the change of government), the online petition signed by several thousands after the May 17, 2013 campaign against homophobia was physically attacked, as well as the recent online campaign against razing Vake Park.

Conclusion

Despite these facts, many experts think that most of the civic activities do not go beyond the social networks and do not really affect Georgian reality. They note that there have been frequent Facebook "outbreaks" focused on certain events but without any tangible consequences, like street rallies, circulating appeals or notices, etc. However, some argue that social media influences should not be measured solely by their real-life manifestations. Social media, like an electronic agora, captures society's diverse points of view and acts as a conduit for community groups, which in the long run affects society's worldview. It can therefore be inferred that the existence of social media, notwithstanding its brief history in Georgia, plays a certain role in the formation and reappraisal of political and sociocultural values, including the development of civic culture. The transformations might not be fully visible but they are in progress.

About the Author

Lia Tsuladze is Associate Professor of Sociology at Tbilisi State University, Georgia.

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A Tale of Two Environments: Practices and Regulations Shaping Armenian Traditional and Online News Media

By Tatevik Sargsyan, Yerevan

Abstract

Armenian regulatory commissions have maintained tight control over the broadcast media through licensing legislation, undermining media independence and plurality. On the other hand, many independent online media have rapidly grown and contributed to the open public expression and diversity of voices in the media market. What are the factors that have made it possible for Armenian online media to go against the grain and break through the conventional control mechanisms?

Introduction

Armenian traditional media continue to face challenges that impede media freedom. A lack of independence, poor legislation and the working conditions of the journalists have all played a role in compromising media freedom. The regulation of broadcast media licensing has served as an important control mechanism for the state. Armenian regulatory commissions have maintained tight control over Armenian TV, the major news source for 90 percent of the population, favoring government-friendly channels and restricting diversity of opinions. The opposition has been limited to a number of low-circulation newspapers consumed by a mere 1 percent of the population.

The internet, nevertheless, is changing the scenario. The entry of new providers into the market and the decreased cost of using the Armenian internet have greatly contributed to the rate of internet penetration, raising it to 57 percent across the country. Armenian authorities have also taken a more liberal approach to internet regulation adopting the best practices of European legislation for the operation of service providers. The Armenian authorities do not engage in extensive blocking and filtering of content and have only applied censorship in occasional attempts during periods of heightened political activity. In a short time, the conditions under which the internet operates have allowed fast development of the independent online news media, which have increased the level of pluralism in the Armenian media landscape. By offering high volumes of fast and diverse content, the online media have gained more audience share than print and radio together, becoming the second major source of news for Armenians. This article examines the set of practices and regulations that have reinforced the lack of media independence, and have helped the rise of independent online media.

Traditional Media Environment

Being a full member of the Council of Europe since 2001 and a participating state in the OSCE since 1992, Armenia has made commitments to respect and protect free-

dom of the media, in addition to the constitutional protection of freedom of expression. However, the overall media environment has remained somewhat oppressive. International organizations have continuously identified low levels of media independence, limited plurality of opinions, a difficult legal environment, and poor working conditions for journalists as major issues that Armenia needs to address to improve its media freedom.

Armenian traditional media have been unable to provide diversity and open public expression due to the concentration of ownership, high levels of partisanship, and state-directed monopoly of control. Many of the newspapers are financially dependent on influential political and business figures and carry strong political biases. The broadcast media particularly lack in independence: television, which is the most popular source of news for Armenians, has been restricted to channels that portray the state favourably. The influence of interests is particularly apparent and consequential during elections. For example, the 2012 parliamentary elections were marked by several TV channels using material taken from paid political advertisements in their news coverage, failing to fulfil their duty to the public, and damaging the credibility of their reporting. The lack of independence and pressures for self-censorship also hindered the traditional media from covering important issues during the campaign, including various allegations of corruption.

The lack of media independence has been reinforced under the cover of legal mechanisms, such as restricting broadcasting licenses to the media that promote the interests of power holders. The broadcast media is regulated by the National Commission on Television and Radio (NCTR), which is an independent body according to the Armenian constitution. However, the members of the NCTR are appointed by the parliamentary majority with preference given to those who have a pro-government bias. Thus, essential decisions about licensing regulations are taken at the discretion of the NCTR, whose independence is highly questionable. Several legal changes in recent years have amplified the possibilities of power holders to put pressure on the media. In

2010, amendments to the Law on Television and Radio enabled the NCTR to revoke licenses without any justification and to impose broadcasting restrictions. The law also specifies that only one digital television license will be issued for each region outside of the capital (Freedom House, 2011). Such broadcast media regulation has traditionally served as one of the most powerful mechanisms of control over the Armenian media.

The Expanding Internet and the Rise of Online News Media

The internet has rapidly expanded in Armenia in recent years. The entry of new providers into the market, improved internet bandwidth, the launch and extension of 2G and 3G telecommunication network services to the distant regions of Armenia, and the decreased cost of the Armenian internet have greatly contributed to the rate of internet penetration (Open Society Foundation, 2013; ITU, 2011). According to a nationwide survey by the NGO *Internet Society of Armenia*, during December 2012 and March 2013, approximately 57 percent of Armenians had access to the internet at home, at work or in public spaces, including via mobile phones. In Armenia's capital, the internet users represent 61 percent of the population, and they represent 48 percent in other regions (Internet Society of Armenia, 2013).

The internet expansion has been accompanied by the emergence and development of many independent online news media. By offering high volumes of rapid and diverse content with low production costs, the online media have greatly contributed to the media plurality and gained more audience share than print and radio together. As of 2011, 7 percent of Armenians used the internet as a source of information, while only 2 percent preferred radio and 1 percent preferred newspapers. Approximately 36 percent of internet users turn to online media for reading news, and that number is steadily increasing. Compared with the most widely read daily newspapers, which have a circulation of 2,000–6,000 copies per day, the audience of the top five news websites is 20–30 times larger. For example, the most popular online news media, News.am, received approximately three million monthly visits in 2011 (Open Society Foundation, 2013, pp. 17–24). Many independent web resources, such as News.am, publish factual, non-biased content. Such publications provide freedoms to journalists to report on all types of issues. But what factors have contributed to the rise of independent online news media?

Against the Grain: Online Media Environment

Governments in many countries apply a variety of tactics to censor and control the information flow online,

restricting media freedom. Legal regulations, as well as internet infrastructure-based controls, are commonly used to restrict freedom of expression and access to information, with third parties frequently implementing this mission. For example, popular information intermediaries such as Google and Twitter receive thousands of requests from governments around the world asking them to remove content deemed illegal. In Russia, new legislation allows the state to block websites if they publish so-called “extremist” or “harmful” materials (Bochenek, 2013; La Rue & Reidy, 2013). An example of infrastructure-based control is the “kill-switch” strategy: when governments completely cut internet access during times of social unrest by ordering outages of the internet infrastructure. Such cases have happened during the civil unrests in several North African countries in 2011 and in the aftermath of the 2009 disputed Iranian presidential elections (Deibert, 2010; DeNardis, 2012).

Despite the stringent control of online information flows in many countries, the Armenian internet is not on the list of heavily censored networks (Reporters Without Borders, 2013; OpenNet Initiative, 2010) and is considered “free” (Freedom House, 2013). The Armenian internet appears to be relatively more open due to the liberal operation of service providers based on favourable legislation, fewer obstacles to internet access, and fewer limits on content. According to the amended Law on Electronic Communication, the internet service providers in Armenia are not required to obtain a license to operate; they need only notify the regulatory authority (Freedom House, 2013). Armenian service providers and host service owners are not liable for storing or transmitting illegal content, unless they had prior knowledge of such content. These regulations play a huge role in allowing a free flow of online news: the service providers do not need to engage in censorship in fear of being held liable for illegal, defamatory or harmful content.

There have been no significant cases of blocking content since the 2008 presidential elections, which were followed by a state of emergency and media blackout. At the time, upon request from the Armenian government, the domain name registrar suspended the domain names of opposition and independent news sites, while the internet service providers blocked certain opposition pages on social network platforms (Freedom House, 2013). A distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attack in Armenia occurred during the 2012 parliamentary elections and during the 2013 presidential election. The targets of attacks were an oppositional news site, a blog aggregator and an election monitoring website. Some selective filtering of the political and national security-related content also occurs, but the Armenian government has not engaged in any consistent censorship activ-

ities (Freedom House, 2013; Open Net Initiative, 2010). The reason for the government's inconsistent intervention online may be the relatively small audience of the online media (compared to television) and its limited influence on social change.

Conclusion

The conditions under which the internet operates have facilitated the growth of Armenian online media. Liberal regulation of the service providers in Armenia, adopted based on the best practices of European legislation, as well as the absence of aggressive censorship activities, have created a more benevolent environment for Armenian online media. Additionally, and more importantly, Armenian online media do not require a license to operate, and can be started with little financial investment in comparison to the broadcast media. Consequently, in a short period many independent online news media were launched contributing to the pluralism and diversity in the media market.

Some of the challenges that the traditional media face are shared by the online media as well, includ-

ing defamation lawsuits used as a proxy for oppression against the oppositional media; the ownership and editorial policy influence on content; and the occasional violence against journalists during elections and periods of political unrest. Additionally, despite the benevolent regulatory environment for the internet service providers, host owners, online media, and various online service providers, there is no insurance against government interventions. Armenian authorities readily block the information flow when there is a real threat to their power, as there was during the mass protests following the 2008 presidential election. The government did not hesitate to interrupt the frequencies of broadcast media, to censor print houses, to block the oppositional websites and social networks, and to order the arrest of more than a hundred civilians. There is no guarantee that a similar situation will not occur again when the stakes are high. But for now, the online news media are growing to become an alternative source to the state-dependent broadcast media.

About the Author

Tatevik Sargsyan is a doctoral student at the American University School of Communication. Her research interests lie at the intersection of information intermediaries, freedom of expression and privacy online.

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E-Democracy in Azerbaijan

By Ulviyya Asadzade, Baku

Abstract

The article examines the state of e-democracy in Azerbaijan, namely, the conditions for adult citizens to participate in the decision-making process by means of information and communication technologies.

Difficult Conditions

According to recent OSCE reports, about 80 percent of the population in Azerbaijan receives its information from TV channels, which, critical observers point out, mainly carry propaganda for the current government instead of providing citizens with quality information.

Furthermore, almost half of the population lacks access to regular, high-quality internet, which prevents them from receiving information from alternative sources, including social media. This problem becomes more obvious during the elections, when the citizens lack opportunities to obtain free and impartial information.

Finally, citizens who dare to criticize government decisions in social media face prosecution and may even end up in prison.

As a result of this situation, this article argues that despite the opportunities for civic participation created by online media, there is still a long way to go until e-democracy develops in Azerbaijan.

The State of Democracy in Azerbaijan

As an oil-rich country, Azerbaijan is described in international reports as a place where human rights and freedoms are repressed.

According to the World Report 2014 issued by Human Rights Watch, the Azerbaijani government's records on freedom of expression, assembly, and association deteriorated during 2013: "The authorities arrested dozens of political activists on bogus charges, imprisoned critical journalists, broke up several peaceful public demonstrations, and adopted legislation that further restricted fundamental freedom" (Watch Human Rights, 2014).

Another human rights organization, Freedom House, considers Azerbaijan as a "not free country," in contrast to "free" and "partly free countries" (Freedom House, Map of Freedom, 2014).

However, in a recent speech, President Ilham Aliyev dismissed the critique regarding democracy issues in Azerbaijan, emphasizing the existence of free internet in the country (APA, 2013). Yet, according to the critics, although the internet platform is free and no restrictions are imposed on accessing websites, the deficiency of democracy in the country naturally affects the devel-

opment of e-democracy as well. The same human rights abuses in real life are abused in virtual life as well, illustrated by the so called "Facebook prisoners," as well as by the violation of the "virtual rights of assembly" and "virtual freedom of expression."

What Is E-Democracy?

There is no single definition of e-democracy. It can be generally described as the use of new information and communication technologies (ICT) to enhance citizens' engagement in democratic processes (E-Democracy, 2009).

On March 23–24, 2010, the European governments met in Lisbon to announce the European Union strategy for the next 10 years. One of the key elements of this strategy was to avoid the digital divide by ensuring that no citizen is left behind in using web-based technologies for decision-making and administrative purposes (Meier, 2012).

What is the distinction between e-democracy and e-government? Norris argues that while developing the ICT infrastructure for e-government, the aim of the authorities is not to provide a platform for e-democracy, but rather to maintain the tools for delivering governmental messages faster and for making administrative processes more effective, while activists and civil society leaders use this infrastructure for empowering civic activism and participation (Norris, 2010).

E-Democracy in Azerbaijan: Access to Online Media

Usually democracy studies are organized around the following themes: freedom and equality, human rights, collective decision making, legitimacy, and justice (Frank Cunningham, 2005).

Article 1.1 of the Constitution of the Republic of Azerbaijan reads: "The sole source of state power in the Republic of Azerbaijan is the people of Azerbaijan." However, the citizens of Azerbaijan are not provided with sufficient opportunities to employ this Constitutional right. The ruling family controls almost all the TV channels (Kazimova, 2011), whereas 80 percent of the population receive information from television. Hence their access is mainly limited to information that is pro-ruling party, consequently, they lack the political

awareness to make informed decisions in elections. The opposition candidates find themselves in unfavorable conditions as the restrictive media environment mars the election campaigns (OSCE, 2013).

However, for the last five years, since the internet and social media have been on the rise, there also has been an increase in civil participation too. For a certain part of the population, social media, especially Facebook (up to 700,000 Azerbaijanis are registered on Facebook), which enjoys more freedom than the traditional media, has become an alternative source of information and even a platform for civic activities (Freedom House, 2014).

Despite these changes, however, they can hardly be generalized to the national level. Although the government announced 2013 as an ICT year, there are only 500 villages out of 4,000 in Azerbaijan with access to broadband internet. As 53 percent of the population is rural, almost half of them have limited access to the internet (Mammadli, 2014), hence to the alternative information spread via the social media.

Some may argue that the rural population can go online using mobile internet platforms. However, the infrastructure for the mobile internet is not well developed yet: Even 3G is not available for all the mobile internet providers throughout the country, to say nothing about 4G.

In addition, the internet is quite expensive in Azerbaijan. By comparison, 1 mb costs 7.5 USD in Azerbaijan, while it costs 1 USD in Turkey and 0.15 cent in Lithuania. Furthermore, accessing internet devices, such as computers, is also problematic as there is only one computer-producing company in the country, while entrepreneurs who import computers have to pay 36 percent taxes, including VAT and customer taxes.

Considering the reasons listed above, it can be inferred that the poor infrastructure provided by the government prevents half of the population from accessing alternative information and participating in collective decision making.

Finally, although the Azerbaijani Law on Access to Information lists 34 types of information that must be publicized online, according to the report issued by the Media Rights Institute (MRI), government organizations treat up to 60 percent of their information as confidential. MRI monitored the websites of 67 governmental organizations and found out that they publicize only 30–40 percent of the information they are required to share by the law. These organizations expose only 18 percent of the information related to tenders, while only 4 percent of the state budget information can be found online (Freedom of Access to Information in Azerbaijan Report, 2014).

Freedom of E-Expression

Freedom House describes the traditional media in Azerbaijan as not free, while the internet as partly free. Indeed, the internet has created an opportunity to escape the direct censorship imposed on the traditional media and is mostly free from systematic blocking of websites; yet, the online activists are increasingly exposed to detention and intimidation. Moreover, the Criminal Code was amended on June 4, 2013, to explicitly extend the application of defamation provisions to internet content. Finally, the recent amendments to the legal framework unduly restrict the constitutional guarantees on access to information (OSCE, 2013).

A few examples from a large body of evidence illustrate the problems. Jabbar Savalan, a 23-year-old student and a member of the opposition Popular Front Party (PFP) in Azerbaijan, was sentenced to two and a half years in prison on May 4, 2011 on drug charges. International Human Rights organizations, including Amnesty International, recognized his arrest as fabricated, relating it to his post on Facebook a day before, in which he called for anti-government protests in Baku (Amnesty International, 2011).

Additionally, MRI declared that the detention of social network activist Abdul Abilov on drug possession charges was politically motivated, as Abilov is an administrator of the Facebook page “Let’s say stop to flatterers” (<<https://www.facebook.com/YaltaqlaraDurDeyk?fref=ts>>, offline as of 16 April 2014).

According to the local NGO Legal Protection and Awareness Society, there are four “Facebook prisoners” in the country: “All four are officially convicted on drug charges but we know that they are imprisoned for creating Facebook pages, which are critical to the government” (Jafarov, 2014).

Such arrests and intimidations lead to self-censorship by the new media users in Azerbaijan as they feel that their online activities are monitored by the authorities.

Freedom of E-Assembly

The social media platforms have provided a new opportunity for those who have encountered obstacles in meeting face-to-face to discuss public issues.

One of the examples is the fact that Facebook was the main platform for the Azerbaijani Front Party members to “come together” and have discussions in 2006–2013 after being forcefully evicted from their building in the city center of Baku.

In addition, social media has become central to organizing protests in Azerbaijan. Since early 2013, a number of protest actions have been organized primarily via Facebook without any support from the traditional opposition parties. Instead, the individuals spread

information throughout their personal social networks (Pearce, 2014).

There have also been some cases when the discussions held in the social media influenced government decisions. For instance, Safar Abiyev, the former Minister of Defense, who held this position for 18 years, was fired after a soldier's death led to a wave of protest that had been inspired by a heated discussion on Facebook (Pearce, 2014).

Conclusion

Azerbaijani citizens have gained an enhanced opportunity to employ their democratic rights on virtual platforms as social media, especially Facebook, enjoys more freedom than the traditional media, which is extensively controlled by the government.

Yet, there are two main reasons that prevent Azerbaijani citizens from being actively involved in e-participation: First, about 50 percent of the population does not have access to high quality internet, which prevents them from participating in online civic activities. Second, citizens who are critical about government decisions face prosecution, a situation that provokes extensive self-censorship in social media.

The Azerbaijani government should meet its legal obligations by making information sources accessible to its citizens and should guarantee the population's constitutional rights, such as freedom of expression, assembly, and association, including via the online platform.

About the Author

Ulviyya Asadzade is a journalist in Baku.

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Use of Facebook by Azerbaijani Government and Opposition: Strategy and Tactics

By Tariyel Jalalli, Baku

Abstract

This article discusses the political activities of the Azerbaijani government and opposition via social media, particularly Facebook, by comparing how each side constructs its own particular reality in the social networks. In addition, the article analyzes the efficiency of using social networks for political communication by both parties.

Social Media in Azerbaijan

Social media, particularly social networks, have gained huge popularity in Azerbaijan in the last three years and become an important channel of communication. The number of internet users in Azerbaijan is around 4,746,800, according to the latest information for June 2013 (Internetworldstats, 2013). The penetration rate is around 50 percent, according to IWS (Internetworldstats, 2013). However, the number of social media users is less than the number of internet users. For example, the number of Facebook users from Azerbaijan is around 1,320,000 (Pearce, 2014), which constitutes only a 27.1 percent penetration rate, followed by Odnoklassniki.ru with around 750,000 users and Vk.com (Vkontakte.ru) with 738,000 registered users from Azerbaijan (Armenian chronicles, 2013). Thus, the figures demonstrate the higher popularity of Facebook in comparison to other platforms.

Facebook is the most important medium for political communication in Azerbaijan. The leading political actors, whether pro-governmental or pro-oppositional, actively use Facebook for setting their political agenda, as illustrated by the use of Facebook for political mobilization in March 2011 and January 2013. Thus, the article aims to analyze the Azerbaijani political actors' Facebook activities: Their online tactics and respective rhetoric are studied to trace their means of constructing their own particular reality and engaging the public. For this purpose, the article reviews the Facebook activities of the ruling party, a pro-governmental youth organization, the traditional oppositional parties, such as the Popular Front Party, Musavat Party, etc., and the non-system opposition consisting of independent journalists, bloggers, and activists, who do not belong to the Azerbaijani oppositional parties though are critical towards the government and its policies, and are among the opinion leaders in the social media.

Analytical Framework

I employ social constructionist theory as the main analytical framework to study Azerbaijani political actors' activities in the social media. Social constructionism

focuses on the construction of reality through social interactions between individuals. The key assumption is that reality is socially constructed based on the actors' cultural and historical backgrounds and knowledge, and depends on a specific context. In this process, language and rhetoric are considered as the cornerstones of social life, creating our subjective construction of meaning (Berger, Luckmann, 1967). However, language can play a role as both constructor and deconstructor by criticizing the existing reality and policies (Edelman, 1988). Valls (1996) applied the social constructionist approach to the analysis of presidential rhetoric, illustrating that by creating certain pictures of reality presidents try to justify their actions or inactions.

In this paper, the social constructionist approach focuses on social interactions between social media users and political actors in Azerbaijan. In addition, the paper attempts to analyze how these political actors try to construct a certain political reality by using specific rhetoric.

Political Messages Delivered via Facebook

The Government's Strategies

Let us review the government's and opposition's political strategies on Facebook. Usually, both parties create groups, pages, and event pages. They were especially active before the presidential elections of 2013. The pro-governmental youth organization "Ireli" Public Union created groups and pages supporting the current president and used event pages to mobilize the electorate for offline support. The Azerbaijani opposition groups (including the non-system opposition) created pages and events, as well as online petitions, to mobilize their own constituency. In addition, in order to provide more persuasive evidence, the Azerbaijani political actors shared different types of content, such as info graphics, video content, etc. Despite using similar tools, the government and opposition apply different communication strategies on Facebook: they employ different types of messages and methods for delivering them to the public.

Government officials and pro-governmental groups do not engage with the audience but try to inform

them. Accordingly, the government uses social media to expand its official propaganda and constructs a reality in which Azerbaijan is portrayed as a rapidly developing democratic country. The analysis of official Facebook pages of “Ireli” Public Union, Ilham Aliyev and Mehriban Aliyeva support this observation. “Ireli” Public Union informs the visitors about its projects and constructs a reality, where Azerbaijani youth is presented as “happy young people who support the current regime” (Ireli, 2014). The official Facebook page of President Ilham Aliyev follows the same strategy by portraying Azerbaijan as “a rapidly developing country.” As Ilham Aliyev’s page mainly shares official information and photos from his visits and meetings, his Facebook page discourse reinforces official governmental propaganda. For example, in the post published on February 24, 2014, on Ilham Aliyev’s page, the state of democracy in Azerbaijan is described as follows: “I believe Azerbaijani people around the world are proud that we have a strong Azerbaijani state. This state works for its citizens, takes care of their problems. Our motherland is now a modern dynamic democracy” (Aliyev, 2014). This discourse is manifested through the visuals and photos as well. Ilham Aliyev’s official webpage frequently publishes photos from construction sites and opening ceremonies, creating the image of “prospering Azerbaijan.”

The same approach is applied by the First Lady Mehriban Aliyeva’s official Facebook page, which does not publish posts on her behalf, but news about her visits and the photos from her meetings. In this way, the page positions Mehriban Aliyeva as an active public figure simultaneously creating the image of “Azerbaijan as a fast developing country.” The photos and visuals from her opening ceremonies reinforce the official discourse offered by the government’s Facebook pages. For example, on October 14, 2013, her page published a video summarizing the outcomes of social-economic development in Azerbaijan. On January 7, 2014, her page published news about opening the Baku Recreation Center and on February 13, 2014—a post about opening the new building of the National Conservatory (Aliyeva, 2014).

It is noteworthy though that the government Facebook pages do not respond to any comments, except for “Ireli” Public Union. As a result, the engagement rates on the pro-governmental pages are quite low. The main Facebook measure of the engagement rate on various pages is People Talking About This (PTAT). The PTAT indicator for Ilham Aliyev’s page during the week of February 17–23, 2014 was 10,380, which is very low considering that the number of his followers is more than 238,000. The PTAT for the “Ireli” Public Union page in the same period was 1,276, while the number of its Facebook followers is more than 33,000.

To summarize, the Azerbaijani government’s communication strategy on Facebook aims to extend the official propaganda, to reinforce the image of a “prospering Azerbaijan,” and to inform the followers only about positive changes. In other words, its one-way communication model is reproduced on Facebook as well.

The Opposition’s Strategies

The Azerbaijani opposition attempts to construct a different reality, while deconstructing the reality created by the government. The Facebook page of Ali Karimli, Chairman of the Popular Front Party, attempts to deconstruct the official propaganda by sharing news and stories from the news media. Ali Karimli shares posts about social-economic problems, protest manifestations, imprisonment of political activists, the suicide committed by a war veteran, and the purchase of a new aircraft for the Azerbaijani President (Karimli, 2014). Ali Karimli constructs a reality, in which Azerbaijan is presented as an undeveloped and non-democratic country full of injustice, and calls for public consolidation to change the current regime. Similar rhetoric is employed by Jamil Hasanli, the ex-presidential candidate from the opposition (Hasanli, 2014), by Isa Gambar (Gambar, 2014), Chairman of the Musavat Party, and by the NIDA Civic Movement (NIDA, 2014).

All the opposition Facebook pages try to deconstruct the reality that the government creates, offering an alternative reality. In addition, these pages communicate with users, responding to their questions and comments, and trying to engage them in a conversation. NIDA Civic Movement is especially active in this regard though both the party and non-system oppositional groups, as well as the opinion leaders from this camp, effectively implement the same communication strategy via their personal profiles. The personal profiles of Khadija Ismayil, Bakhtiyar Hajiyev, Erkin Gadirli, Adnan Hajizade, Natig Jafarli, Rovshan Agayev, Vugar Bayramov, Natig Adilov, Mehman Huseynov, Zamin Haji, and many other non-system oppositional figures encourage active engagement and discussion on Facebook, and manage to transfer this discussion to other media, like online news websites and newspapers. Khadija Ismayil demonstrated the efficiency of Facebook activities by creating a fake party (Ismayil, 2014), after which the news media actively referred to her joke and announced the creation of a new party. Another case relates to her publishing of “confidential instructions” that she facetiously claimed came from the Azerbaijani Ministry of National Security.

Cases of creating information waves in social networks which then transfer to the traditional media and public opinion are plenty. The news media, especially the websites and newspapers, regularly follow the pub-

lic profiles of pro-oppositional opinion leaders and use their posts and statuses as the source of news. Therefore, the non-system opposition leaders' influence on public opinion via social media in Azerbaijan is quite strong.

To summarize, the Facebook communication strategy of the Azerbaijani opposition, including the non-system opposition, aims to deconstruct the reality offered by the government and to create an alternative reality, simultaneously engaging the population in discussions and actions. In other words, the opposition employs a two-way communication model on Facebook.

Conclusion

A brief overview of the Azerbaijani pro-governmental and pro-oppositional actors' activities via Facebook demonstrates that this social network functions predominantly as a platform for propagating their political ideology. The Azerbaijani government continues to portray

Azerbaijan as a rapidly developing democratic country, where there is no need for changes, while the opposition depicts Azerbaijan as a non-democratic country full of injustice, criticizing the government and urging changes. Even though government officials have large numbers of Facebook followers, the government is losing grounds in the social networks. The traditional opposition, together with non-system opposition, is succeeding in the social media owing to the activities of its opinion leaders being rather popular among the public. The government officials do not communicate with the audiences and do not respond to their comments or questions, while the opinion leaders from non-system opposition are actively engaged with their audiences and do respond to their questions. Consequently, although the pro-opposition Facebook pages have fewer followers, the opposition's influence on public opinion is obviously stronger.

About the Author

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CHRONICLE

25 March–14 April 2014

25 March 2014	The spokesman of Abkhaz leader Sergei Bagapsh, Kristian Bzhanian, said that holding a referendum on whether Abkhazia wants to join Russia or not is “out of the question”
25 March 2014	EU Commissioner for Enlargement and European Neighborhood Štefan Füle says in a tweet that he is watching with concern the Georgian prosecutors’ decision to summon former Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili for questioning
25 March 2014	A group of environmental activists disrupt an international mining conference in Yerevan where experts had gathered to discuss ecological safety in Armenia’s mining sector
26 March 2014	US President Barack Obama says at a press conference after the EU–US Summit in Brussels that there are no “immediate plans” for expanding NATO membership to Georgia and Ukraine
27 March 2014	The US co-chair of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe’s (OSCE) Minsk Group on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, James Warlick, reports on Twitter that the presidents of Armenia and Azerbaijan have met on the sidelines of the Nuclear Security Summit in The Hague on 24–25 March 2014
27 March 2014	Former Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili rejects an offer made by prosecutors in Tbilisi to be questioned via Skype
31 March 2014	The three sons of late Georgian President Zviad Gamsakhurdia call on the current authorities in Georgia to resume the official investigation into his death which was shelved in 2004
31 March 2014	Georgia signs an agreement to establish diplomatic relations with the South Pacific island nation of Tuvalu which has retracted its decision to recognize Abkhazia and South Ossetia under a previous government in 2011
2 April 2014	Armenia’s Constitutional Court rules that several clauses in the controversial new law on pensions are illegal
2 April 2014	Georgian President Giorgi Margvelashvili starts a two-days visit to Poland and meets with his counterpart Bronisław Komorowski and Prime Minister Donald Tusk
3 April 2014	Armenian Prime Minister Tigran Sarkisian steps down after six years in office
4 April 2014	Former secretary of Georgia’s National Security Council (NSC) Giga Bokeria is questioned by prosecutors in connection with an ongoing investigation into the misspending of budgetary funds at the NSC
7 April 2014	Georgian Interior Minister Alexander Tchikaidze says that the United National Movement party aims to “destabilize” the country and “overthrow state institutions” in an interview with a Georgian weekly newspaper
8 April 2014	The Georgian Defense Ministry says that a Georgian special mountain battalion has been deployed at an airbase in Kandahar as part of the ISAF mission in Afghanistan
8 April 2014	The Azerbaijani Defense Ministry says that an officer and two conscripts have been killed in a mine explosion at the border with an Armenian-controlled region
9 April 2014	Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev meets with his Iranian counterpart Hassan Rohani in Tehran to discuss strengthening ties between the two countries and the status of the Caspian Sea
9 April 2014	Danish Foreign Minister Martin Lidegaard meets with his Georgian counterpart Maia Panjikidze and Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili in Tbilisi and says that his visit aims to send a strong signal showing Danish and EU support for Georgia
13 April 2014	Ovik Abraamian is appointed as new Prime Minister in Armenia taking over from Tigran Sarkisian
14 April 2014	EU foreign ministers reaffirm their support during a meeting in Luxembourg for an “early” signature of the Association Agreements, including the comprehensive free trade agreements, with Georgia and Moldova no later than June
14 April 2014	The EU will hold investment conferences in Georgia and Moldova during the visit of EU Commission President José Manuel Barroso to the two countries on 12 and 13 June 2014

Compiled by Lili Di Puppo

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ABOUT THE CAUCASUS ANALYTICAL DIGEST

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