

Elections, Social Movements and Internet Penetration in Armenia

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Abstract

The number of Internet users has been growing in Armenia during recent years; the geography of users is expanding as well. Public activists have implemented successful campaigns using internet tools. Meanwhile consumers have started to make more and more use of the Internet as a means of obtaining political and social information.

The Elections of 2013 and the Internet

In both the presidential and city council elections of 2013, the Internet played an important role in registering election fraud as well as in providing opportunities for discussing political processes.

During the 2012 National Assembly elections, a civil platform for reporting election fraud called “iditord” (<https://iditord.org/>) was developed. This crowdsourcing platform works on the basis of the ushahidi program. It enables citizens to report election fraud by sending short text messages, through Twitter, or by posting messages, photos and videos directly in iditord.org. During the 2013 presidential election, the system received 394 alarms and 2 criminal cases were opened. During the city council elections of May 2013, iditord received 428 alarms.

The main social media platform for disseminating and discussing news about elections was Facebook. It becomes more and more popular in Armenia. According to Quintly, which does its calculations on the basis of the data provided by the Facebook advertising department, the number of Facebook registrations in Armenia by June 2013 was 446,980 (<http://www.quintly.com/facebook-country-statistics/>). This number has grown by 57.69% in the recent year.

Twitter in Armenia is not so popular. There are no strict data about the number of users of this microblogging platform in Armenia. However, it was actively used for disseminating information during the elections. On the day of the presidential elections, 19 February 2013, the hashtag used for covering the elections—#armvote13—was among the top Twitter trends (<http://media.am/en/armvote13-hashtag-and%20armenian-presidential-elections>).

The audience of Armenian websites is constantly growing, which became obvious especially in the post-election period. For instance, after the presidential elections, the audience of news.am, the most popular media website in Armenia, almost equaled in number the audience of TV programs. According to circle.am that calculates the number of Armenian website visitors, the number of visits of news.am was 92,409 on a random day, November 8, 2012. On February 21, 2013 (a post-election

day), that number doubled to 189,617 visits (http://www.noravank.am/upload/pdf/1.Anna_Zhamakochyan_03_2013.pdf).

According to the Nielsen company, which measures the rating of Armenian TV companies, the most popular news program in 2011 was “Haylur” of Armenian Public TV: the program was watched by 147,401 people during its peak hour. According to circle.am, the main media websites of Armenia, news.am, tert.am, lin.am, have on average 100,000–150,000 visitors a day. Of course, it is methodologically wrong to compare the numbers directly, for times differ, internet news are consumed during the day, whereas news programs last for half an hour. Besides, 30% of visitors of news.am are outside Armenia. However, the number of those who use the Internet as a source of information evidently tends to grow. (<http://media.am/television-program-measurement>) Another novelty of the 2013 elections was the live broadcast of campaigns, voting and post-election events on different internet platforms. (<http://media.am/en/hello-internet-tv>)

Generally, this election period can be considered a period of Internet broadcast progress in Armenia. Three companies, “A1+”, “Azatutyun” and “Civilnet” provided the broadcast of meetings and press conferences; they also made election reports and organized live online discussions about the situation in the country.

The total audience of these three websites in the post-election period was 85,000–90,000 visitors daily. The average number of daily visits of “Civilnet” was 33,000; “A1+” had 15,000 visitors, and “Azatutyun” had 45,000 visits.

The influence of the Internet in Armenia was especially obvious on April 9, 2013, Inauguration day. Then two inaugurations took place at the same time in Yerevan. The first was the official inauguration of Serzh Sargsyan at the Yerevan Sports and Concerts Complex; the second was the alternative inauguration of Raffi Hovhannisyan, who gathered his supporters at Independence Square after having officially received 36.75% of the votes.

TV broadcast only the official inauguration, whereas huge numbers of people had gathered at Indepen-

dence Square, and collisions with the police were quite likely. Armenian websites covered the events every hour through text, photo and video articles, as well as through live video broadcasts. Different means were used, including cameras and smartphones. The risk of collisions was reduced also due to the presence of reporters and public activists.

The Audience of the Internet. Statistics

The growth of politically active net users, as well as the increase of Internet media influence can also be explained by the atmosphere of distrust towards television in Armenia. People search the Internet for information unavailable on TV.

Here are some figures from the IPSC research on the sources of social-political information from 2010 to 2013; 91% of the population gets such information from television, 37% from the Internet, 14% from published media, and 12% from the radio.

In 2010 only 15% of respondents received social-political information from the Internet. This figure has grown 2.5 times during the last two years. According to the research, 95% of respondents used television as the main source of information in 2010. This figure decreased by 2013, but not significantly.

According to another IPSC poll, by January 2013, 62% of 18–29 year-old people consider the Internet a source of political news. In March 2012 this number was 48%. 14% growth has been registered in ten months. Younger people prefer the Internet, but 34% of 30–49 year-old respondents also get political news from the Internet (<http://www.eufoa.org/uploads/POLL20130125AM.pdf>).

There is no generally accepted number describing the internet penetration rate in Armenia. In 2013 the government confirmed the methodology of calculating the internet penetration rate. However, there are still no data (<http://media.am/en/internet-penetration-in-armenia>).

In order to present the internet penetration rate in Armenia in 2011–2012, the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) used figures provided by the Armenia Public Services Regulatory Commission. According to these figures, Armenia's internet users comprised 47.1% of the population in 2011; in 2012, this figure was 60.6%.

According to the poll by the Caucasus Barometer survey of the Caucasus Research Resource Centers (CRRC), 53% of the investigated Armenian households have a computer. 48% of respondents had an Internet connection as well. The sample is representative.

According to the figures provided by the Caucasus Barometer, the question "Have you ever used the Internet?" has been answered affirmatively by 52% of Armenian respondents, 27% of Azerbaijani respon-

dents and 43% of Georgian respondents. (<http://www.crrccenters.org/caucasusbarometer/>; <http://www.katypearce.net/new-caucasus-internet-stats/>).

The internet penetration increase was also supported by the cost reduction resulting from the business competition in the past three to four years. In 2007, a 1Mb/s internet connection cost 2,900,000 AMD, in 2011, 24,000 AMD. In 2013, 1Mb/s internet connection can be obtained for 5,000–6,000 AMD.

The internet speed increase and price reduction led to a rapid geographical expansion of Armenian internet users.

As noted above, the number of Armenia users of Facebook, according to June 2013 data, is 446,980 people. But the most successful social site in Armenia is the Russia-based Odnoklassniki. According to June 2013 figures, the average number of daily visits to the site comprises 747,713 visitors (http://www.liveinternet.ru/stat/odnoklassniki.ru/countries.html?period=month&id=51&show=rebuild+graph&per_page=10&report=countries.html%3Fperiod%3Dmonth).

The Odnoklassniki phenomenon is explained by the presence of numerous Armenians in Russia. This social network is also a means of communication between friends and relatives. Odnoklassniki, as well as Skype, contributed to the penetration of the Internet into the regions and villages of Armenia. The motivation for many families to obtain a computer and an internet connection is the wish to keep in touch with friends and relatives through Odnoklassniki and Skype. Odnoklassniki is quite often used by men and women for making friends. The people interested in using these two services drastically improved the statistics of Armenia internet users. According to the CRRC Caucasus Barometer figures, 62% of Armenia internet users in the regions use Skype. In Yerevan this figure comprises 40% (<http://www.katypearce.net/regional-and-gender-differences-in-internet-activities-in-armenia-azerbaijan-and-georgia/>).

One of the main conditions of internet penetration in Armenia is business competition. There are three telecommunications operators, providing high-speed internet services (Beeline, MTS, Orange), two large companies, which provide fiber-optic internet connections (Ucom, RosTelecom), as well as several smaller local providers.

The increase of internet availability made the traditional media work more freely during the elections period in order to withstand the on-line competition. Media consumers could follow internet media and social networks instead of television news. Traditional media had to provide more balanced coverage in order not to lose their audience. The groups monitoring Armenia's broadcast media coverage of the National Assembly,

presidential and City Council elections in 2012–2013 speak about a particularly balanced work, as compared to the past (http://ypc.am/upload/YPC%20Monitoring_RA%20Presidential%20Elections%202013_eng.pdf; http://ypc.am/upload/YPC%20Monitoring_Second%20Stage_April%208-%20May%204,%202012_eng.pdf; http://ypc.am/upload/YPC%20Monitoring_Second-Third_Stages_May%204-19,%202013_eng.pdf).

A major reason for this balanced coverage of the campaigns has been the attention that the international community paid to making certain that the elections proceed according to Armenia's obligations. The government made certain that the coverage is balanced on government-owned channels as well. However, the Internet availability increased the overall need through competitiveness, which presumably also affected the quality of coverage by the mainstream TV.

Political and Social Activism and the Internet

The internet expansion throughout Armenia by means of Odnoklassniki and Skype did not contribute only to the maintenance of family ties.

After 2008 presidential elections, when the whole country was in a post-election shock, the main platform for videos featuring opposition meetings and processions was YouTube. Videos were made and spread through the Internet not only by such network media as A1+, but also by bloggers supporting either the opposition or the government.

Videos on the collision of the opposition with the police on March 1 and the night of March 2, 2008, were spread through YouTube. DVDs and Bluetooth also served this purpose. The opposition created a peculiar media for itself through the Internet and modern technologies.

YouTube and Facebook informed the public about the abuse of soldiers by an officer of one military unit in 2010. The video spread through YouTube and for several days remained the main subject of discussion in Facebook. A criminal case was opened on the basis of the mobile-made video, and the officer was sentenced.

In the past two to three years in Armenia, several successful cases of public activism with the active use of social media have been registered. One of the most well-known case was the fight against the construction of shops on the territory of Mashtots park in Yerevan. It lasted for several months; in the end, the shops were dismantled. The public activists fighting for the park spent days and nights there in winter 2011 and spring 2012. They were able to make their offline activity more effective through the Internet. Facebook was used for rapidly spreading information. The public activists and network media put videos on YouTube about the events in

Mashtots park. Live broadcasts were organized by both Internet-TVs, with their official channels, and the activists on their personal broadcasting platforms. This tactic was especially effective in preventing possible collisions with the police.

Another victory of public activists was the protection of Trchkan waterfall. The epicenter of the events was a territory about 100 km from Yerevan. The activists succeeded in preventing the government from building a hydropower station on the waterfall. Internet tools were successfully used by the activists to reach their goal.

The activists managed to win the admiration of the Internet community. The Armenia Internet followed the events of Trchkan and did its best to support the activists. Exchange of information through social networks involved the media in the coverage of Trchkan events. The protesters in Trchkan and their daily visitors from Yerevan used Twitter, YouTube and Facebook to spread information (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/259531000744522/?fref=ts>).

The latest example is the campaign against the reopening of foreign language schools. It started in blogs and in Facebook. The aim was to keep the government from ratifying the law on the reopening of foreign language schools. The organizers of the campaign were able to shift the discussions from the Internet to traditional media. Many politicians were involved in the campaign, and the draft law was changed. However, the changed law was still adopted.

One of the features of this campaign was the appearance of slacktivism or clicktivism, when people think their duty is fulfilled only by clicking "like", commenting or sharing the article in the social networks. Thousands of internet activists were involved in the Facebook group against the reopening of foreign language schools, whereas there were not so many people involved in offline campaigns (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/menkdemenk/>).

In all the above mentioned campaigns the activists have tried to press the government via social networks and make the politicians change their decisions. This was done on different levels: national and local, as well as targeting sometimes executive and sometimes legislative branches. The reactions of the government have varied. In the case of Mashtots Park, after a long resistance, the matter was solved by the directive given to municipal authorities personally by President Sargsyan before the National Assembly elections. But in the case of foreign language schools, the activists were not so successful; the government did not yield. All these campaigns have one common goal: to keep the government alert. The role of the Internet here becomes particularly important, because it is almost impossible to control the infor-

mation flow on the net. If the traditional media choose to ignore a problem, social media will make the government focus on it, if not solve it.

At the beginning of the article I spoke about one of the most important crowdsourcing programs in Armenia: iditord, a site for registering election fraud alarms. A similar crowdsourcing technology, based on social activity in the Internet, operates in the civil field as well. One of the map crowdsourcing platforms is CityBugs (<http://www.citybugs.am/>). It operates mainly in Yerevan and has an information exchange system with the local authorities. Citizens can alarm the municipality in CityBugs by means of text messages, photos and videos, and offer the municipal authorities solutions to the problems.

Another project of crowdsourcing is GiveMeInfo (<http://givemeinfo.am/en/>). It was made by the Information Freedom Center. If a state government body violates the Law on Information Freedom, the case is registered in GiveMeInfo. Each user can download his/her case in the site; they can also make an easy inquiry to any state institution through the site. Similar other

crowdsourcing startup programs are launched on the Armenian Internet. They mainly aim at making people's lives more comfortable through the Internet and innovation technologies.

But we should not think that the Internet penetration increase in itself can solve the problems of democracy in the country. For instance, a social innovation project which uses the Internet to affect the flow of migration won't be able to achieve an effect if it is not accompanied by real life actions.

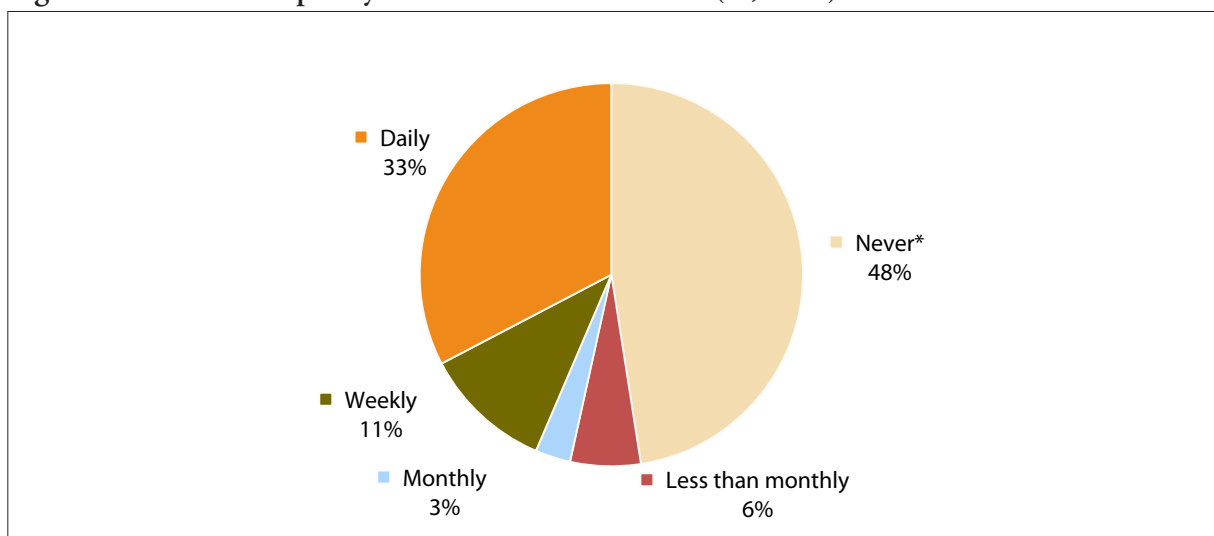
This refers to civil campaigns as well. The activists keep on using the Internet; however, exclusively online projects are not successful. The availability of high-speed Internet is an opportunity to create one's own media by means of social networks and blogs. They help in disseminating information and organizing discussions. This is as much as they can do. The Internet is an additional tool that helps to implement ideas. For real democratization, offline is the key.

Translated from the Armenian by Tatevik Mkhitarian

About the Author

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Figure 1: Internet Frequency Distribution for Armenia (% , 2012)



* Includes "I don't know what the Internet is".

Source: <http://www.katypierce.net/new-caucasus-internet-stats/> (using data from the CRRC Caucasus Barometer (Caucasus Barometer 2012, representative opinion poll conducted between October 26 and November 29, 2012) (<http://www.crrccenters.org/caucasusbarometer/>))