Civic Engagement via Social Media in Georgia

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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 quantitative (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.

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 rare 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 paticipated 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.

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