The Best Defense is a Good Offense: The Role of Social Media in the Current Crackdown in Azerbaijan

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Abstract

While Azerbaijan has been on the path to full-fledged authoritarianism for quite some time, the increased repression of 2013 and 2014 is, to many Azerbaijan watchers, unprecedented. Other articles in this issue detail the legislative and practical actions taken by the regime over the past few years. This piece focuses on the role of social media with historical contextualization.

Introduction

Many pundits give too much credit to the role of information and communication technologies in political events. Policymakers enthusiastically assume that through "putting cracks in the wall" of authoritarianism, regimes can be defeated and, moreover, that information and communication technologies are a powerful crack-making tool, although rarely are the mechanisms for this process elucidated. Yet any tool that can put a crack in the wall can also be used to nail a door shut, build a new prison, or hit someone over the head. Readers must understand that information and communication technologies are merely tools and authoritarian regimes have the resources to use the tools more efficiently and effectively than the resource-less.

Contextualization is also essential: it must be acknowledged that most Azerbaijani citizens are in fact *not* using social media. Facebook's own user numbers show that only 18% of Azerbaijanis are on the site as of January 2015.[1] And in the last Caucasus Barometer public opinion survey in 2013, only 33% of Azerbaijani adults have ever used the Internet[2] and only 13% of adults are online every day. So while certainly many urban educated Azerbaijanis use social media, it is impossible to judge what *all* Azerbaijanis think based on the social media behavior of a few. Additionally, the use of social media for political information gathering and deliberation are not popular for *any* individuals. Most social media users spend their time communicating with friends.

Yet the Internet and social media's role in Azerbaijani political life is far from unimportant. We know that information and communication technologies can allow for easier collective action in authoritarian states where freedom of assembly is limited. The Internet can also provide a space for public deliberation and discussion as well as a platform for expressing discontent, all more challenging in an authoritarian environment. But perhaps most importantly, the Internet can provide more news and information alternatives to state-provided media.

All of this also occurs in Azerbaijan. Yet, changes in the regime's approach toward social media require a more careful examination. Essentially, the regime moved from ignorance to tolerance to defense to offense in a decade. It is only with contextualization and an understanding of history can the effect of social media in the current crackdown be understood.

Ignorance Era

In the early 2000s, few Azerbaijanis used the Internet. While Internet cafes and some workplaces may have provided Internet in this era, it was not until the end of the 2000s that over 10% of Azerbaijani homes had a personal computer with online access (See Figure 1 on p. 5). In this era, the Internet seemed to be a glimmer of political hope in Azerbaijan because at that time individuals who were interested in politics and were active online were more likely to be pro-democracy advocates. And with so few citizens online, the regime essentially ignored online activities.

Tolerance Era

Internet use in Azerbaijan grew at the end of the first decade of the 2000s. Netbooks and personal computer prices dropped significantly at this time, making them more affordable for more households. This was also the beginning of the social media era—MySpace, Facebook, vKontakte, and Odnoklassniki joined established sites like LiveJournal and encouraged many established and new users to join them. Some early Azerbaijani Internet celebrities, like Ilgar Mammadov and Hebib Muntezir, formed small discussion groups that were popular among the politically active.

Given the Azerbaijani regime's control over mainstream media, the Internet and social media have long played a role as an information source providing views outside of what the regime broadcasts. And, according to history professor Altay Goyushov, after the first round of media crackdowns in Azerbaijan in 2008, the Internet and social media took on new meaning as one of the few spaces for alternative information and indepen-

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1　<http://www.katypearce.net/january-2015-facebook-use-in-armenia-azerbaijan-and-georgia-according-to-facebook/>

2　<http://www.katypearce.net/2013-internet-penetration-armenia-azerbaijan-georgia/> <http://www.katypearce.net/2013-caucasus-internet-and-technology-infographic/>

dent deliberation.[3] Goyushov argues that in 2009 and 2010, the growth of social media and especially Facebook completely changed information flow in Azerbaijan and, he argues, that over time Facebook became the center of everything in Baku—new ideas, social and political issues, and discussions that would have never been allowed before were now happening online.

Defense Era
But, as time passed and more Azerbaijanis went online, Azerbaijani Internet users became more diverse. The regime became increasingly concerned that the relative free space of social media would no longer be contained to well-educated Bakuvians. The regime also witnessed the speed by which critical content can spread on social media and became increasingly concerned that it would be less able to predict and control citizens' reactions to such content. Thus, what was once considered a safe space for free expression was no longer. The regime took advantage of the perceived freedom of expression online and used it for greater surveillance of citizen behavior. The regime also realized that it needed to demonstrate to citizens that online dissent would not be tolerated. We can specifically point to the Donkey Blogger case in 2009 as a turning point: what happens online in Azerbaijan has offline repercussions. This has been repeatedly demonstrated: the N!DA trials, the Harlem Shake arrest, and punishment of popular online personalities like Mehman Huseynov. Popular online dissent is swiftly and severely punished for everyone to see.

Offense Era
Unlike earlier eras, current oppositional Azerbaijani Internet users are *well aware* of the regime's capacity and willingness to punish online dissent. And more recently, the regime has moved from purely defense to the addition of well-funded offense in dealing with dissent online. The regime does tolerate some alternative information sharing as it provides the regime with a sense of what oppositionists think, and social media discussion about alternative news provides information to the regime even better than a formal opposition press does. Yet the regime and its supporters do not allow for unfettered online alternative news and discussion. Individuals who share alternative news are frequently harassed by family and friends. The regime has also passed legislation that gives it more legal authority to combat online dissent through individual charges of libel and defamation.[4]

In what seems like a coordinated offensive plan, pro-regime youth organizations hijack hashtags and flood social media with attempts at discrediting alternative media, frequently using fake social media accounts to appear to have more support.[5] And numerous pro-regime gossip sites leak *kompromat* and rumors about oppositionists—all at a much lower cost and with fewer direct links and attribution to the regime than in the pre-social media era. In fact, in authoritarian media systems, the Internet and social media are even more rumor and scandal-laden than traditional media.

Yet—especially due to the current wave of crackdowns on independent media, including the harassment and closure of independent media outlets like Radio Liberty and Azadliq Newspaper and the blocking of foreign grant funds to support independent media—in the current crackdown era, even more than in the past, social media and the Internet provide one of the few spaces where alternative information can be distributed and found. And, despite the risks involved in sharing or publishing oppositional content, for some brave Azerbaijanis, the Internet and social media are truly all that is left.

These brave outspoken Azerbaijanis are essentially Internet celebrities. Their celebrity was built on the structure and norms of social media and Facebook in particular. There is an unusual mix of interpersonal and broadcast communication that enables followers to have a parasocial relationship with a figure. While an individual posts political commentary between photos of a new baby or a child's graduation and a video clip of a favorite song, followers have a sense of intimacy with that person that is likely not reciprocated but enables a connection much deeper than what they would have with a traditional political figure.

Recent Crackdown in the Offense Era—Do They Even Know There Is a Crackdown?
In the most recent wave of crackdown, social media have essentially become the only place for individuals to share and receive information and discuss what is happening. But after witnessing the repercussions of online dissent both interpersonally and politically, it is likely that many Azerbaijanis, even those who are oppositionally-minded, are reluctant to share their feelings online.

But do Azerbaijani citizens realize that there is a crackdown? The answer likely varies by the degree of emotional involvement with those being targeted—and this is where these parasocial relationships may play a role. Active oppositionists with "real" or parasocial relationships with targeted individuals and organizations

3   <http://www.ned.org/events/the-crackdown-on-independent-voices-in-azerbaijan>
4   <http://www.rferl.org/content/azerbaijan-internet-defamation-law-criminal-aliyev/25008799.html>
5   <http://www.katypearce.net/we-are-young-heartache-to-heartache-we-stand-no-promises-no-demands-azvote13/>

are quite aware of the crackdown and social media have provided an efficient and low-cost way for information to spread. Nearly every arrest in the recent crackdown has been accompanied by a socially mediated play-by-play. For example, (now imprisoned) investigative journalist Khadija Ismayilova's arrival at the Baku airport and subsequent near-arrest in October 2014 was being "live blogged" by Ismayilova herself as well as numerous commentators. It seemed as if all of oppositional Baku and exile was online on a Friday evening waiting for the next bit of information. This also occurred during human rights defender Leyla Yunus' various encounters with the police. After court appearances, fuzzy smartphone photos of the detained at a distance go viral. I suggest that the (mediated) experience of "being there" or at least being involved more intimately has an effect on the emotional involvement and possibility commitment to those most affected by the crackdown. If these experiences actually translate into any concrete action remains to be seen.

But those not actively engaged in oppositional activities may or may not be aware that a crackdown is taking place for three reasons. First, the unintentional exposure to social media content *about* the crackdown depends on an individual's social network. It is entirely possible that some Azerbaijanis who previously had no sense of crackdowns may now know more because individuals post content and it appears in a newsfeed. This unintentional exposure may have both short- and long-term effects on attitudes toward the regime and the opposition in Azerbaijan. Second, an individual could choose to use social media to reinforce their own viewpoint—oppositional or pro-regime and actively avoid any content that does not resonate with pre-existing beliefs. Third, the flood of pro-regime media, both officially and unofficially affiliated, clouds the media landscape. Pro-regime media actively attacks oppositionists and likely confuses individuals.

Some exceptional cases may break through though. The August 2014 brutal beating of Azerbaijani human rights advocate and journalist Ilgar Nasibov in Nakhchivan is a clear example.[6] Photographs of the results of the beating were released (by his family) to opposition online newspapers a few days after the event. The Facebook thumbnail of the story showed a graphic photograph that was impossible to ignore.

Conclusion

The "cracks in the wall" argument, while appealing, does not hold up under careful scrutiny. Authoritarian regimes like Azerbaijan use information and commu-

nication technologies to their own advantage and often more effectively than oppositions do.

One small crack that should be considered, however, is the power of social media to bring new voices to the mainstream. In Azerbaijan, the traditional opposition parties are threatened by new and charismatic independent voices. These new players have built their reputations on social media. Some are information disseminators like Hebib Muntezir, arguably one of the most important information sources in Azerbaijan, with over 22,000 followers on Facebook. Others are interesting political commentators like historian Altay Goyushov or journalist Mirza Khazar. Khadija Ismayilova is both information disseminator and commentator. Other young upstarts like Emin Milli, Bakhtiyar Hajiyev, Gunel Movlud, Turkan Huseynova, and Mehman Huseynov have significantly larger social media audiences than any traditional opposition figures. And importantly, there would be no way for these individuals to have grown their political influence without social media and the parasocial relationships that their followers have with them. These individuals, further, are *fueled* by the social media, and sometimes offline, support that their followers give them. Every post gets immediate feedback and is "liked" or re-tweeted or shared. They are learning more about what their audience wants and likes and how to properly respond to the needs. Social media is like a political marketing university for them. This feedback and message testing is incredibly empowering for these independents and adds a new dynamic to Azerbaijani political life.

I posit that the regime, that has well-established ways of dealing with the traditional opposition parties, feels more threatened by these young upstarts than they do by the opposition parties because of their savvy followers and potential power. And the regime's response to these independents is to punish them severely. The Donkey Bloggers, Bakhtiyar Hajiyev, the N!DA members, among others—all have felt the brunt of the regime's fist in a way that the traditional parties usually do not.

And when historians and others try to understand this current crackdown, I suggest that this is the regime's experimental attempt at dealing with this new type of threat—social media-fueled, savvy, charismatic, and emboldened individuals. While I cannot subscribe to the "cracks in the wall" perspective, I see why these people and their affiliated organizations have frightened the regime and the regime has responded with defense and offense to deal with them.

See overleaf for information about the author and further reading.

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6   <http://www.rferl.org/content/azerbaijan-attack-rights-activist-nasibov/26545123.html>
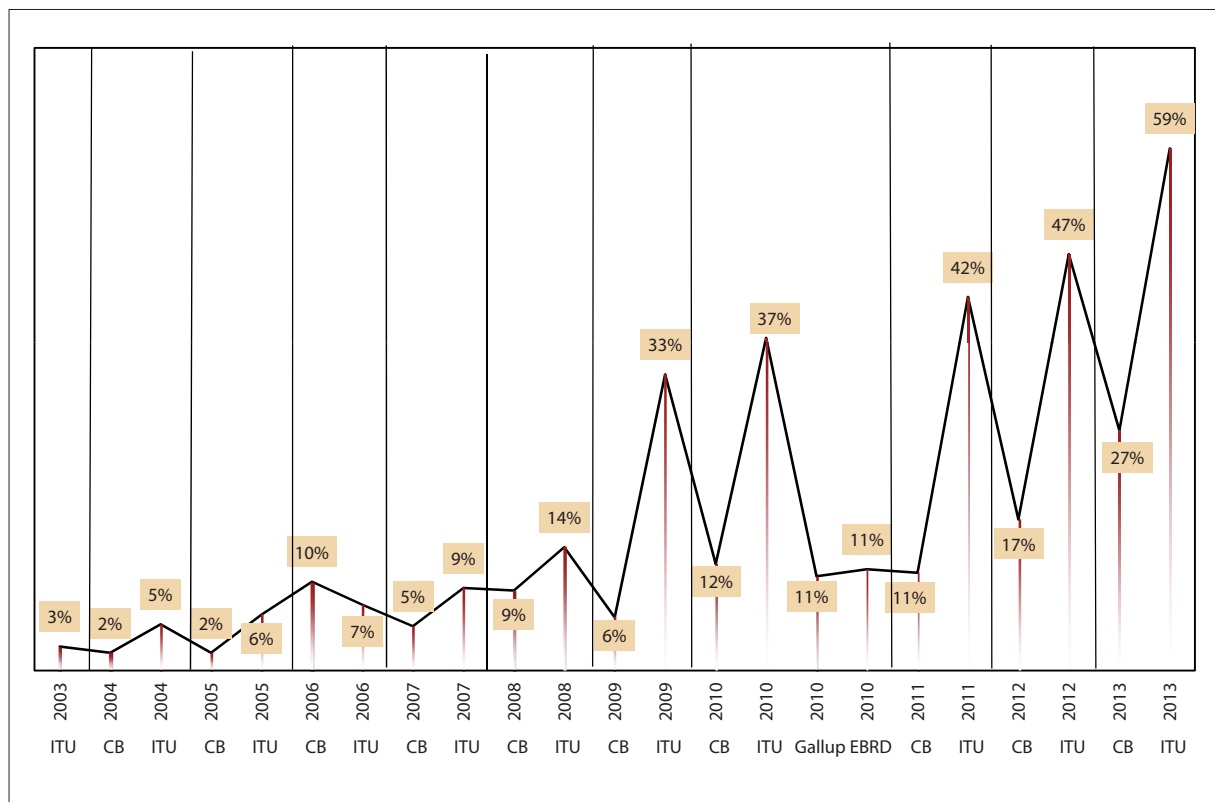
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Katy E. Pearce is an assistant professor in the Department of Communication at the University of Washington and holds an affiliation with the Ellison Center for Russian East European, and Central Asian Studies. Her research focuses on social and political uses of technologies and digital content in the transitioning democracies and semi-authoritarian states of the South Caucasus and Central Asia, but primarily Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Further Reading
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Figure 1:   Household PC-Based Internet Connection in Azerbaijan—the Most Consistent Over-Time Internet Use Measure Available, 2003–2013, Various Sources

Source: <http://www.katypearce.net/lets-have-a-data-party/>