

THE NEW MEDIA AND TRANSFORMATION OF THE PUBLIC POLITICAL SPHERE IN GEORGIA

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Introduction

Today, when information technology is sweeping the world, it is commonly thought that the social media have essentially pushed the traditional media aside to emerge as an important factor behind public opinion. This is especially obvious in countries where the traditional me-

dia (including TV) lack pluralism and operate under the pressure of the powers that be. Georgia is one such country, where the social media serve as a lifebuoy for the public political sphere.

They provide the luxury of interactive communication, while the traditional media drown the

audience in unidirectional information flows. This means that the social media not merely disseminate information, they serve as a platform for political discussions (something which Georgia lacked in the past). It has become absolutely clear that people are not indifferent to political issues—this is confirmed by the heated discussions on the Internet.

According to the polls conducted by the Georgian National Communications Commission (GNCC), the Georgian population prefers to watch entertainment and sports events than to ponder on political issues. This means that the country will not acquire new public-political TV and radio channels any time soon. Meanwhile, the Internet and social media are rapidly developing.

Transformation of the Information Field

Social networks and the Internet have not merely changed the traditional media and the country's political sphere, they have changed the cornerstone of the country's political communication.

In the last few years, the Georgian electronic media have abandoned political issues to concentrate on entertainment, which means that the political parties and political figures have moved, albeit partially, to the virtual sphere to discuss public and political issues; this, in turn, has encouraged the social media.

The number of Internet users is rapidly rising: in 2000, there was no more than 400; whereas by 2009, this number had reached approximately 20 thousand. According to the U.N. ITU, today there are 1,300,000 Internet users in Georgia (about 28.3 percent of the total population).¹

“Most Georgian users, about 55 percent, access the Internet from home, while about 21 percent use a friend's computer. Others use connections at the office (9 percent), on mobile phones (6 percent), or in cybercafes (6 percent).”²

In recent years, the regions have joined the Internet frenzy; however, Tbilisi and other big cities remain the leaders, partly because many smaller towns, as well as villages lack the adequate infrastructure. On average, each user spends between \$7-10 and \$25 every month on the Internet, sums which villagers cannot afford.

There are 19 Internet providers in Georgia, two of which have scooped over two-thirds of the market: Silknet (with over 40 percent of the Internet market) and Caucasus Online (with a large share of the Georgian market of Internet communications).

Three mobile communication operators are trying to squeeze into the Internet market by using wireless telecommunications.³

New Paradigms of Political Communication and Virtual Elections

The Egyptian revolution, which has been dubbed the Facebook Revolution, taught users and the people in power to treat the social networks with caution.

¹ See: ICT Statistics 2009—Internet. International Telecommunication Union (ITU), available at [<http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/ICTEYE/Indicators/Indicators.aspx>].

² [<http://www.freedomhouse.org/uploads/fotn/2011/FOTN2011.pdf>].

³ [http://top.ge/all_report.php].

In Georgia, the mobilization potential of the media had already been tested and found effective, which forced the victors of the Rose Revolution to take control of the electronic media as soon as they came to power.

Very soon, however, the social networks and media showed they were even more effective; the Georgian political leaders and the leaders of other Soviet successor-states have already voiced their concerns.

In the wake of the mass riots in Tunisia and Egypt, which demonstrated the inordinate impact of the social networks and media, the latest CSTO summit spoke about tighter control over them.⁴

The Arab Spring urged the Georgian political establishment and the country's leaders to become active users of social networks. In the summer of 2011, Speaker of the Georgian parliament David Bakradze began actively promoting his page on Facebook: it took him three or four months to gather a large crowd of 20 thousand supporters (by 30 September, 2011, 15 thousand were already registered); and the number is growing.

Prime Minister of Georgia Nika Gilauri has even more virtual friends: 24,744 by the fall of 2011.

The Mayor of Tbilisi Giorgi Ugulava has outstripped both: he has 42,812 supporters, the ranks of whom are swelling by the day.

The Internet activities of the speaker and the mayor of Tbilisi are attracting particular attention: the ruling party has already earmarked them as presidential candidates in 2013. Their virtual friends might support them at the coming presidential elections if the ruling party does not change its mind and take a fancy to someone else.

Meanwhile, the two potential presidents are competing on Facebook; Speaker Bakradze initiated regular personal meetings: he invites small groups of his supporters (no more than 10 at a time) to parliament tours followed by lunches. During one such meeting, he told the journalists: "Any power that thinks it necessary to communicate regularly with the people should use the social networks."

It should be said that the Georgian legislators have made communication with their virtual friends a habit: Akaki Minashvili and Giorgi Gabashvili, members of the parliamentary majority and chairmen of two parliamentary committees, have organized personal meetings with their Facebook friends.

In the fall of 2011, the Georgian parliamentarians, driven by their newly awakened enthusiasm for the virtual world, launched an Internet game to stir up the young people's social activity. For 45 days, anyone could join the game to test themselves as candidates for the virtual post of parliament speaker and as voters.

The executive branch, likewise, appreciated the usefulness of social networking: practically all the ministers have opened their pages on Facebook.

Late in September 2011, the president started his official site with, so far, a very limited number of friends (600 people). The prospects, however, are good: he will gather more friends than any other official in no time. It should be said that in view of the 2012 parliamentary and the 2013 presidential elections, the number of virtual supporters of the political heavyweights is fairly suggestive and might affect members of the political community and the ruling class.

Political parties are widely using Facebook; everyone who talks about the weakness of the opposition in Georgia obviously underestimates the huge potential of the social networks, which function beyond state control. It seems that the opposition is accusing the people in power of monopolizing the traditional media to justify their own passiveness.

Meanwhile, the developing social media and networks can obviously offer Georgian society a much greater role than the one played by political parties.

⁴ See: "ODKB vozmet'sya za sotsialnye seti; Revolutsii budut predotvrashchat cherez Facebook and Twitter," *Izvestia*, 12 September, 2011, available at [<http://www.izvestia.ru/news/500269>].

The social media and networks articulate political interests, ideas, and slogans, while the traditional media in Georgia have always been (since the 1990s) talking and writing about what interests the actors actively involved in the political processes (the political elites, people in power, the opposition, etc.) rather than society; the people remained silent. Nothing has changed since that time: very much as before, the traditional media are serving the people in power.

The social media has crystallized real public opinion, which has nothing to do with the interests of all sorts of political circles and groups. Some think that in the future, confrontation with the authorities will no longer follow the old pattern typical of Georgia: dominating political leaders and a potential messiah. Confrontation, which could develop into a revolution, will begin at the grass-roots level with the social media playing an important role in the process.

We should bear in mind that Georgia ranks 88 among the 213 countries which use Facebook; it is more popular in Georgia than Twitter, MySpace, and others⁵; this is confirmed by several sources which cite more or less similar figures. In June 2011, for example, the number of Facebook users in Georgia was 615,960 (44 percent of them men and 56 percent women)—a huge figure for a country with a population of about 4,500 thousand. It should be said that the absolute majority of users are young people, the most active population group.

The age distribution of Facebook users in Georgia is as follows:

13-15	— 8 percent;
16-17	— 8 percent;
18-24	— 36 percent;
25-34	— 27 percent;
35-44	— 12 percent;
45-54	— 5 percent;
55-64	— 1 percent;
over 65	— 2 percent.⁶

The Internet Media— Second Wind for Freedom of Speech in Georgia

The media in Georgia are developing at a slower rate than the social networks, however an ever growing number of journals, newspapers, and agencies are opening their online versions and posting information on Facebook and in blogs. Youtube is used to exchange video information. According to Freedom House, many of the Georgian journalists employed by the traditional media lack the necessary knowledge and experience to use the latest Internet technologies with good results.

Some think that in Georgia (and elsewhere for that matter) social and other types of media are locked in uncompromising rivalry, however in Georgia TV has been always regarded as the main source

⁵ See: "Top Sites in Georgia," *Alexa*, available at [<http://www.alexa.com/topsites/countries/GE>], 20 September, 2010.

⁶ [www.socialbakers.com].

of news (even though it was hugely biased). A poll conducted in 2011 by one of the Georgian research groups revealed that although 70 percent of the republic's population prefer social networks and 45 percent use the Internet to obtain information (in 2009, these people comprised 34 percent of the total population), only 5 percent of the total population regard the Internet as the main source of news; this means that it comes after TV; 11 percent (twice as many as in 2009) describe it as a source of news of secondary importance.⁷

As distinct from TV programs, newspapers which criticize the regime have to be bought; and in order to obtain detailed and objective information people have to pay for more than one newspaper. There is another negative factor: many of the newspapers support one of the politicians or parties and in this respect cannot compete with the Internet. They compete with one another, mainly for money.

In this way, the Internet cuts down newspaper sales; this, however, should not be taken to mean that people have lost interest in newspapers: all the traditional newspapers run their own sites with a stable Internet readership. Significantly, at no time have any of the newspapers in Georgia been able to sell more than several thousand copies; the Internet audience is much vaster. On the other hand, newspapers are losing money because access to their electronic versions is free.

We should take into account that at no time have the printed media enjoyed lucrative incomes in Georgia; journalists (mainly students) have always worked and are working on raw enthusiasm. The owners or editors (in most cases one and the same person) manage to preserve the core of their editorial staff and remain in business on foreign grants.

The new information technologies created electronic newspapers and journals to be read online; they are highly popular. Today, people read more newspapers and journals (albeit online) than before; in Georgia, unlike in many other countries, the Internet does not compete with the traditional press but helps it reach its readers.

The TV audience, likewise, has acquired its own alternative in the form of the Internet and social networks; Internet TV, which is developing in Georgia, threatens the monopoly of the country's national TV company.

Nothing is known about the incomes and profits of the social media and about their share in countrywide advertising; in its report for 2011 Freedom House pointed out: "At present, most online media outlets find it difficult to attract advertisers," and expressed the hope that the situation will improve as the number of users grows.⁸ So far, the Internet media live on foreign grants, which have paid for several new online newspapers.

In recent years, Freedom House has been using the following criteria to measure the freedom of the Internet (apart from the traditional media):

1. Obstacles to access.
2. Limits on content.
3. Violations of user rights.

The 2011 rating described Georgia as "partially free;" Freedom House deemed it necessary, however, to point that "government censorship is not a major hindrance to Internet freedom in Georgia. Users can freely visit any website around the world, upload or download any content, and contact other users via forums, social-networking sites, and applications like instant messaging."⁹

The report goes on to say that "this was in contrast to the period in August 2008, during a brief military conflict with Russia, when the government blocked access to all Russian addresses (those

⁷ [<http://www.tabula.ge/article-5434.html>].

⁸ "Freedom on the Net 2011," Freedom House, available at [<http://www.freedomhouse.org/images/File/FotN/Georgia2011.pdf>].

⁹ *Ibidem*.

using the .ru country code), including the popular blogging service LiveJournal, in an effort to prevent users from receiving ‘unofficial’ information about the fighting. The move was also a response to attacks launched by Russian hackers against Georgian government websites.”¹⁰

The Georgian journalist community and part of the public interpreted this as an encroachment on information freedom.

“There is no law that specifically regulates Internet censorship or bans inappropriate content, such as pornography or violent material. The Law of Georgia on the Protection of Minors from Harmful Influence addresses gambling and violence, but it does not refer to online activities.”¹¹ The Georgian National Communications Commission (GNCC) is the country’s main regulator in this sphere.

Freedom House voiced its concern that legal vagueness can be used to restrict access to the Internet.

The Traditional Media on the Brink of Extinction

In July 2009, Vice President of the United States Joe Biden opened his address to the Georgian parliament with the following statement: “The revolution will end only when the media become completely free and completely professional.”¹²

Soon after that one of the Georgian media, the state-controlled Imedi TV Company, blundered once more. On 13 March, 2010, it issued so-called “simulated information” as part of its Special Report program that spoke of an alleged Russian invasion of Georgia. The program began at 08:00 p.m. when the audience habitually switches on for the Chronicle, the main information program. On 13 March, it reported that Russians had bombed airports and sea ports, causing numerous casualties, that three Georgian battalions had gone over to the enemy, and that President Saakashvili had been liquidated. The pictures of the calamity carried no warning, they merely suggested what could happen in the event of a resumed military conflict with Russia.

Many of those who had missed the beginning and had not heard the warning panicked and poured into the streets; they gathered on squares in anticipation of Russian tanks, which, according to the TV report, were already at Tbilisi’s doorstep.

Very soon, however, it became clear that the government was merely “experimenting” in order to find out how the public, political parties, and even some of those close to the people at the top might respond to Russian aggression. This unprecedented experiment and the public’s response revealed the extent to which the Georgian electronic media could manipulate the masses. This “simulated information issue” of the Georgian TV Company (under the title “Georgia on Everyone’s Mind”) climbed to the top of the list of the “Top 10 Shocking Hoaxes” run by the *Time* journal.¹³ It pushed aside the previous leader—Orson Welles’ radio adaptation of the classic H.G. Wells novel *The War of the Worlds*. Performed by Welles’ Mercury Theatre on the Air as a Halloween special on 30 October, 1938 (and aired over the Columbia Broadcasting System radio network), the radio play—which took the form of a series of faux newscasts—caused many listeners to believe that an actual alien invasion was taking place. Millions of Americans rushed around looking for shelters for their families. The American authorities went on the air to call on the people to stop panicking and go back home since the threat

¹⁰ “Freedom on the Net 2011.”

¹¹ *Ibidem*.

¹² [www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=21283&search=biden%20parliament].

¹³ [http://www.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1931133_1931132_1972067,00.html].

had been nothing more than an advert gimmick by director and star Orson Welles who arranged the book into a direct report from the place where men from Mars had landed. He never expected such a disastrous response.

The Georgian company apologized, while its director remained convinced that such developments could not be excluded: “If in late 1920,” he argued, “television, non-existent at that time, broadcasted a simulation of what happened in February 1921 (when Soviet Russia occupied Georgia.— *B.Ch.*), many more Georgians would be forewarned and many more determined to rebuff the enemy.”

In 2010, Freedom House ranked Georgia (along with Moldova) 118th among 196 countries of the world in terms of freedom of the press (in 2009 Georgia was 126th). The local expert community explains the country’s progress and the much healthier editorial policy of the Public Broadcaster of Georgia by the methodological and financial assistance of BBC and the EU. Very much as in previous years, Georgia found itself on the brink beyond which it would be among the countries which were “not free.”

After the Rose Revolution, the dynamics of the freedom of the media looked as following:

YEAR	PLACE	SCORE	STATUS
2004	114	54	Partly free
2005	116	56	Partly free
2006	118	57	Partly free
2007	121	57	Partly free
2008	129	60	Partly free
2009	129	59	Partly free
2010	118	55	Partly free. ¹⁴

In 2011, Freedom House included the disputed territories (Abkhazia and South Ossetia among others) in its survey: the former was rated as “partly free,” the latter as “not free.”

In 2012, Georgia might move several points lower compared to the 2011 figures: in the summer 2011, the electronic media (private owned radio and some of the TV stations which cover the capital and environs and which criticize the authorities) were pushed into a quandary. The authorities transferred (without preliminary warning) control of the Tbilisi TV tower (an object of strategic importance) to a private company (the only one that took part in the tender) for 110 thousand lari. The new owner is duty bound to preserve the tower’s profile for the next 4 years. This means that the private company loyal to the authorities may raise tariffs to a level outside the reach of independent channels.

After the Rose Revolution, foreign donors, which discerned democratic developments in the country, cut down their financial aid to the Georgian media; after several years, in 2010, they resumed their support. This means that, dissatisfied with the state of freedom of the press in the country, the West had decided to remedy the situation. This is being done to restore the trust in the Georgian media by developing professional skills, independence, and a politically balanced media sector. USAID, for example, started a four-year program called Georgian Media Enhance Democracy, Informed Citizenry and Accountability (G-MEDIA); the European Union allocated large sums to improve the quality and availability of news and information on new and traditional platforms produced by professionals with new skills and by citizen contributors.¹⁵ Since 2010, international donors have been extending

¹⁴ Based on annual reports of Freedom House.

¹⁵ [<http://irex.ge/programs/media/gmedia>].

large-scale financial support to the Georgian media, including traditional media. For the first time, the Internet and new media technologies are receiving a great deal of attention.

More often than not, however, the money lands in a narrow circle of journalist syndicates that specialize in fund-raising rather than professional services.

Today, much is being done to raise a new generation of journalists; society refuses to look at the older generation as members of a free profession (this is true even of those employed by the opposition media) since they have to follow the political preference of the editors-in-chief.

Robert Parsons, a veteran of international journalism who worked for the BBC and Radio Liberty and who, in the summer of 2011, left the post of Director General of the First Caucasian Channel (Georgian Russian-language TV Channel), said that the media which “at the moment dominate the media scene in Georgia are already the dinosaurs of the media. For sure, before very long they are going to be extinct” and that “one set of channels says one thing and, in response to this, you get something almost as extreme on the other side.”¹⁶

Conclusion

Further development of the social media and networks will promote civil-minded journalism because practically all Internet users become journalists with no editor above them and no censorship to take into account: they are free to disseminate all kinds of information, even if it is unreliable. On the one hand, there is the danger that the social networks might be used to discredit politicians or political groups. On the other, the authorities have long been using the national TV channels to discredit their opponents. The social media, therefore, provide the opponents with a chance to popularize their values and political ideas.

New media and wider social networks will help to overcome monopolization of public consciousness, which is best described as a “natural calamity.” The times when the audience of strictly controlled electronic media had to constantly watch the same personalities presented as the true representatives of civil society have ended. The social media encourage civil society and push people with leadership talents to the fore.

Today, the social networks allows their multimillion audience to freely circulate their ideas, describe their civil principles, find new friends, etc. (active Facebook users have thousands of “friends”).

At all times the media have been described as an instrument of information and entertainment. In Georgia, entertainment and propaganda will remain the main missions of the national channels, while information will emigrate to the social and Internet media.

¹⁶ [<http://en.tabula.ge/?p=5677>].