

# Armenia Online: *Activism or slacktivism?*

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## Abstract

*The development of the internet in Armenia has been frustrated by the problematic privatization of the ArmenTel monopoly in the late 1990s. Closed borders with Azerbaijan and Turkey have exacerbated the problem, making connection speeds the slowest and most expensive in the region, though how this has actually affected internet penetration remains unclear. Despite these problems, usage is increasing, notably since the mid-late 2000s, when three cellular phone companies entered the domestic market.*

*Given constraints on media freedoms and freedom of expression, many independent and pro-opposition news outlets are reliant on the internet as the only means to disseminate alternative information to the population. For example, blogs also moved in to fill the information gap when a 20-day state of emergency imposed restrictions on mass media activity following post-presidential election clashes in 2008 which left 10 people dead. As a result, international donors are increasingly interested in funding online media projects in Armenia.*

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Armenia was once known as the “Silicon Valley of the Soviet Union”. Nowadays, however, internet development there is problematic, even in comparison to its immediate neighbors. Although the government has prioritized the IT sector as an area of economic and development importance, internet penetration was reported to be the lowest in the region until recently. According to the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), it stood at just 6.4 percent in September 2009<sup>1</sup>, compared to 18 percent in Azerbaijan<sup>2</sup> and 22.2 percent in Georgia<sup>3</sup> the same year.

Unexpectedly, however, the following year the Armenian government submitted its own statistics to the ITU which put internet penetration at 47.1 percent, compared to 44.4 percent in Azerbaijan and 28.3 percent in Georgia. The argument that the huge increase was due to an increase in the use of mobile internet by cell phone subscribers was deemed unconvincing, with many people remaining skeptical, based on the relatively low number of users on the popular social networking site, Facebook. Although it is one of the most frequently accessed sites in the country, there are just 208,800 users in Armenia co-

pared with 655,700 in Georgia at the time of writing.

A recent household survey<sup>4</sup> by the Caucasus Resource Research Center (CRRC) put internet penetration at just under 20 percent, though it did confirm significant growth in the activation of online services via mobile phone. Reports that high-speed, low-cost internet from Turkey would be available in the event of Ankara and Yerevan normalizing relations came to nothing after attempts to establish diplomatic relations in 2010 stalled, and so the majority of Armenia’s internet service continues to come from the Trans-Asia-Europe fiber-optic cable system via Georgia<sup>5</sup>, with the rest mainly from Iran.

The situation is not ideal, given that fiber optic cables are vulnerable to damage, and disruptions on the Georgian side involving outages of a few days are known to occur.

In March 2011, for example, a 75 year old ethnic Armenian woman in Georgia accidentally cut off the internet for 90 percent of Armenia<sup>7</sup>, as well as parts of Georgia and Azerbaijan, reportedly while digging for copper

1 *Internet World Stats, Armenia*  
<http://www.internetworldstats.com/asia/am.htm>

2 *Internet World Stats, Azerbaijan*  
<http://www.internetworldstats.com/asia/az.htm>

3 *Internet World Stats, Georgia*  
<http://www.internetworldstats.com/asia/ge.htm>

4 *Facebakers, Facebook Statistics by Country*  
<http://www.socialbakers.com/facebook-statistics/>

5 *Epress, Internet Penetration in Armenia Tripled in Past 2 Years: Caucasus Barometer*  
<http://www.epress.am/en/2011/04/12/internet-penetration-in-armenia-tripled-in-past-2-years-caucasus-barometer.html>

6 *Telecommunications in Armenia*  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Telecommunications\\_in\\_Armenia#International\\_System](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Telecommunications_in_Armenia#International_System)

7 *Georgian woman cuts off web access to whole of Armenia*  
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/apr/06/georgian-woman-cuts-web-access>

wire. The situation stems from the lack of diplomatic relations with Azerbaijan and Turkey, its neighbors to the east and west respectively. Locked in a stalemate with Baku over Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, a major obstacle to the country's economic development in general, the two borders remain closed, making Armenia extremely reliant on Georgia.

The situation took a turn for the worse with the indifference of Armenian businessmen to the 2009 auction of Georgian Railway Telecom (GRT),<sup>8</sup> the company responsible for much of the internet traffic coming into Armenia. Critics argue that buying shares in GRT would have increased bandwidth and reduced tariffs. ArmenTel, the country's main provider of telecommunication services, uses most of the bandwidth from the six other lines through which internet is brought into Armenia for its own national interest purposes. This Soviet-era company- controversially privatized in 1998- has shown itself to be one of the biggest obstacles to internet development in Armenia.<sup>9</sup>

Granted a 15 year monopoly on tele-

<sup>8</sup> *Internet Cable Servicing Armenia was Sold, No Armenian Bidders Participated in Auction*  
<http://www.armeniadiaspora.com/news/881-internet-cable-servicing-armenia-was-sold-no-armenian-bidders-participated-in-auction.html>

<sup>9</sup> *Armenia's Greek-owned telecommunications operator put up for sale*  
[http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no\\_cache=1&tx\\_nnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=31856](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_nnews%5Btt_news%5D=31856)

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phone and Internet services in the country by the government, ArmenTel has failed to invest significantly in the country's Soviet-era communications system, causing major setbacks to the development of the sector, which lags years behind its neighbors. Thus ArmenTel maintained its monopoly on internet service providers, setting prices too high for re-sellers to offer lower cost Internet services to the population. It was not until 2004 that the monopoly was partially lifted, opening up the market to other cell phone companies. In particular, the appearance of VivaCell, which offers mobile internet in addition to standard cell phone services, has dramatically changed the situation.

ArmenTel's monopoly collapsed almost entirely in 2007, with the exception of domestic landlines. The arrival of mobile internet was a significant development, given the constraints on the the local economy and

the relatively poor access to computers. In line with the international trend, the number of mobile internet subscribers rose significantly, with official statistics putting the number of internet-capable phones at 1.5 million<sup>10</sup>, although it is uncertain how many are actually used for going online. These figures should also be treated with some caution, given how cheap and readily available SIM cards are for tourists.

In addition, many Armenians use multiple providers, which further complicates the picture.

Even so, the market is sure to gain more attention, especially with the arrival of the French Orange company in Armenia, increasing the number of cellular phone companies to three, the other being the Russian Beeline alongside VivaCell. Indeed, many analysts believe that it is mobile internet that is more likely to empower citizens, rather than traditional domestic broadband services. Nonetheless, 13,500 domains were registered in the .AM zone last year<sup>11</sup> and internet services are available in most major urban centers in Armenia, with around 100 ISPs believed to be offering connections.

Wimax is also available in Yerevan and 18 other cities, and it is intending to introduce country-wide coverage

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<sup>10</sup> Over 1.5 million internet users listed in Armenia  
<http://www.panarmenian.net/eng/details/56422/>

<sup>11</sup> News.am, Armenian domain market needs development  
<http://www.armeniadiaspora.com/news/1822-armenian-domain-market-needs-development.html>

in the near future. Additionally, free wifi is available in many locations in the center of the Yerevan, though its quality varies widely. 3G connectivity is offered by all of the cellular phone companies, but, as mentioned above, the number of enabled handsets in circulation remains uncertain.

### **Engaging the Masses?**

Despite serious problems with bandwidth and connection speeds, the Armenian government does at least appear to be prioritizing the development of the internet. The Broadband Armenia project is seeking to install the necessary infrastructure for higher speeds and more reliable internet connectivity throughout the country, in partnership with the private sector. The initiative is seen as particularly important for the development of the country's IT sector, as well as laying the foundations for e-society and e-commerce. The government has also stated its aim to link all primary and secondary schools through an online education network by the end of 2011.

As of last year, 624 schools were connected to the internet as part of the World Bank funded project, but 750 remain offline.<sup>12</sup> Although attempts to introduce internet and computer technologies as a means of advancing education and democratization are progressing, there are still some areas of concern. Internet security,

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<sup>12</sup> PanArmenian, Government plans to further expand IT in the educations system  
<http://www.panarmenian.net/eng/details/44727/>

for example, is particularly important in light of the unresolved conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the Nagorno-Karabakh. A tit-for-tat hacking war of attrition<sup>13</sup> has become as much a part of the continuing hostilities as regular skirmishes on the frontline.

As a result, the National Security Council in Armenia considers internet security as one of its areas of concern.<sup>14</sup> Plans to install equipment to monitor and protect against potential online attacks have proven particularly controversial; some civil society activists fear that such equipment could also be used to monitor political opponents or critics. Given the use of new media during Armenia's last presidential election as well as the use of social media during uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa earlier this year, such concerns are probably valid.

The 2008 presidential elections, which led to ten days of street protests against the official victory of President Serge Sargsyan, are seen by some to have encouraged greater use of the internet in Armenia. The protests, led by Armenia's first president Levon Ter-Petrossian (now leader of the extra-parliamentary opposition) resulted in violent clashes with po-

lice and security forces on March 1<sup>st</sup> 2008. Ten people were killed and a 20-day state of emergency was declared.<sup>15</sup> During that time, all media was censored and publication was restricted to official government press releases and news. Sites such as Radio Free Europe and even YouTube<sup>16</sup> were also temporarily blocked.

Yet despite the government's attempt to control news and information, blogs were left untouched, with many activists and media outlets using them to circumvent the restrictions. In fact, some observers likened their role in the post-election environment to that of samizdat during the Soviet era.<sup>17</sup> In much the same way, while some blogs generated and published their own pro-opposition information, others instead used their own resources and information to increase their reach. The heavily polarized environment on the ground was also replicated in cyberspace with pro-government bloggers spreading information against the opposition or posting updates in support of the newly elected president.

In fact, during the state of emergency, the president-elect launched his own blog on the LiveJournal platform (a network popular among bloggers

13 Nagorno-Karabakh Dispute Takes to Cyber Space  
<http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav020807a.shtml>

14 The Armenian Observer, Armenia plans measures to beef up cyber security  
<http://ditord.com/2009/05/05/armenia-plans-measures-to-beef-up-cyber-security/>

15 Armenia Liberty, At Least Eight Killed In Armenian Post-Election Unrest  
<http://www.azatutyun.am/content/article/1593576.html>

16 YouTube Blocked in Armenia?  
<http://blogoscoped.com/archive/2008-03-10-n27.html>

17 Global Voices, Armenia: Samizdat & the Internet  
<http://globalvoicesonline.org/2008/03/05/armenia-samizdat-the-internet/>

writing in the Armenian and Russian languages) where the public could ask him questions.<sup>18</sup> The questions were not answered live, but on March 13<sup>th</sup>, a two-hour tape was aired in its entirety on Armenian Public TV. A prominent pro-government blogger was among a handful of loyal journalists invited to read out the questions to Sargsyan.

Naturally, international organizations and donors noticed the use of blogs during the state of emergency and started to promote and support their use in existing media development programs. The U.S. Embassy in Armenia is currently funding a four year \$4 million program to be implemented by Internews, Yerevan Press Club and the Eurasia Partnership Foundation to develop alternative media resources online.<sup>19</sup> The project aims to strengthen the regional media, particularly through individuals who serve as content producers using high and low technology solutions including mobile phones and pocket video cameras.

Nevertheless, the success of new media development is contingent on the internet as a delivery system, notably its speed and cost to end-users. More significantly, however, is that interest in blogs from online users has

18 *Ahousekeeper, Serge Sargsyan Q&A*  
<http://ahousekeeper.livejournal.com/189078.html>

19 USAID, *Alternative Resources in the Media*  
<http://armenia.usaid.gov/en/node/269>

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decreased significantly in the aftermath of the emergency rule period in 2008. Reflecting an already polarized media environment divided between pro-government and pro-opposition voices, most blogs were duplicating news already available in the mainstream media. Even though Freedom House rates the media situation in Armenia as ‘Not Free,’<sup>20</sup> there is in fact a plurality of pro-government and opposition views represented online. From this perspective, the problem is not so much the volume of alternative information in Armenia, but rather the constricted access to it on the part of citizens.

Social media sites such as Facebook have also changed the dynamic of online media, rapidly taking over from blogs as the primary medium for sharing news, opinion and information online. Even so, there are concerns that that the phenomena of *slacktivism*<sup>21</sup>, i.e. demonstrating sup-

20 Freedom House *Calls on Armenia to Liberalize Its Broadcast Media*  
<http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=70&release=1293>

21 NetEffect, *The brave new world of slacktivism*  
[http://neteffect.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2009/05/19/the\\_brave\\_new\\_world\\_of\\_slacktivism](http://neteffect.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2009/05/19/the_brave_new_world_of_slacktivism)

port for a cause simply by clicking a button does not necessarily translate into real world action; thus social media may have limited impact in organizing and coordinating pro-democracy actions on the ground. Attempts by the opposition in Armenia to stage post-MENA protests calling for fresh parliamentary and presidential elections illustrated this phenomenon all too clearly. Encouraged by protests in Tunisia and Egypt, the opposition also declared that it would stage a 'Facebook Revolution' in Armenia, but in the end, few signed up to the various Facebook pages set up to attract support.<sup>22</sup>

Even so, the numbers taking to the streets were significantly higher than in Azerbaijan, where the use of Facebook by activists is arguably more evolved, reaching as many as 15,000 at times, demonstrating that traditional activism in Armenia remains the best way to engage the population, especially given that only 7.04 percent of its population are Facebook users. That figure is even smaller for micro-blogging sites such as Twitter, which is scarcely used at all.

Having said that, the Armenian Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) community offers a compelling example of how community empowerment that can be achieved through new media tools.<sup>23</sup> A similar

<sup>22</sup> *Global Voices, Armenia: Social Networks for Social Revolution?* <http://globalvoicesonline.org/2011/02/26/armenia-social-networks-for-revolution/>

<sup>23</sup> *Armenian Bloggers aim to diversify media, bolster civil society* <http://wikileaks.org/cable/2009/11/09YEREVAN790.html>

point was made in a U.S. Embassy cable recently released by Wikileaks, which noted the potential for national minorities and environmental activists to also use online tools for empowerment, particularly in terms of raising awareness of their causes.

LGBT bloggers, alongside gender activists working to combat the problem of domestic violence, are using these new tools to cover issues that are ignored, or inadequately or inaccurately portrayed by the traditional media.<sup>24</sup> This is perhaps the one area where blogs continue to play an important role, with social media and micro-blogging sites like Twitter serving as the primary channel for sharing this information with the greatest number of people. In a deeply patriarchal and homophobic society, it can be argued that online tools are the *main* medium for disseminating and discussing such issues, though this is not to say that the audience in question is particularly large.

The difficulty of audience size is true even for bigger media outlets now publishing online in an attempt to dissolve the near total monopoly of the broadcast media by the government or businessmen close to the regime. Few of these sites attract more than 10,000 visits per day, according to the Circle.am ranking site, and alternative views on matters of significant importance are still for the most part absent from their pages.

<sup>24</sup> *Global Voices, Armenia: LGBT Blogs* <http://globalvoicesonline.org/2008/07/08/armenia-lgbt-blogs/>

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The absence of alternative coverage is particularly true in relation to the ongoing conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh. Because the internet is used to spread partisan and sometimes nationalist propaganda, there is also a tendency to view the internet as an important tool in the information war between Armenia and Azerbaijan, which shows no sign of abating.

Armenia-Turkey relations also tend to attract the attention of bloggers, as opposed to domestic or other international political events. Indeed, bloggers and hackers from Armenia, Azerbaijan and Turkey regularly engage in a mutual denial-of-service attacks (DDoS) and the issue has become even more important given Georgia's experience during the 2008 August war with Russia, when internet and mobile services were deliberately overloaded to bring them down.<sup>25</sup> The Armenian government and pro-regime or nationalist bloggers, now often found holding press

conferences as 'information security analysts', are even more aware of the danger of an escalation in the Armenian-Azerbaijani cyber warfare.

That is not to say that new media has no role to play in the internal processes of Armenia, however. Indeed, as the events of March 2008

showed, there is significant potential. Facebook continues to be an invaluable platform for news and information sharing between users and for organizing albeit small grassroots protests, petitions and flashmobs, and if some Azerbaijani youth are using social networking sites to voice their discontent with their government, the same is true to a lesser extent in Armenia.

Of arguably greater importance, however, is the way in which Facebook has empowered the people in between the government and opposition camps. The most successful use of social media to date has been in non-politicized, non-opposition campaigns.

For example, mobile phone videos posted on YouTube depicting the bullying of pupils by teachers in State-run schools<sup>26</sup> resulted in changes in the education system, and throughout 2010, in highly publicized incidents, hazing in the Armenian military caused outrage among many citi-

<sup>25</sup> Wired, Estonia, Google Help 'Cyberlocked' Georgia (Updated)  
<http://www.wired.com/dangerroom/2008/08/civilge-the-geo/>

<sup>26</sup> Global Voices, Armenia: Abuse in Yerevan School  
<http://globalvoicesonline.org/2010/10/11/armenia-abuse-in-yerevan-school/>



zens<sup>27</sup>, with Facebook users being particularly vocal. An online campaign against the demolition of a Soviet-era open-air cinema to make room for the construction of a church<sup>28</sup>, another to protest the introduction of foreign language schools<sup>29</sup> in Armenia, both attracted cross-party support to a much greater degree than any action staged by the parliamentary or extra-parliamentary opposition.

The new Mayor of Yerevan has also taken to Facebook, with serious discussions appearing on numerous aspects of municipal policy, such as the shooting of stray dogs on the streets of the Armenian capital.<sup>30</sup> It is this sphere that international consultants working on donor-funded projects appear now to be focusing on, with a number of projects underway, such as one based on the popular UK-based 'Fix My Street' launched to allow citizens to report problems of potholes and garbage directly to the local authorities. A website which aims to facilitate better communication and cooperation between citizens and local officials will be piloted in

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27 Global Voices, Armenia: Army forced to act after hazing video circulates online <http://globalvoicesonline.org/2010/09/24/armenia-army-forced-to-act-after-hazing-video-circulates-online/>

28 Global Voices, Armenia: SOS Save Cinema Moscow's Open Hall <http://globalvoicesonline.org/2010/03/08/armenia-s-o-s-save-cinema-moscows-open-hall/>

29 Ararat, The Debate Over Foreign-Language Schools in Armenia <http://araratmagazine.org/2011/03/debate-over-foreign-language-schools-armenia/>

30 Global Voices, Armenia: Animal Activists Demand End to Stray Dog Killings <http://globalvoicesonline.org/2011/06/28/armenia-animal-activists-demand-end-to-stray-dog-killings/>

three regional cities of Armenia, with GPS positioning from mobiles used to map the towns themselves.

The Yerevan office of the Open Society Institute (OSI) is already technically supporting NGOs in adopting online technologies and developing custom-designed sites to use in their advocacy and activism work. Transparency International, for example, is reportedly working on incorporating new and social media to draw attention to environmental problems in the country and to monitor and combat corruption. Even so, with new election cycles almost upon Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia in 2012 and 2013, there is no doubt that social media is set to play a very important role in the political life of the country. Whether such projects will result in any immediate change remains to be seen, but the coming elections will surely offer the best opportunity to assess its actual impact.

In early 2010, local election violations in Georgia were mapped online in real-time<sup>31</sup> and it seems likely that such a system could be implemented in the 2012 and 2013 elections in Armenia. Facebook, Google+, and Twitter will also prove invaluable tools for politicians and civil society activists alike to reach out to citizens. What remains to be seen, however, is whether given the post-2008 presidential election experience, the Ar-

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31 Global Voices, Georgia: Social Media deployed for local elections <http://globalvoicesonline.org/2010/06/03/georgia-social-media-deployed-for-local-elections/>

menian government will seek to control news and information online, and how it might attempt to do so. But perhaps the main lesson to be learned from the past few years is simpler.

Despite low Internet penetration in Armenia, which will naturally improve over time, the issue is not whether such tools will be increasingly used in political life, but rather how and by whom.