

Georgian Media & Georgian Facebook

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Abstract

The article covers Georgia's media problems and the challenges it faces in the establishment of civil society. The author sets out the context of the 2003 Rose Revolution, when Georgian society rose in rebellion, refusing to forgive the ruling power for the errors made during the parliamentary elections. The author argues that while the current administration is ostentatious in displaying its recognition of basic democratic values: rule of law, free media, primacy of property rights, it is simultaneously utilizing all available means to establish control over the media. This begins with hidden censorship and crude meddling in editorial strategy, and runs to encouraging corrupt systems in media outlets. This is an effective way to destroy media credibility in the eyes of the nation. One of the central arguments of the article is that government-controlled capital has not yet reached media outlets of this type and newspapers in particular are in grave financial straits; the level of independence of their editorial policy is much higher.

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On November 22-23, 2003 a coup d'état best known as the Rose Revolution took place in Georgia. Society rose up in rebellion, refusing to forgive the errors the ruling party had made during the parliamentary elections: inaccurate voter lists, high levels of fraud, manipulation of election results, etc. and the uprising prevented the newly elected parliament from commencing operations. Citizens and leaders of the opposition, including Mikheil Saakashvili, burst into the Parliament Session Hall with roses in their hands, disrupting the first meeting of the legislative body so swiftly that it scarcely had a chance to establish its legitimacy. President Eduard Shevardnadze resigned from office, ending his eleven-year presidency (1992-2003).

Mikheil Saakashvili's first presidential term lasted four years instead of five, as written in the constitution. The political crisis of October-November 2007 forced him to call snap presidential elections. In the January 5th 2008 elections, Mikheil Saakash-

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vili won 53.47 percent of the votes, while Levan Gachechiladze, his opponent from the United Opposition party, received 25.69 percent.

These two political events have substantially contributed to the trajectory of Georgia's democratic devel-

opment over the course of the past eight years. The current administration proudly broadcasts its recognition of basic democratic values: rule of law, free media, the primacy of property rights. The legislative framework supports these claims. In reality, however, the actions of the government signal elements of authoritarian rule- peculiarities of the transitional period, according to the administration. Regardless, democratic institutions, including the objective media, are stuck in a developmental stasis.

The year of 2012-2013 represents a crucial point in Georgia's social and political life. The country will elect a new parliament and a new government, in addition to switching over to a new system of governance, that is, a parliamentary system, involving the election of a new president, and implementation of a new constitution. The people are wondering whether Saakashvili himself will remain in power, or whether he will be replaced by a prominent member of his team, or indeed whether there will be a total shift in the political power dynamic.

Over the course of the past seven years, the administration has showed that it not only can but is actually willing to coexist with criminal groups. It manages this coexistence through autocratic control and by monopolizing corrupt transactions. The administration is well aware that its main risk lies in a well-informed society; a society is well-informed only when there exists a robust, pluralistic and

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unbiased media. Thus the administration is utilizing all available means to establish control over the media: starting with hidden censorship and crude meddling in editorial strategy and ending with encouraging corrupt systems in media. This is an effective way to strip media credibility in the eyes of society. The level of media freedom has substantially decline during this seven year period.

In order to ensure freedom of media in Georgia, it is necessary to:

- Protect independent editorial policy from not only government intervention but also interference by media-owners;
- Develop a transparent system for the dissemination of public information;
- Support the development of media outlets as independent businesses, which will eliminate the issue of political affiliations and restrict the flow of capital of unknown origin into media outlets.

These are mandatory conditions for the development of free media.

Media Environment

Citizens use all types of media to access information, though the frequen-

cy of their use varies. Television is very often utilized as a source of information. According to the latest poll conducted by the Caucasus Research Resource Center (CRCC), 85 percent of respondents said that television was their primary source of information. Of course, citizens do use newspapers, radio and the internet, but their audience share is modest in comparison to that of television. The level of trust in information is high among internet users; however, the number of internet users is low. Internet users prefer fora and other social networks as their sources of information, and the vast majority of internet users seek out these virtual locations, which serves as further proof that society does often trust ‘word of mouth’ and unverified information. For example, from November 7th through to November 17th, when the government declared a state of emergency and all television channels were prohibited from broadcasting news bulletins, the internet served as the country’s main source of information. The same goes for the August 2008 war, although internet access more limited then.

Information currently disseminated by television is very much shaped by the author’s subjective position, commentary and opinion; this is less true for information disseminated by radio and news agencies. This type of information delivery indicates a low standard of professionalism. Additionally, it impedes the development

of independent public opinion and turns the media into a propaganda tool, which contributes to the polarization of the political environment. Instead of being left to exercise their own judgment in evaluating an event or issue, viewers are forced either to accept or reject an a priori judgment. Accordingly, instead of informing public opinion, media, especially electronic media, disseminate and propagate pre-formulated opinions.

Nationwide television channels are presently available in 92 percent of Georgian territory. The de facto territory does not include the autonomies of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which together make up 18 percent of the entire territory. Ninety-five percent of the population lives in the broadcast coverage area, and thus are able to receive a television signal free of charge (not to be confused with indirect expenses related to electrical power or the Public Broadcaster's share of GDP to the amount of 0.12 percent). The largest share in the broadcast market belongs to over-the-air broadcast television (70.7 percent), while cable television holds 19 percent, and 10.23 percent belongs to radio broadcasters.

Georgian legislation prohibits the state from owning media outlets. Nevertheless, owners of nearly all influential print media outlets are business partners of the state. Their business success depends directly on their relationship with the state. The administration has managed to grad-

ually establish control over the activity of these businessmen.

During the events of November 2003, the television company *Rustavi 2* was the most opposition-minded of the channels. Refusing to remain between neutral, it opted to ally itself with the political opposition. This decision seriously damaged its reputation, along with the functionality of media as a whole. *Rustavi 2* has changed ownership several times since, presently making up a single media-holding together with television company *Mze* and the entertainment channel *First Stereo*. The holding is jointly owned by the offshore company *Dixon Ltd*, registered on the Virgin Islands, and another offshore company, *Georgian Industrial Group*, previously (prior to its offshore registration) owned by Davit Bezhuashvili, a member of the Georgian Parliament. Bezhuashvili's main business interests include bituminous coal, metallurgy, cement, and natural gas. He comes from a political family; his brother, Gela Bezhuashvili, was Minister of Internal Affairs of Georgia between 2005 and 2008, and later became Head of the Intelligence Department. Gogi Gegeshidze is the General Director of the television channel; Irakli Chikovani, Chairman of the Georgian National Communications Commission, is his business partner.

Businessman Badri Patarkatsishvili was the founder of the television company *Imedi*. In 2001, he returned

from Russia to establish his own television and radio broadcasting service. During the events of November 2007, *Imedi*, like *Rustavi 2* had done four years earlier chose a political alliance. But this time, it was the owner of *Imedi* himself who had political aspirations, and he actually ran for president in the [2008] snap election. The administration turned out to be much more radical than its predecessor: on November 7th, Special Forces stormed the television station, destroying property, insulting staff, and taking the channel off air. After international pressure and public protests, the television regained its right to broadcast. Later on, however, it ceased broadcasting of its own accord. After the retirement of Badri Patarkatsishvili, *Imedi* was handed over to private citizen Joseph Kay, who before long entrusted 90 percent of the shares first of all to offshore company *Rakia Georgia* (registered in Dubai) and then to the Georgian Media Enterprise Group (registered on the Marshall Islands). The former Minister of Economy, Giorgi Arveladze, is the channel's managing director.

The "tele-government" values form over content, popularity over consistency, effect over reason. After all, the current government came to power riding the wave of the tele-revolution; it simply does not know any other form of governance. It is for this reason that President Saakashvili made great efforts at the dawn of his

presidency to replace the owners of television stations with businessmen who supported him. As for businessmen owners of television stations, they were not particularly interested in the success of their media enterprises beyond their profitability. State funded television stations, on the other hand, are valuable instruments of manipulation in the hands of the administration:

1. Journalists are permanently anxious about their job security, of the owner being unable to pay their wages, of the television station being shut down because it is not profitable. A frightened journalist is unable to talk back to the media owner or the administration;
2. The owner is eager to tighten control over editorial policy to prevent the journalist from accidentally saying something that the administration will not like, thus straining the relationship between the administration and the owner;
3. The administration continually reminds journalists that they may be sacked by the owner at any time; therefore, if they wish to keep their jobs, they should not anger the administration.

Transparent media owners were gradually replaced by obscure offshore companies, which created "black holes" in the broadcasting business. At the insistence of the public, Parliament required broadcast licenses to transfer all shares presently owned

by offshore companies to residents of Georgia, thus making ownership transparent (deadline: December 31, 2011). This process has not yet begun. Members of parliament rejected proposals for reforms to increase financial transparency.

State-owned 'Adjara Television' and the 'Public Broadcaster of Georgia' are both very government-friendly. It would be unthinkable for any type of anti-government sentiment to appear on either of these channels. Private television channels *Rustavi 2* and *Imedi* serve as government propaganda tools. The government is aware that its propaganda campaign will be more powerful if it is supported by influential channels with a long broadcasting history. Television companies *Kavkasia* and *Maestro* retain their critical attitude towards the government.

Criticism of the government and skepticism toward official sources of information are characteristic of newspapers and radio stations. Government-controlled cash has not yet infiltrated the non-television sector of the media. Although these media outlets, especially newspapers, are in dire straits financially, their editorial policies enjoy significantly greater independence.

The total daily circulation of newspapers is between 70,000 and 110,000. Organizations and institutions represent the bulk of subscribers. Single-copy sales account for the largest

portion of total circulation. An average of four individuals read one copy, which means that between 300,000 and 400,000 people have daily contacts with Georgian print media (10-12 percent of the population older than fifteen). The newspaper-reading audience has been in decline since the 1970s.

While licensing is mandatory for television and radio companies to function, registration with the Revenue Service is the only formal requirement for a newspaper publication. The system for registration is very simple. A total of 88 newspapers are published in Georgia, 31 of them in Tbilisi. Only four newspapers are daily: *Rezonansi* (the most "seasoned" among Georgian newspapers, a politically moderate publication), *Akhali Taoba*, *24 Saati* (the government's most loyal newspaper), and *Sakartvelos Respublika* (former governmental newspaper). Their combined circulation is approximately 10,000 – 12,000 copies. *Versia* and *Alia* are published three times a week, and their total circulation is 8,000 – 10,000 copies. All four sports newspapers are published daily.

Weekly publications have a larger circulation, fluctuating between 25,000 and 60,000., including both newspapers (*Kviris Palitra*, *Kronika*, *Asaval-Dasavali*) and magazines (*Sarke*, *Tbiliselebi*, *Reitingi*, *Gza*). Weekly publications are known for a more 'tabloid' style of journalism.

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Publishers state that public demand and marketing considerations account for this.

The administration has almost never used methods of persecution against print media. This could be explained by the fact that the administration does not yet consider newspapers to have significant influence over public opinion. Newspaper circulation remains quite low, meaning that newspapers are low-profit businesses. The salaries of newspaper journalists are much lower than those of their television counterparts. President Saakashvili has said frequently that he does not read newspapers. The State Chancellery, ministries and local government bodies were strictly prohibited from subscribing to periodicals; this does constitute an indirect form of government persecution of print media. In July 2011, when tax compliance officers launched simultaneous inspections of six different enterprises owned by *Media Palitra* Holding, journalists and numerous individuals interpreted it as an act of reprisal and persecution. A single campaign initiated over the course of a single evening on Facebook alone, brought out 700 people to protest in the offices of *Media Palitra*. Although the tax inspection was not

terminated, it proceeded in accordance with legal standards and in a much more transparent manner than in which it had begun.

Internet Environment

The law presently makes no provision for restrictions on internet use. The Georgian National Communications Commission only regulates the rules of cable line services. There are several internet providers offering services that vary in quality, form and price. ADSL service fees are between 25 and 60 GEL (approximately 10 to 25 Euro). The level of accessibility of internet remains low in spite of the general trend of economic growth. The situation in the regions is especially lamentable in this regard: no modern telephone systems exist there and the standards of living are extremely low. There is also an issue surrounding age: the vast majority of the population aged over 45 are not familiar with computer technologies.

Trends are as follows: by the end of 2006, the total number of ADSL technology internet users had increased by almost 81 percent in comparison with 2005, reaching 27,700 users. Internet service is the second fastest growing segment in the communication service market today, beaten only by mobile service. In 2007, the number of ADSL technology internet users reached 75,000. ADSL technologies are used mainly by corporations, so the number of actual users can on average be quadrupled: 300,000 us-

ers (approximately 8.3 percent of the population aged over 15).

According to 2010 data, the number of registered internet users is 300 050. Technologies have also changed: besides DSL (55.8 percent), internet is also provided by means of fiber optic connection (28.7 percent). In its report, the Georgian National Communications Commission defines a “user” as a person who has received internet service in the last month of a given quarter. Even if several customers use one internet access device, they still count as a single user. Taking into account that one user in Georgia shares internet with several other people, the number of actual users should be much higher. According to ITU, the number of internet users reached 1,300,000 in 2010. In addition, 789 000 users began using mobile internet service in the last quarter of 2010.

Recorded revenues from internet service providers (ISPs) constituted 80 million GEL (approximately 35 million euro), while mobile internet service brought in 15 million GEL (approximately 6.4 million euro). According to www.netgazeti.ge, 90 percent of internet users live in big cities. Internet usage is picking up especially among youths under 15. All nationwide television channels have their own regularly updated websites (www.gpb.ge; www.ltv.ge; www.rustavi2.com; www.ime-dinews.ge). Several Georgian newspapers also have websites: *24 Saati-*

www.24saati.ge; *Asaval-Dasavali* – www.asavali.ge; *Rezonansi* – www.rezonancedaily.ge; *Alia* – www.alia.ge. There is also a website where electronic versions of various newspapers are uploaded: www.opentext.ge. These internet publications experience the same levels of government interference as their print publications.

News agencies also have websites. The most frequently visited website – www.ipn.ge – belongs to the agency *Interpresnews* (which, in turn, belongs to *Media Palitra* Holding). The same company owns a number of internet platforms, with www.ambebi.ge being particularly popular, with 17-18,000 unique daily visitors. The number of actual visitors is, of course, higher. These numbers are considered the highest in the Georgian internet market.

There are independent internet newspapers as well (www.netgazeti.ge; www.civil.ge), with average numbers of unique users between 2 500 and 4 000. Some internet publications that were popular three or four years ago are now losing ground (www.apsny.ge; www.iwpr.net; www.pankisi.info). There are also specialized websites (www.media.ge; www.humanrights.ge), the success of which is largely dependent on donor aid. Advertising is a rare exception in today’s internet publications.

Blogging has also become a more active domain. Unable to express

themselves through traditional media outlets, a great number of journalists have started blogging. The number of consistently active bloggers is several hundred; some of these bloggers have attracted five to eight thousand

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visitors in total. Of course, these are low figures in comparison with the 615 980 statistic - the number of Facebook users in Georgia as of June 2011.

According to a Freedom House assessment, Facebook is the most popular website in Georgia, providing liberally-oriented Georgian citizens with a platform for discussion and discourse. According to the 2011 Freedom House Report, social networking sites are gaining increasing status as sources of information. Although no website is blocked in Georgia, Freedom House deems Georgia to have only partial freedom of internet access, mentioning the story of two students detained in 2009 after posting an “offensive” video about the Catholicos-Patriarch of Georgia on YouTube. These youths were detained, and then released, though the confiscated hardware was never returned to them. Freedom House

also refers to amendments to the legislation ratified by the parliament in 2010; these amendments grant law enforcement agencies significant discretion in conducting surveillance. Depending on the requirements of

investigation, police can generally begin surveillance of personal correspondence, e-mail, and instant chat services without court approval.

The social media marketing and branding company <http://leavingstone.com> has developed an online resource to monitor statistical data on Georgian pages on Facebook. TBC Bank Smart Club Facebook page presently holds number one spot with 130 000 “likes”. The popularity of the page was determined by the competition and gifts the bank offered to new clients. Two Catholicos-Patriarch websites, websites of two deceased individuals: poet Niko Gomelauri and Georgian luger and Olympic contender Nodar Kumaritashvili, along with websites of singer Sofia Nizharadze and Charity Foundation *Iavnana* are among the top ten popular Georgian Facebook pages. It is interesting that the only media product among these top ten is Nanuka Zhorzholiani Show. There is broadcast on the television channel *Imedi*; the journalist herself actively engages with Facebook users, answering their questions and posting previews.

Information Environment

In January of this year, law enforcement officers broke up a protest – a hunger strike, started on Heroes' Square in Tbilisi, by veterans of wars for independence. This information was covered only by television companies *Maestro* and *Kavkasia*. Their audience consists mainly of Tbilisi residents. Later that evening, pictures were posted on Facebook, featuring a person in civilian clothing participating in the dispersal operation and physically assaulting a female protester. Discussion ensued; someone recognized the person in the picture and verified that it was Otar Gvenetadze, a police officer with the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA). The topic remained hot on social networks, but nationwide broadcasters ignored the story through January 3rd and 4th.

On January 5, I was in one of the high mountainous regions of Georgia, delivering training. I was watching the evening newscast together with the training participants. Residents of this region (like in most regions) can only watch Public Broadcaster newscasts. The *Moambe* anchor announced that by decree of the Minister of Internal Affairs, an MIA officer, Otar Gvenetadze, was being dismissed due to unethical behavior. This information was followed by a commentary from John Bass, Ambassador of the United States of America to Georgia, stating that freedom of expression is the holy of

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holies and that it was admirable that state services had reacted so swiftly to its violation. *Rustavi 2* and *Imedi* used the same format of information delivery. Viewers of the newscast were dumbfounded. They had no idea who Otar Gvenetadze was, what his crime was, why he had been fired, or why the minister's decree was on the news. These broadcasters never provided the viewer with relevant information on January 2nd in the first place, and failed again to provide the background in January 5th broadcasts.

On one hand, information seemed to have been provided, and the administration addressed an issue that had been raised on social networking sites. Nevertheless, the vast majority of the population of Georgia, that is, people who receive information from television, remained in ignorance.

The main problem for Georgian media is the superficial nature of coverage of decisions made by the administration. This fault is especially evident when journalists start arguing with government representatives, and, as usually happens, lose the dispute. The reason for their defeat is that evaluation government policy

requires specific knowledge and a level of understanding that journalists often lack. One of the challenges contemporary Georgian journalism faces is professionalism. Hosts of political and social talk-shows do not even bother looking into topics discussed by viewers. Thus discussion of Georgia's integration into NATO and a show on women's rights share the same lack of professionalism.

Polarized groups have been appearing in the virtual environment: "I vote for NATO membership" and "Georgia says NO to NATO". This is characteristic of post-Soviet society.

In 2007, the editorial meeting for broadcasting company *Rustavi 2* discussed the bombing of settlements in Zemo Abkhazia by unidentified aircraft. We decided to investigate the incident. One of the journalists asked me, "Yes, but would that serve the interests of the state?" Overzealous concern for "the interests of the state" has shackled the majority of journalists with the fetters of self-censorship. They have lost the ability to apply critical thinking towards any topic, even matters of national security.

Self-censorship illustrates how journalists and producers coordinate their work with various officials. In

many cases, there is no need to coordinate, as the position of these officials is known in advance, and shared between journalists. Searching for sources of information in various state and public institutions has been replaced by a single, static group of advisors and consultants who provide journalists with general trends and messages.

I have heard on many occasions that yes, we should deliver what the reader/viewer wants. But we risk forgetting the social responsibility of the media, to:

- Comply with professional standards and ethical norms in an unbiased manner;
- Introduce more liberal values;
- Abstain from introducing stereotypes. Dangerous stereotypes change public attitude, making the public easily manipulable, which serves the interests of the administration.

On March 13, 2010 the television company *Imedi* broadcast a drama of a fictional war, a documentary called "Props Chronicle". After the show, Giorgi Arveladze, the head of the channel, stated: "I do not want to refuse to defend the interests of the Georgian people, or the Georgian state, even if I am accused of being biased". He voiced a principle that journalists with a "state-oriented mentality" have been following for some time: *Journalists do not defend professional standards; they are defenders of the nation.*

These media-trends have also infiltrated social networks. Polarized groups have been appearing in the virtual environment: “I vote for NATO membership” and “Georgia says NO to NATO”; “I love my patriarch” and “I hate my patriarch”, and so forth. This is characteristic of post-Soviet society. Of course, certain individuals are able to achieve fulfillment through this process, but ongoing discussions prove unable to improve the level of public awareness. Thus of these active Facebook users: some remain faithful supporters of the postmodern worldview of the state; others are secret apologists for the ruling party; some hold on to pre-Christian beliefs- and everyone is happy with his role. Only then some intern at the Ministry of Internal Affairs who was denied a full-time job comes home angry and starts a new group: “New Revolution, Georgia, May, 2011”. He is aware of the Twitter revolutions in the Middle East, and yet he is unable to bring this awareness to bear on his own world. The very concept of these revolutions is: social networks should ensure awareness. Only then do they become a social medium and bring about changes in the social environment.

Georgian social networks have the opportunity to become social media before the 2012 parliamentary election. If they succeed, change awaits Georgian society.