

NO LAUGHING MATTER HUMOR AS A MEANS OF DISSENT IN THE DIGITAL ERA: THE CASE OF AUTHORITARIAN AZERBAIJAN

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Abstract: Oppositional political humor has a long history. With the growth of the Internet and social media, opposition groups can easily and affordably create and disseminate political humor, such as memes. This new capacity threatens authoritarian Azerbaijan and the regime severely punishes those who engage in online political humorous dissent, as the examples described in this article demonstrate. Interestingly, the regime has co-opted online political humorous content, especially memes, to achieve its own goals. Using Edward Schatz's "soft authoritarian tool kit" as a framework, we describe the humorous actions of the government.

Humor has long been a tool against oppression. From anti-Nazi comics¹ to the strategic use of humor as part of the Serbian *Otpor* movement in

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¹ Kathleen Stokker. 1996. "Hurry Home, Haakon: The Impact of Anti-Nazi Humor on the Image of the Norwegian Monarch." *The Journal of American Folklore* 109 (443): 289–307.

2000² to more recently in China,³ Zimbabwe,⁴ Syria,⁵ and Egypt,⁶ opposition groups have made humor a part of their platforms. Cartoons, videos, and puppets are just a few examples of how opposition groups have used humor as a tool. While some, like Benton,⁷ argue that jokes are only revolutions metaphorically, as they are simply moral victories, there is evidence that humor can make a difference in mobilization and dissent. In the digital era, where content can easily and cheaply be created and distributed, humorous dissent may play an even more important role for the opposition.

This article will first give conceptual definitions and illustrate the use of humorous political user-generated content for dissent in Azerbaijan, followed by the government's response with both its punishment of those who engage in digital dissent as well as the government's own humorous political digital content that attacks the opposition. Further, Azerbaijan provides an important case study of humorous political digital content because it is an authoritarian state in which the Internet is almost the exclusive platform for dissent.

Conceptual Definitions

Humor

Humorous content is any message that is delivered with the intention to be funny. At an individual level, people use humor as an expression of superiority, to relieve tension, and to deal with incongruity. But humor also has a social function – for example, creating identity or creating a sense of control.⁸

² Majken Jul Sorensen. 2008. "Humor as a Serious Strategy of Nonviolent Resistance to Oppression." *Peace & Change* 33 (2) (April): 167–190. doi:10.1111/j.1468-0130.2008.00488.x.

³ Alexander Neish Lugg. 2013. "Mantous and Alpacas as Weapons of the Weak: Chinese Spoof Video and Self-expression Online." *First Monday* 18 (7) (June 12). doi:10.5210/fm.v18i7.3885. <http://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/3885/3695>.

⁴ Jennifer Musangi. 2012. "'A Zimbabwean Joke Is No Laughing Matter': E-humour and Versions of Subversion." In *Crisis? What Crisis? Multiple Dimensions of the Zimbabwean Crisis*, edited by Sarah Helen Chiumbu and Muchaparara Musemwa, 161–175. Cape Town: HSRC Press.

⁵ Camps-Febrer, Blanca. 2012. "Political Humor as a Confrontational Tool Against the Syrian Regime: A Study Case: Syria, 15th March 2011 – 15th May 2012." Institut Català Internacional per la Pau. <http://www.recercat.net/handle/2072/205490>.

⁶ Mohamed M. Helmy and Sabine Frerichs. 2013. "Stripping the Boss: The Powerful Role of Humor in the Egyptian Revolution 2011." *Integrative Psychological & Behavioral Science* (June 26). doi:10.1007/s12124-013-9239-x. Bahaa-eddin Abulhassan Hassan. 2013. "The Pragmatics of Humor: January 25th Revolution and Occupy Wall Street." *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences*. <http://mcser.org/journal/index.php/mjss/article/view/238>.

⁷ Gregor Benton. 1988. "The Origin of the Political Joke." In *Humor in Society: Resistance and Control*, edited by C. Powell and C. Patton, 85–105. New York: St. Martin's Press.

⁸ Owen H. Lynch. 2002. "Humorous Communication: Finding a Place for Humor in

Political Humor

Political humor is a “crucial part of society’s political discourse.”⁹ Moreover, political humor can attract citizens who are not interested in politics.¹⁰ Evidence shows that consumption of political humor can increase political attention and learning, especially for younger and less educated individuals.¹¹ People process humorous political messages differently than they do serious ones, with less scrutiny.¹² Political humor does have an effect: the outcome of consumption of political humor is sometimes increased feelings of political efficacy,¹³ greater interest in discussion and participating in politics,¹⁴ and lower trust in politicians and greater cynicism.¹⁵

Digital Political and Humorous Content

Today with digital tools and social networking sites, political and humorous content is not the exclusive domain of professionals. Content creation

Communication Research.” *Communication Theory* 12 (4) (November): 423–445. doi:10.1111/j.1468-2885.2002.tb00277.x.

⁹ Jason T. Peifer. 2012. “Can We Be Funny? The Social Responsibility of Political Humor.” *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* 27 (4) (October): 263–276. doi:10.1080/08900523.2012.746110.

¹⁰ Matthew Baum. 2003. “Soft News and Political Knowledge: Evidence of Absence or Absence of Evidence?” *Political Communication* 20 (2) (April): 173–190. doi:10.1080/10584600390211181.; Dannagal Goldthwaite Young. 2004. “Late-Night Comedy in Election 2000: Its Influence on Candidate Trait Ratings and the Moderating Effects of Political Knowledge and Partisanship.” *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 48 (1) (March): 1–22. doi:10.1207/s15506878jobem4801_1.

¹¹ Baum. 2003. “Soft News and Political Knowledge”; Xiaoxia Cao. 2010. “Hearing It From Jon Stewart: The Impact of the Daily Show on Public Attentiveness to Politics.” *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 22 (1) (February 9): 26–46. doi:10.1093/ijpor/edp043.

¹² Robin L. Nabi, Emily Moyer-Gusé, and Sahara Byrne. 2007. “All Joking Aside: A Serious Investigation into the Persuasive Effect of Funny Social Issue Messages.” *Communication Monographs* 74 (1) (March): 29–54. doi:10.1080/03637750701196896.

¹³ Jody Baumgartner and Jonathan S. Morris. 2006. “The Daily Show Effect: Candidate Evaluations, Efficacy, and American Youth.” *American Politics Research* 34 (3) (May 1): 341–367. doi:10.1177/1532673X05280074.; Amy B. Becker. 2011. “Political Humor as Democratic Relief? The Effects of Exposure to Comedy and Straight News on Trust and Efficacy.” *Atlantic Journal of Communication* 19 (5) (November 28): 235–250. doi:10.1080/15456870.2011.622191.

¹⁴ Xiaoxia Cao and Paul R. Brewer. 2008. “Political Comedy Shows and Public Participation in Politics.” *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 20 (1) (February 4): 90–99. doi:10.1093/ijpor/edm030.; Lindsay H. Hoffman and Dannagal G. Young. 2011. “Satire, Punch Lines, and the Nightly News: Untangling Media Effects on Political Participation.” *Communication Research Reports* 28 (2) (April 27): 159–168. doi:10.1080/08824096.2011.565278.

¹⁵ Lauren Guggenheim, Nojin Kwak, and Scott Campbell. 2011. “Nontraditional News Negativity: The Relationship of Entertaining Political News Use to Political Cynicism and Mistrust.” *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 23 (3) (July 18): 287–314. doi:10.1093/ijpor/edr015.; Baumgartner and Morris. 2006. “The Daily Show Effect.”

is more affordable and content can be transmitted quickly and efficiently. (Vickery argues that memes, in particular, require few tools and literacies to create.)¹⁶ This user-generated content differs from professional content because of its amateur nature and that it involves sharing with others. Of user-generated content, a great deal is humorous.¹⁷ It follows then that digital political humor is also a notable proportion of user-generated content. The content itself is not qualitatively different from older forms of political humor, however, the production cost and speed of distribution is different.

While some investigation into the political effect of digital political content created by users who are not professionals has occurred, it remains unknown if humorous political user-generated content will have similar effects as humorous professional political content.¹⁸ Nonetheless, user-generated content “should be treated as a distinctive audience experience defined by its incorporation of expressivity, performance and collaboration. From the point of view of democratic engagement, theoretical arguments exist to suggest that these features could promote, reinforce or otherwise be linked to the behavioral dimension of democratic engagement...” although there is no direct evidence for a relationship between user-generated content and democratic engagement, there is an association between them.¹⁹ And as political humor has such an effect on political outcomes, the combination of political, humor, and user-generated should be a powerful one. The case of humorous political user-generated content in Azerbaijan will now be explored.

Azerbaijan

Azerbaijan is one of the most authoritarian of the post-Soviet states²⁰ and the regime “possess[es] control over the means of violence, [is] better

¹⁶ Jacqueline Ryan Vickery. 2014. “The Curious Case of Confession Bear: The Reappropriation of Online Macro-image Memes.” *Information, Communication & Society* x (x) (Online First):1–25. doi:10.1080/1369118X.2013.871056

¹⁷ Limor Shifman. 2011. “An Anatomy of a YouTube Meme.” *New Media & Society* 14 (2) (October 3): 187–203. doi:10.1177/1461444811412160.

¹⁸ Ivan Dylko and Michael McCluskey. 2012. “Media Effects in an Era of Rapid Technological Transformation: A Case of User-Generated Content and Political Participation.” *Communication Theory* 22 (3) (August 10): 250–278. doi:10.1111/j.1468-2885.2012.01409.x.;

J. S. Lim and G. J. Golan. 2011. “Social Media Activism in Response to the Influence of Political Parody Videos on YouTube.” *Communication Research* 38 (5) (May 24): 710–727. doi:10.1177/0093650211405649; Johan Östman. 2012. “Information, Expression, Participation: How Involvement in User-Generated Content Relates to Democratic Engagement Among Young People.” *New Media & Society* 14 (6) (March 20): 1004–1021. doi:10.1177/1461444812438212.

¹⁹ Östman. 2012. “Information, Expression, Participation.”

²⁰ Magdalena Frichova Grono. 2011. “Nations in Transit: Azerbaijan.” Washington: Freedom House.

equipped than grassroots movements to act collectively and is able to disseminate propaganda on a massive scale.”²¹ Further, the ruling regime easily limits the opposition through control of resources²² and a patronage system.²³ The opposition is weakened in a number of ways, but as the government has nearly total control of mainstream media, especially television and radio, there are few formal ways for the opposition to share information with Azerbaijani citizens. Even opposition newspapers face serious challenges.²⁴ Moreover, there has been a dramatic deterioration in freedom of expression in Azerbaijan since mid-2012 that has resulted in dozens of political activists being arrested and imprisoned on bogus charges.²⁵

To borrow from Sienkiewicz, “Describing the potential for comedy in places of conflict, scholar Majken Jul Sorenson²⁶ observes that ‘political humor needs some incongruity and absurdity in order to thrive—if things are as the politicians say they are, then there is almost nothing on which to build satire, parody, and irony’... In the Palestinian territories, incongruity and absurdity are in abundance.”²⁷ The same can be said for Azerbaijan. Ample opportunities to mock the government exist and, in fact, mockery is one of the few ways for Azerbaijanis to note dissent. Humor, despite appearing frivolous, is in fact threatening to repressive regimes and can come with serious consequences.²⁸

Today with digital tools and social networking sites, humor can

²¹ Scott Radnitz. 2012. “Oil in the Family: Managing Presidential Succession in Azerbaijan.” *Democratization* 19 (1) (February 28): 60–77. doi:10.1080/13510347.2012.641300.

²² Farid Guliyev. 2009. “Oil Wealth, Patrimonialism, and the Failure of Democracy in Azerbaijan.” *Caucasus Analytical Digest* 2. <http://www.res.ethz.ch/analysis/cad/details.cfm?lng=en&id=95426>. Andrea Kendall-Taylor. 2012. “Purchasing Power: Oil, Elections and Regime Durability in Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan.” *Europe-Asia Studies* 64 (4) (June 8): 737–760. doi:10.1080/09668136.2012.671567.

²³ Farid Guliyev. 2012. “Political Elites in Azerbaijan.” In Andreas Heinrich and Heiko Pleines, eds., *Challenges of the Caspian Resource Boom: Domestic Elites and Policy-Making*, Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 117–130. Farid Guliyev. 2013. “Oil and Regime Stability in Azerbaijan.” *Demokratizatsiya* 21 (1) (February 16): 113–147.

²⁴ Arifa Kazimova. 2011. “Media in Azerbaijan: The Ruling Family Dominates TV, the Opposition Has Some Papers.” *Caucasus Analytical Digest* 25. http://kms1.isn.ethz.ch/serviceengine/Files/ISN/127759/publicationdocument_singledocument/bcce560a-61c7-4b4e-91d3-0cc7ef45a167/en/CaucasusAnalyticalDigest25.pdf.

²⁵ Human Rights Watch. 2013. Tightening the Screws: Azerbaijan’s Crackdown on Civil Society and Dissent. <http://www.hrw.org/node/118310>

²⁶ Majken Jul Sorenson. 2008. “Humor as a Serious Strategy of Nonviolent Resistance to Oppression.” *Peace & Change* 33 (2) (April): 167–190. doi:10.1111/j.1468-0130.2008.00488.x.

²⁷ Matt Sienkiewicz. 2012. “Out of Control: Palestinian News Satire and Government Power in the Age of Social Media.” *Popular Communication* 10 (1-2) (January): 106–118. doi:10.1080/15405702.2012.638575.

²⁸ Elliot Oring. 2004. “Risky Business: Political Jokes Under Repressive Regimes.” *Western Folklore* 63 (3): 209–236.

be an even more effective strategy for activism or dissent because of the affordability of content creation and the speed and efficiency by which it travels. It is certainly the case that humorous print media can go viral, just like digital media.²⁹ Moreover, the potential for anonymity with digital humor may be attractive for activists. And with digital tools and social networking sites, humor as a strategy can be even more effective. In fact, almost one-fifth of all re-tweeted Tweets related to the events in Egypt were humor-related, only second to news-related tweets.³⁰ Perhaps, with digital media, political humor is in a new era.

Despite the Internet being considered a space for free expression, in Azerbaijan, online dissent, even of a humorous nature, has offline consequences. At the same time, the government itself has begun utilizing humor via digital media to attack the opposition (see the article by Pearce in this issue). This article will look at a few recent examples of the use of humor for online dissent in Azerbaijan and the consequences faced by those who engage in it. Proving the effectiveness of digital humor in Azerbaijan, the government has begun to use it as a tool *against* dissidents. This is a unique situation that is only possible in the social media era.

History of Humor as a Tool of Dissent in Azerbaijan

Azerbaijan and its neighbors have a long history of humor as dissent.³¹ Through the satirical journal “Molla Nasreddin” (1906-1931), Azerbaijanis “have long been connected to literature and politics through both word and image, often brought together in what one might call proto-comics or cartoons.” The journal included satirical prose, cultural commentary and novels, but its social and political satirical images were most popular.³² “In an era and a region where free speech wasn’t particularly encouraged, it bravely satirized politics, religion, colonialism, Westernization and modernization, education (or lack thereof), and the oppression of women.”³³

²⁹ Enis Dinç. 2012. “On the Limits of Oppositional Humor: The Turkish Political Context.” *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication* 5 (3) (January 1): 322–337. doi:10.1163/18739865-00503012.

³⁰ Alok Choudhary, William Hendrix, Kathy Lee, Diana Palsetia, and Wei-Keng Liao. 2012. “Social Media Evolution of the Egyptian Revolution.” *Communications of the ACM* 55 (5) (May 1): 74. doi:10.1145/2160718.2160736.

³¹ H.B. Paksoy. 1988. “Elements of Humor in Central Asia: The Example of the Journal Molla Nasreddin in Azarbaijan.” http://vlib.iue.it/carrie/texts/carrie_books/paksoy-6/cae19.html. First published in *Turkestan als historischer Faktor und politische Idee*. Ed. Erling von Mende, Baymirza Hayit Festschrift. Koln: Studienverlag: 164-180.

³² Alison Mandaville. “Mullahs to Donkeys: Cartooning in Azerbaijan.” *ImageText: Interdisciplinary Comics Studies*. 5.3 (2010). Department of English, University of Florida. http://www.english.ufl.edu/imagetext/archives/v5_3/mandaville/.

³³ Elizabeth Minkel. 2011. “The Magazine that Almost Changed the World,” *The New Yorker*, http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/books/2011/05/the-magazine-that-almost-changed-the-world.html#slide_ss_0=1

Moreover, in the Soviet era, humor more broadly was a common form of registering dissatisfaction.³⁴ In the post-Soviet period, “Cheshme” was a satirical journal critical of the Heydar Aliyev regime. The journal was published as *samizdat* until 1995 when the editor-in-chief Ayaz Ahmadov and his staff were arrested and charged with libel. Subsequently, the entire staff spent time in jail and the “Cheshme” newspaper closed. After serving their time, many of the staff members sought asylum in Europe.

With all of these journals defining its past, visual humor remains particularly important in Azerbaijan, as “[v]isual media continue to be among the more popular forms for narrative political critique – in no small part because, at some level, images offer an aesthetic experience not often found locally today in prose.”³⁵ (This is not dissimilar from Iran.³⁶) Accordingly, the visual traditions inherited from the past have continued into the digital era in Azerbaijan and *digital* resistant art, like its offline, analogue forebears, is growing increasingly important.³⁷

Why Humor?

As noted early, political humor can be very powerful. Specifically for activists, humor can be used for a variety of aims. For recruiting purposes, humor attracts attention, even from those not politically inclined. Humor can make it seem fun or cool to be involved in activism. It can also facilitate a culture of dissent by building solidarity. Humorous content can also cause contemplation, confront the hegemonic power of the oppressor, and possibly challenge the climate of fear and apathy.³⁸ Humor more broadly is often a means of expressing superiority.³⁹

Activists in Azerbaijan have reached varying degrees of success using humor for these aims. Certainly digital humorous content attracts attention and receives many “likes” and “shares” and “re-tweets,” but as far as challenging hegemony, it is impossible to measure the impact of the content, in particular while it is ongoing.

³⁴ Elliot Oring. 2004. “Risky Business: Political Jokes Under Repressive Regimes.” *Western Folklore* 63 (3): 209–236.

³⁵ Mandaville. “Mullahs to Donkeys.”

³⁶ Elizabeth L. Rauh. 2013. “Green Movement| Thirty Years Later: Iranian Visual Culture from the 1979 Revolution to the 2009 Presidential Protests.” *International Journal of Communication*. <http://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/1558>.

³⁷ Pedram Khrosronejad. 2013. “Green Movement| Editorial Introduction: Digital Ethnography, Resistance Art and Communication Media in Iran.” *International Journal of Communication*. <http://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/2305>.

³⁸ Majken Jul Sorensen. 2008. “Humor as a Serious Strategy of Nonviolent Resistance to Oppression.” *Peace & Change* 33 (2) (April): 167–190. doi:10.1111/j.1468-0130.2008.00488.x.

³⁹ Owen H. Lynch. 2002. “Humorous Communication: Finding a Place for Humor in Communication Research.” *Communication Theory* 12 (4) (November): 423–445. doi:10.1111/j.1468-2885.2002.tb00277.x.

Examples of Digital Humor with Real Consequences

But why is humorous content, and especially digital humor, so threatening to the authoritarian government of Azerbaijan?

One explanation is that humorous content is personally *embarassing* or *humiliating* to the government and individual government representatives. Some claim that there is nothing worse in Azerbaijan than humiliating the government or especially the First Family. Similarly, the fatherly overtone that the regime evokes as a way to maintain control⁴⁰ is also undermined by humor. Further, *image* is key to the ruling regime. The regime knows how to prevent and deal with protests and insurgency, but addressing threats against its image requires extra consideration.

All of this is entangled with Azerbaijan being a society in which personal (and family) honor is of great importance.⁴¹ “In honor cultures, honor serves as an effective disciplining tool, and the honor-code is, therefore, a structure of social power. In order to achieve and maintain honor, an honor culture offers its members specific behavior codes, demanding complete obedience. Failure to detect an insult which taints one’s honor, or failure to respond to an offense to one’s honor at the right time, in the right fashion, in the right degree result in costly consequences...”⁴² and thus in Azerbaijan, humorous insulting content must be dealt with.

Another reason is that humor reaches a wider audience than other forms of political dissent, including among the politically disinterested. The Azerbaijani government tolerates dissenting materials distributed amongst the oppositional elite, but outreach efforts that go beyond this small circle are often swiftly punished.

Further, the viral nature of humor content, especially through social media, means that it is less able to be controlled than other content. While the government tolerates the opposition press, which generally reaches a small audience, humorous digital viral content can have a much broader impact. In the following discussion, we provide a series of examples from the past 5 years and, in each case, explain how it threatened the regime.

⁴⁰ Graeme Gill. 1980. “The Soviet Leader Cult: Reflections on the Structure of Leadership in the Soviet Union.” *British Journal of Political Science* 10 (02) (April 1): 167–186.

⁴¹ Nayereh Tohidi. 1997. “The Intersection of Gender, Ethnicity and Islam in Soviet and post-Soviet Azerbaijan.” *Nationalities Papers* 25 (1) (March): 147–167. doi:10.1080/00905999708408494.

⁴² Orit Kamir. 2002. “Honor and Dignity Cultures: The Case of Kavod and Kvod Ha-Adam in Israeli Society and Law.” In David Kretzmer and Eckart Klein, eds., *The Concept of Human Dignity in Human Rights Discourse*, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 231–262.

Donkey Bloggers

Azerbaijan is infamous for its status as one of the first countries to arrest activists for using digital humor. In early September 2009, Adnan Hajizada produced a YouTube video ridiculing the government for spending hundreds of thousands of dollars to import donkeys from Germany. In the video, journalists interview a donkey about his impressive resume and abilities (he must be incredibly talented to be worth so much!) and note that this donkey would be afforded more rights than Azerbaijani citizens (the “donkey rights” video may be found, with English subtitles, at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Aaecvg7xCIk>): “There will be someone to protect donkey rights,” the video concludes, “but what of human rights?”

Using irony, this video successfully exposed the absurd extent of embezzlement and corruption in Azerbaijan. The video did not attract a big audience: 10,000 views in the first two weeks after being promoted on personal and organizational Facebook pages.

Despite the limited audience of the video, however, it attracted the attention of the government. In the video the donkey is referred to as “Janab Essel” (Mister Donkey in German), which *some* speculate sounded similar to “Janab President,” thus provoking the top leader himself.

Two weeks later, Hajizada and Emin Milli, an activist featured in the video, were attacked by two unknown men at a restaurant. They went to the police station to report the attack, assuming that the incident would be investigated. Instead, they were arrested for “hooliganism” and sentenced to 30 and 24 months imprisonment, respectively, on November 11, 2009. Massive appeals by human rights organizations and foreign governments in late 2009 and through most of 2010 were ignored by the Azerbaijani government. However, as the international pressure continued, the two were released in November 2010.

The government reaction was so intense for a number of reasons. First, the video’s focus on the donkey purchase was humiliating to the government. Secondly, while the initial audience was small, the potential for wider distribution existed. Additionally, because of the good production quality and relatively short length, it would likely generate a larger audience beyond frequent Internet users. Finally, both Hajizada and Milli had a strong online presence and reputations both online and offline, ensuring that the video would spread more quickly than if it had been produced by an unknown person. (It also should be noted that Milli had engaged in a number of public criticisms of the government in the months leading up to the video and was likely already a target.)

While the Donkey Blogger case temporarily deterred online dissent in Azerbaijan,⁴³ such dissent and specifically digital dissenting humor have

⁴³ Katy E. Pearce and Sarah Kendzior. 2012. “Networked Authoritarianism and So-

returned, possibly because there are so few options for expression offline and possibly because the post-Donkey Bloggers fear has subsided.

Bulistan Video Project

In 2011, a group of Azerbaijani students studying in Turkey created a satirical YouTube channel called Bulistan featuring a fake talk show interviewing “stereotypical Azerbaijanis” with content often wittily critiquing Azerbaijani society, and sometimes critiquing the government. The Bulistan video project was threatening to the government because the creators were well placed within Azerbaijani student networks in Turkey and thus the potential for mobilization was high, especially given a culture in Turkey that is more favorable toward student protests. Moreover, parodying Azerbaijani government institutions and the president himself was a direct threat. Soon after the videos appeared, the members of the group faced offline punishments including military conscription, harassment, beatings, and family members losing their jobs. Half of the Bulistan group members have sought asylum in Europe; some of them now work on different Internet-based Azerbaijani video projects.

The Page Named for Heydar Aliyev

One popular opposition Facebook page is the Page Named For Heydar Aliyev, father of current President Ilham Aliyev, and a revered figure in Azerbaijan. The page ridicules the fact that many landmarks in Azerbaijan are named for the senior Aliyev, including the airport, numerous streets, parks, and stadiums. The page features anti-government parody, and with 23,000 likes, funny posts are frequently shared virally.

This particular page was threatening to the government because of the humiliating nature of the content as well as the focus on the First Family. According to informants, “everyone” knows that insulting the First Family is a line that is not to be crossed. The page also became wildly popular and as its audience grew, so did the potential threat. Finally, the administrators were not exclusively dissenting online. The offline activities of the page administrators made them targets as well. In March 2013, a number of youth activists and members of the youth oppositional civic movement N!DA (Exclamation) were arrested amidst increased opposition activity and tightening government restrictions in advance of the Fall 2013 presidential elections. Some of these young men were also administrators of the Page Named For Heydar Aliyev Facebook page. Three activists, Bakhtiyar Guliyev, Shahin Novruzlu, and Mahammad Azizov, were charged with using Facebook for illegal activity. On March 8, 2013 the

Ministry for National Security and the Chief Prosecutor's Office issued a statement stating that these men were detained because they were on Facebook calling for violent forms of protest and were actively discussing the preparation and use of smoke grenades and Molotov cocktails during the rally. N!DA representatives claim that these young men were tortured for information while they were in detention and, as a result, four N!DA board members were also arrested. As of fall 2013, the men remain in jail, following numerous extensions of their pre-trial detentions. In November 2013, the trial began with early signs that transparency was not a priority and as this article went to press, the hearings continued.

Other humorous Facebook pages remain active, however. For example, HamanTimes (95,000 likes from among Azerbaijan's approximately 1 million adult Facebook users⁴⁴), Sancaq Productions (15,000 likes), and Molla Nasreddin (8,500 likes) continue to use humor as a tool of dissent. These pages differ from the Page Named For Heydar Aliyev in two ways. First, they do not directly "attack" Heydar Aliyev. Secondly, neither page is as strongly associated with a particular opposition group as the Heydar Aliyev page was with N!DA. While the administrators of these pages have faced questionings from the prosecutors' office, harassment, and other forms of intimidation, they have not experienced direct punishment like that meted out to the Page Named For Heydar Aliyev administrators.

Other Opposition Videos

Another youth activist, Ilkin Rustemzade of the Free Youth Organization, was arrested on May 17, 2013 and sent to pretrial detention for two months, which was extended multiple times pushing his trial start date until November 2013. In fact, Rustemzade is being tried with the N!DA members mentioned above, despite no formal link between the cases. He is accused of "hooliganism" because of a Harlem Shake video posted on YouTube. He faces between two and five years of imprisonment if convicted. (Some sources report that Rustemzade denies participation in the production and distribution of the video.) The Harlem Shake, an early 2013 online dance craze, was threatening precisely because of its non-political nature. Participating in a Harlem Shake video sends a signal of engagement with global Internet culture. The video was likely to be viewed by a fairly large audience because of the notoriety of some of the participants. Thus, while not a humiliating threat, the symbolic aspects of the video did make it threatening to the government.

Most importantly, Rustemzade's arrest came 2 days after he was released from a 15-day administrative detention sentence for participating

⁴⁴ <http://www.katypearce.net/facebookistan-am-facebookistan-az-facebookistan-ge-in-2012/>

in an *offline* unsanctioned memorial service on the four-year anniversary of a suspicious shooting at the Azerbaijan State Oil Academy. Rustemzade had been interrogated on multiple occasions in the past few months, and served 6 days of administrative detention in early March 2013 for planning a protest.

In October 2013, popular photojournalist Mehman Huseynov created a video that employed footage from the historical action film “300,” but replaced the audio with clips from a presidential debate to show the primary opposition candidate Jamil Hassanli’s superiority over the other candidates and to humiliate them. Huseynov was promptly called into the prosecutor’s office. This particular case was threatening again because of the humiliating nature of the content and Huseynov’s audience. With over 77,000 Facebook followers and friends (as of January 2014), Huseynov’s potential reach is unparalleled in Azerbaijan. Notably, Huseynov frequently must contend with the problem that his social media accounts are shut down following complaints. What is missing is that Huseynov, as a photojournalist, does not directly engage in organizing *offline* dissent. However, he is frequently the first on the scene for nearly all offline dissident events in Azerbaijan and promptly posts his photographs (often *from* the event itself). His ability to reach a large audience gives him great power, thus creating a threat for the government.

Thus, in all of these cases of digital dissidence, offline activities, the potential for large audiences, and the humiliating nature of the content created situations in which the government felt threatened enough to punish the creators. Further, the need to retaliate against insult permeates Azerbaijani society, and the government is no different.

Despite these serious consequences, Azerbaijani activists continue to engage in digital humor because, with little offline space for expression, the Internet is one of the few resources that they have, despite low Internet penetration in Azerbaijan. In fighting its opponents, the government has come to realize the potential power that digital humor can have and has co-opted humor as a tool for its own purposes.

Government Motivations

The mechanisms of authoritarian rule are important to acknowledge because they influence behaviors and choices. Edward Schatz’s “soft authoritarian tool kit” provides an understanding of the way that the state interacts with its people in order to maintain control.⁴⁵ First, an authoritarian regime boasts that it has extensive support. Second, it controls

⁴⁵ Edward Schatz. 2009. “The Soft Authoritarian Tool Kit: Agenda-Setting Power in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.” *Comparative Politics* 41 (2) (January 1): 203–222. doi:10.5129/001041509X12911362972034.

non-supporters through material enticements. Third, those not influenced by material considerations face, blackmail, harassment and coercion. Fourth, the regime carefully controls information flows while allowing the opposition limited access to media that generally reach small audiences. And fifth, the regime employs discursive preemption, staging political drama to undermine opponents' ability to grow support.

Digital political humor supports each of these regime efforts in Azerbaijan. Internet memes are exemplary for this task because they provide an opportunity to show support (through "likes" and "shares"); they often are part of larger blackmail campaigns; they are harassing; they help the regime control the narrative; and they stage political drama. In the following section, we describe a number of government-sponsored memes from 2013 and show how they fit into the tool kit.

Memes

"'Internet meme' is commonly applied to describe the propagation of content items such as jokes, rumors, videos, or websites from one person to others via the Internet."⁴⁶ Or as one of Milner's undergraduates eloquently described them "a nationwide inside joke."⁴⁷ Memes typically begin with references to an event or a cultural product, often with some degree of obscurity. Memes are often images, but can also involve multimedia content.⁴⁸ Memes are often multi-layered and contain submemes of dialect, slang, and jargon.⁴⁹ Huntington argues that memes are subversive because they respond to dominant communication in unexpected ways.⁵⁰

Memes eschew attribution and the anonymity of them enables a type of freedom, especially in cases where a meme is transgressive.⁵¹ Memes, while usually humorous, are not always malicious. However, in the case of memes designed by pro-government Azerbaijanis online, the intention is malicious and thus can be considered a form of trolling.

The first case of a trolling meme that we discuss attacked an

⁴⁶ Limor Shifman. 2013. "Memes in a Digital World: Reconciling with a Conceptual Troublemaker." *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 18 (3) (April 26): 362–377. doi:10.1111/jcc4.12013

⁴⁷ Ryan M. Milner. 2013. "Media Lingua Franca: Fixity, Novelty, and Vernacular Creativity in Internet Memes." In *Selected Papers of Internet Research*. Vol. 3. <http://spir.aoir.org/index.php/spir/article/view/806>.

⁴⁸ Nigel J. Ramoz-Leslie. 2011. "Doin' It for the Lulz: a Contemporary Analysis of Internet Humor." <https://dspace.lasrworks.org/handle/10349/1039>.

⁴⁹ Patrick Davison. 2012. "The Language of Internet Memes." In Michael Mandiberg, ed., *The Social Media Reader*. New York: New York University Press, 120–134.

⁵⁰ Heidi E. Huntington. 2013. "Subversive Memes: Internet Memes as a Form of Visual Rhetoric." In *Selected Papers of Internet Research*. Vol. 3. <http://spir.aoir.org/index.php/spir/article/view/785/371>.

⁵¹ Davison. 2012. "The Language of Internet Memes."

opposition protest event. The chairman of a pro-government youth group (described in Pearce's article in this issue) posted the trolling meme presented in Figure 1 on March 10, 2013 after a protest where over 22,000 clicked "attending" on Facebook, but many fewer actually showed up. This photograph also shows the use of a water cannon on protesters. The poster engaged the popular meme of "FAIL." "FAIL is turn-of-the-century internet slang that came to popularity through image macros and short videos depicting situations with unfortunate outcomes. Traditionally, the verb "fail" has been used to signify the opposite of "succeed," to fall short of achieving a goal. Today, the word is also commonly used as an interjection to point out a person's mistake or shortcoming, often regardless of its magnitude."⁵²

This FAIL meme exemplifies a number of the tools in the tool kit. This meme harasses and attacks the honor the opposition and stages political drama. Also, by the number of likes and supportive comments, it provides an opportunity to show that support for the government does exist, the first tool in the tool kit. These types of memes allow for the replication of the dominant ideology or social identity, in the case of Azerbaijan, being pro-government. These sorts of inside jokes that reaffirm a dominant position can in fact reinforce oppressive ideologies.⁵³ As "the person finding the joke funny is implicitly accepting these stereotyped assumptions about the nature of the other"⁵⁴ with a meme, sharing the joke to your social media audience also lets everyone know what position you take – whether it be pro- or anti-government.

The meme in Figure 2 also was generated by the head of the pro-government youth group during the March 10 protest. It trolled the well-known Azerbaijani dissident Emin Milli for being in Prague rather than Baku for the protest event. In the meme, the author imagined Milli sitting at a Starbucks in Prague watching a livestream video of the protest. The troll also created a corresponding Twitter hashtag: #cupofstarbucks, which was used by a small group of pro-government Twitter users. This meme directly attacks Milli and his honor and stages political drama. Milli did not respond. Again, the number of likes and comments provided an opportunity to demonstrate that pro-government support does exist.

⁵² <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/fail>

⁵³ Ryan M. Milner, 2012. "The World Made Meme: Discourse and Identity in Participatory Media". University of Kansas.

⁵⁴ Michael Billig. 2001. "Humour and Hatred: The Racist Jokes of the Ku Klux Klan." *Discourse & Society* 12 (3) (May 1): 267–289. doi:10.1177/0957926501012003001.

Figure 1. Example of a trolling meme.



Translation: On Facebook, 22,000 said they would join; in actuality, this many were there. #molotovyouth

Figure 2. Pro-Government Meme.



Translation: Emin Milli in Prague; Tricked youth in Baku

A series of memes created in March 2013 focused on the Molotov Cocktails and drugs allegedly used by the administrators of the Page Named For Heydar Aliyev (see Figure 3 and Figure 4). This was an exemplary illustration of trolling that harassed the opposition and prevented them from responding. The meme linking N!DA to narcotics plays on the Bob Marley song “No Woman No Cry” and the famous lyric “Everything’s gonna be alright,” here written in Azerbaijani. As N!DA means exclamation, the use of the exclamation point here also signifies the group.

These memes are a space for the construction of “the truth”. But memes, Milner argues, “like other ‘everyday’ texts, are important because social texts are the raw materials in the construction of societal discourses. Social texts are the artifacts by which cultural participants piece together reality. Truths are argued, stances are taken, and the world is seen through these textual artifacts. The study of cultural participation means the study of the social texts that constitute that culture, like memes.”⁵⁵ With these memes, the pro-government youth group can introduce this reality. Especially in a distrustful society with governmental media control, interpersonally driven, viral narratives can be powerful.

Figure 3. A Pro-Government Meme Alleging that Opposition Members Use Drugs



Translation: [Do not think too much about molotovs and barricades,] just know that everything’s gonna be alright.

⁵⁵ Ryan M. Milner, 2012. “The World Made Meme: Discourse and Identity in Participatory Media”. University of Kansas, p. 15.

Figure 4. Pro-Government Meme Linking the Opposition to Molotov Cocktails



#molotovlugenclik istəmirik!

Translation: We don't want #molotovyouth.

Well-known activist Ruslan Asad was also the target of a trolling campaign after he participated in a recent protest (Figure 5). Asad is one of the founding members of OL (To Be) Youth Movement, and after being detained by authorities for questioning over his role in the protests, trolls created a series of memes and a Twitter hashtag asking why Asad had not served his compulsory military service. The creators appropriated the popular meme “Y U No...” These humiliating memes were essentially a form of blackmail. After the memes about Asad became popular, he was approached about fulfilling his military service and was eventually forced to enter the military.

Figure 5. Pro-government meme attacks Ruslan Asad for not serving in the military



Translation: Panel 1: Person 1: Ruslan, brother, did you serve in the army? Person 2: Why?; Panel 2: Hey, I'm talking to you! Have you served?; Panel 3: I...I... I...; Panel 4: I'm not fit for the army.
Ruslan Asad, what's the deal? #ruslanwhatsthedeal

Thus, while these memes may seem like harmless jokes, they are in fact an important tool in the government's social media arsenal and support its larger goals of managing society.

Conclusion

In Azerbaijan, the Internet is one of the few spaces where dissent can exist, even if being punished for it is a likely possibility. Humor is an effective way for dissidents to distribute their message widely and to reach out to reach audiences that are less politically engaged.

Mandaville asked in 2010 if the "Donkey Bloggers" would have been censored if they had not used video and words and had created a purely visual cartoon image for dissent. She suggests that because of the

Figure 6. Pro-government meme attacking Ruslan Asad

Translation: Panel 1: During the conscription period: (Looking ill) Dear doctor, I'm blind, I'm missing a kidney, and I'm impotent.; Panel 2: (Looking healthy) Ruslan Asad, during the protests.; Panel 3: (Crying?) Behind the monitor and in reality.; Panel 4: Why am I doing all of this? Hey guys, there is a new joke, gather around. Ruslan, you need to see this too.

“sensitivity” of political criticism in *words* that cartoons are more permissible.⁵⁶ The cases detailed above demonstrate that in 2013 Azerbaijan, a threat is a threat and humorous and especially digital content is especially threatening because of its viral nature.

Secondly, while Bernal claims “The power of humor under dictatorship... lies in the fact that humor is one of the few spheres of expression that officials do not dominate”⁵⁷ in Azerbaijan, this may be changing as the government co-opts humor to use against the opposition and severely punishes humorous dissent.

Thus while humor remains an important tool in the arsenal of the opposition, the government’s co-opting of humor is a significant development in the Azerbaijani online political realm. Whilst funny posts might seem frivolously the consequences are anything but.

⁵⁶ Mandaville. “Mullahs to Donkeys.”

⁵⁷ Victoria Bernal. 2013. “Please Forget Democracy and Justice: Eritrean Politics and the Powers of Humor.” *American Ethnologist* 40 (2) (May 10): 300–309. doi:10.1111/amet.12022.

