

TWO CAN PLAY AT THAT GAME: SOCIAL MEDIA OPPORTUNITIES IN AZERBAIJAN FOR GOVERNMENT AND OPPOSITION

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Abstract: Much has been written on the ways in which the Internet benefits opposition movements, in particular in authoritarian regimes. And while some acknowledge that the Internet also provides opportunities for authoritarian governments as well, few have looked at the Internet and social media as a space for back-and-forth actions between the sides. In Azerbaijan, social media allows both the ruling regime and oppositionists to engage with each other and Azerbaijani citizens in new ways. Social media provides the regime with an alternative medium to harass the opposition and demonstrate its power to the citizenry. And while there is a social media presence, the traditional opposition parties do not leverage all affordances of it, however oppositionists not affiliated with traditional parties *are* leveraging social media to build audiences and engage in action. While the regime is currently “winning” the social media battle through the use of its resources, the new and creative ways that oppositionists are using social media for *connective action* could prove to be a successful means of dissent.

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The authoritarian state of Azerbaijan has a unique way of regulating the Internet and social media to maximize its opportunities for simultaneously promoting itself while deterring dissent. Instead of using high-level filtering, it instead uses psychological techniques to create an environment of self-censorship (and increasingly is using policy mechanisms to enforce the psychological controls.) The government also monitors and punishes social media-enabled dissent. Nonetheless, oppositionally-minded Azerbaijanis use social media as a promotional tool, an information dissemination medium, and for some – *though not the traditional opposition parties* – an organizational tool.

This article will describe how the opposition uses social media for organizing, using the Connective Action framework to understand different opposition uses of social media for action, and explain how the government controls the online space. Analysis of how the two sides use the Internet enhances understanding of how social media can enrich not only our understanding of the Azerbaijani political scene, but also how social media and politics intersect in more authoritarian contexts, a perspective that is sorely missing from current writing on social media and politics. Social media has enabled both the government and the opposition to engage with each other and Azerbaijani citizens. For the government, social media provides an alternative medium to toy with the opposition and demonstrate its power to the citizenry. The traditional opposition, on the other hand, does not effectively use social media to engage its audience. However, oppositionists not affiliated with traditional parties are leveraging social media to build audiences and engage in action.

Background

Azerbaijan, one of the most authoritarian of the post-Soviet states according to Freedom House, typifies the social control that post-Soviet rulers have over their peoples.¹ Due in large part to oil revenue, the regime can easily preempt any opposition.² However, because the regime allows low-challenge opposition candidates to run for office, Azerbaijan is an “electoral authoritarian” state where elections are held, but always reflect what the regime wants.³ The key elements of Azerbaijani politics are: 1) the

¹ Magdalena Frichova Grono. 2011. “Nations in Transit: Azerbaijan.” New York: Freedom House.

² Farid Gulyev. 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> and 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.

³ Max Bader. 2011. “Hegemonic Political Parties in post-Soviet Eurasia: Towards Party-based Authoritarianism?” *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 44 (3) (September): 189–197. doi:10.1016/j.postcomstud.2011.07.002 and Erik S. Herron. 2011. “Measuring

personalist-clientelist nature of Aliyev's rule, where patronage-based elite factions demonstrate loyalty and become dependent on resources allocated by the ruling party; 2) deficient stateness and endemic corruption, which dominate all aspect of political life; and 3) a marginalized political opposition, which exists but represents few organized interests.⁴ Additionally, the citizens of Azerbaijan experience a general sense of apathy and fear⁵ and a lack of trust in others.⁶ As such, Azerbaijani society is self-censoring.⁷

The Internet in Azerbaijan

In Azerbaijan, the government has nearly total control of the mainstream media.⁸ Accordingly, in the last few years, many oppositionally-minded Azerbaijanis have turned to the Internet to express their political views. With the growth of social media, especially Facebook (between 13-18 percent of Azerbaijanis had a Facebook account as of late 2013⁹), this sort of political deliberation has increased. As the openness of the Internet became an attractive space for activists, the Azerbaijani government seemingly took notice and began formulating a policy to control it. Like in the print media sphere, the Azerbaijani government understood that allowing some independence can provide benefits. One argument along these lines is that authoritarian states make policies and have bureaucrats to implement them. Independent media is one of the only ways that authoritarian leaders can verify that the bureaucrats are doing their jobs. With the Internet and social media, a little bit of freedom can provide the government with insight into what the opposition elite are thinking, as well as an excellent and systematic monitoring tool. Some freedom on the

Dissent in Electoral Authoritarian Societies: Lessons from Azerbaijan's 2008 Presidential Election and 2009 Referendum." *Comparative Political Studies* 44 (11) (June 3): 1557–1583. doi:10.1177/0010414011410171.

⁴ Farid Gulyev. 2012. "Political Elites in Azerbaijan." In Andreas Heinrich and Heiko Pleines, eds. *Challenges of the Caspian Resource Boom: Domestic Elites and Policy-Making*. Houndsills: Palgrave Macmillan, 117–130 and Farid Gulyev. 2013. "Oil and Regime Stability in Azerbaijan." *Demokratizatsiya* 21 (1) (February 16): 113–147.

⁵ Shahin Abbasov. 2010. "Civil Society in Azerbaijan: Under Fire but Still Resisting." *Caucasus Analytical Digest* 12. http://kms1.isn.ethz.ch/serviceengine/Files/ISN/111716/ipublicationdocument_singledocument/5801e755-43be-4f82-b7a9-8acd36fd0c3b/en/CaucasusAnalyticalDigest12.pdf.

⁶ Aytan Gahramanova. 2009. "Internal and External Factors in the Democratization of Azerbaijan." *Democratization* 16 (4) (August 4): 777–803. doi:10.1080/13510340903083919.

⁷ Gahramanova, 2009. "Internal and External Factors in the Democratization of Azerbaijan."

⁸ 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/ipublicationdocument_singledocument/bcce560a-61c7-4b4e-91d3-0cc7ef45a167/en/CaucasusAnalyticalDigest25.pdf.

⁹<http://www.katypearce.net/facebookistan-am-facebookistan-az-facebookistan-ge-in-2012/> and <http://www.katypearce.net/facebook-in-armenia-azerbaijan-and-georgia-2013-with-a-gender-focus/>

Internet can also allow the Azerbaijani government to appear democratic.¹⁰ However, the Azerbaijani government does have to control the Internet and social media in order to ensure that dissent does not go beyond what it considers a safe level. In the second half of this paper, I will apply Deibert and Rohozinski's¹¹ framework from their study of the Russian-language Internet to Azerbaijan by dividing the techniques used by governments for Internet censorship and control into three "generations." The Azerbaijani government engages in each of these generations. But first, a description of how the opposition does and does not use the Internet for organizing will be presented.

Opposition Background

The opposition in Azerbaijan is both marginalized and divided.¹² However, despite its fragmentation, the opposition is networked. Connections, often of a personal nature, exist between individuals and groups within the larger movement, despite subdivisions organizationally. These ties create a web that is more difficult to destroy.

Moreover, these information relationships are essential to understand politics in Azerbaijan. To "make sense of political processes and outcomes in such contexts, paying attention to the formal institutions that are typically the focus of political scientists is inadequate; in addition—or instead—one must study informal institutions and interactions."¹³

Being networked creates efficiency advantages over more hierarchical forms of organization.¹⁴ Networks are light on their feet. Information transfers reliably and efficiently through them.¹⁵ Moreover, networked forms of organization have greater trust amongst individuals,¹⁶ reciprocity¹⁷, and more opportunities for learning from one another.¹⁸ Social

¹⁰ Katy E. Pearce and Sarah Kendzior. 2012. "Networked Authoritarianism and Social Media in Azerbaijan." *Journal of Communication* 62 (2) (March 14): 283–298. doi:10.1111/j.1460-2466.2012.01633.x.

¹¹ Ronald Deibert and Rafal Rohozinski. 2010. "Control and Subversion in Russian Cyberspace." In *Access Controlled: The Shaping of Power, Rights, and Rule in Cyberspace*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 15–34.

¹² Guliyev. 2012. "Political Elites in Azerbaijan."

¹³ 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.

¹⁴ Jeffrey L. Bradach and Robert G. Eccles. 1989. "Price, Authority, and Trust: From Ideal Types to Plural Forms." *Annual Review of Sociology* 15: 97–118.

¹⁵ Walter W. Powell. 1990. "Neither Market nor Hierarchy." *Research on Organizational Behavior* 12: 295–336.

¹⁶ Mark S. Granovetter. 1995. *Getting a Job: A Study of Contacts and Careers*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

¹⁷ Powell. 1990. "Neither Market nor Hierarchy."

¹⁸ Ronald Dore. 1983. "Goodwill and the Spirit of Market Capitalism." *The British Journal of Sociology* 34 (4): 459–482.

networks such as these are essential for mobilization in non-democracies.¹⁹

The web of personal ties between oppositionally-minded people has traditionally been maintained offline. However, new technologies provide opportunities for these ties to be maintained and reaffirmed virtually.

Impact of the Internet on organizing

The Internet and social media have had an impact on interpersonal relationships. Information and communication technologies can foster connectedness and socialbility.²⁰ The Internet has also affected organizational relationships. And specifically, new opportunities and challenges for social movements have emerged. The Internet reduces barriers for creating, organizing, and participating without co-presence and at a reduced cost²¹, and in Azerbaijan, where freedom of assembly is restricted, being able to organize without co-presence is a tremendous asset to organizations. The reduction in cost is also useful for Azerbaijani oppositionists because one of the government's strongest tools against them is economic.

However, these same affordances provided by the Internet also threaten traditional social movement organizations because the barriers for competitors are also reduced.²² Established opposition parties no longer hold the monopoly on countering the government. An individual or a loosely organized group can create and organize social activism much more easily than in the pre-Internet era.

Social media and social networking sites are especially important for social movements – regardless if they are an established opposition group, individuals, or loosely organized groups. Broadly defined, a social network site (SNS) is a “networked communication platform in which participants 1) have uniquely identifiable profiles that consist of user-supplied content, content provided by other users, and system-level data; 2) can publicly articulate connections that can be viewed and traversed by others; and 3) can consume, produce, and interact with streams of user-generated content.”²³

¹⁹ Maryjane Osa and Kurt Schock. 2007. “A Long, Hard Slog: Political Opportunities, Social Networks and the Mobilization of Dissent in Non-Democracies.” *Research in Social Movements, Conflicts and Change* 27 (March 7): 123–153. doi:10.1016/S0163-786X(06)27005-8.

²⁰ Rich Ling. 2004. *The Mobile Connection: The Cell Phone’s Impact on Society. The Morgan Kaufmann Series in Interactive Technologies*. Vol. 1. San Francisco: Morgan Kaufmann and Ronald E. Rice and Ingunn Hagen. 2010. “Young Adults’ Perpetual Contact, Social Connection, and Social Control through the Internet and Mobile Phones.” In C. Salmon, ed. *Communication Yearbook 34*, 2–39. London: Routledge.

²¹ Jennifer Earl and Katrina Kimport. 2011. *Digital Enabled Social Change: Activism in the Internet Age*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

²² Earl, and Kimport. 2011. *Digital Enabled Social Change*.

²³ Nicole B. Ellison, , and danah m. boyd. 2013. “Sociality through Social Network Sites.” In *The Oxford Handbook of Internet Studies*, edited by W. H. Dutton, 151–172. Oxford, UK:

Social networking sites are ideal for generating and affirming interpersonal interaction, broadening social ties, and providing information about how to become involved (Valenzuela et. al. 2009). They also allow individuals and organizations to better manage their social networks and connect with new individuals. Further, Facebook is like an information hub,²⁴ and users can receive mobilizing information and encounter greater opportunities to engage by following particular personalities and joining groups.²⁵ Users can also express their political opinions on social media.²⁶ In fact, Valenzuela found that social media use for political opinion expression and activism were significant predictors of protest behavior.²⁷

Opposition Social Media Organizational Structure

These particular affordances of the Internet and social media are important because they can enable a new type of social movement collective action form: connective action, especially in an era when younger people are shifting away from identifying with organizations to engaging civically through “simple, everyday discourses anchored in lifestyles and shared with social networks.”²⁸ (Similar is the idea of “networked individualism” as described by Rainie and Wellman in which technology enables a new osmotic self that absorbs elements from multiple networks, which is personalized, while still networked.)²⁹ This individualization means that individuals are less guided by norms and collective identities. Imagine campaigns, for example, such as a young woman holding a hand-written sign that states “I have type I diabetes. How can I afford college when I may not be able to afford my insulin? I am the 99%” being shared by sympathetic others. Or in the case of Azerbaijan, personal opinions and statements about the political situation, rather than party alliances, being popular on Facebook or photographs of the families of political detainees

Oxford University Press.

²⁴ Homero Gil de Zúñiga, Nakwon Jung, and Sebastián Valenzuela. 2012. “Social Media Use for News and Individuals’ Social Capital, Civic Engagement and Political Participation.” *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 17 (3) (April 10): 319–336. doi:10.1111/j.1083-6101.2012.01574.x.

²⁵ Sebastián Valenzuela. 2013. “Unpacking the Use of Social Media for Protest Behavior: The Roles of Information, Opinion Expression, and Activism.” *American Behavioral Scientist* 57 (7) (March 6): 920–942. doi:10.1177/0002764213479375.

²⁶ Sebastián Valenzuela. 2013. “Unpacking the Use of Social Media for Protest Behavior: The Roles of Information, Opinion Expression, and Activism.” *American Behavioral Scientist* 57 (7) (March 6): 920–942. doi:10.1177/0002764213479375.

²⁷ Valenzuela. 2013. “Unpacking the Use of Social Media for Protest Behavior.”

²⁸ W. Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg. 2013. *The Logic of Connective Action: Digital Media and the Personalization of Contentious Politics*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

²⁹ Barry Wellman and Lee Rainie. 2012. *Networked: The New Social Operating System*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

being shared on social media – this is not organizationally-sponsored, but driven by individuals empathetic to other individuals' plights. This demand for personalized relations with causes or organizations makes social media more central as an organizing tool. "When people who seek more personalized paths to concerted action are familiar with practices of social networking in everyday life, and when they have access to technologies from mobile phones to computers, they are already familiar with a different logic of organization: the logic of connective action... the recognition of digital media as organization agents... taking public action or contributing to a common good becomes an act of personal expression."³⁰

Traditional organizational structures (what Bennett and Segerberg call organizationally brokered networks³¹) are noteworthy for strong organizational coordination of action (especially with regard to resource allocation and distribution) and formalized relationships with followers (members). The organizations are greatly concerned with getting individuals to join when the cost of participating outweighs the benefits. Rhetoric engages collective action frames rather than personalized ones. Social media is used to reduce communication and coordination costs, but it does not fundamentally change the logic of participation or action. This does not mean that these traditional organizations do not use social media, rather it is used as a tool rather than an organizational agent. In Azerbaijan, the traditional opposition parties are examples of this. And while the best known individuals have many followers, friends, or likes, there is very little personalized interaction with audience members. It should be noted that in Azerbaijani parties, as in many post-Soviet political parties, a great deal of party activity *is* focused on individuals. Because of this, Bennett and Segerberg's description of organizational brokered networks, derived from Western organizations, may not seem appropriate. Nonetheless, those individuals receiving the focus are essentially symbols of the organization.

However, with the introduction of digital media, the logic of this sort of organization can change. Through the organizational processes of social media, the symbolic construction of a united "we" and organization to support that "we" is unnecessary.³² Motivation to join and participate may be different in digitally-enabled networks and cooperation is voluntary.³³ Based in the production and sharing of content – the way that individuals associate and organize with one another is quite different

³⁰ W. Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg. 2012. "The Logic of Connective Action." *Information, Communication & Society* 15 (5) (June): 739–768. doi:10.1080/1369118X.2012.670661.

³¹ Bennett and Segerberg. 2012. "The Logic of Connective Action."

³² Bennett and Segerberg. 2012. "The Logic of Connective Action."

³³ Yochai Benkler. 2006. *The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

than in non-digitally-enabled networks. This co-production and co-distribution is *personalized* expression that allows for symbolic inclusiveness and technological openness.³⁴ This sort of engagement can occur either in organizationally-enabled networks or in crowd-enabled networks.

The first type of connective action is with *organizationally enabled* networks, with loose organizational coordination of action around a general set of issues and organizationally generated inclusive personal action frames with some moderation of personal expression.³⁵ Social media is part of organizing, but there is still an organization in the background. In Azerbaijan, examples include groups like N!DA that have formal structures, but strongly engage with social media for more than organizational purposes as well as the REAL (Republican Alternative) organization, which is mostly an offline organization, but its leadership uses social media beyond information dissemination and recruitment. The social media presence of this sort of organization is much more organizationally-based than individually-based, as network-building mechanisms that allow individuals to contribute, bringing more agency to individuals than as it is with traditional organizations.

Full connective action, which Bennett and Segerberg call crowd-organized/technology-enabled³⁶, comes from *self organizing* networks, which are individuals with little or no organizational coordination of action and collective action is entirely about personal action frames.³⁷ Social media is an integrative organizational mechanism and possibly the most visible activity of the network. These individuals are very much engaged in personal expression and have a strong and personal voice in their social media content. Individuals activate their own followers and social networks. These individuals have the largest social media audience and influence of anyone in Azerbaijan.

There is certainly a class of “Internet Celebrities” in Azerbaijan, individuals with large social media followings that have the ability to set the tone and spread information. There are pro-government celebrities, but the opposition has many as well at all three levels: organizationally brokered networks, organizationally enabled networks, and crowd-enabled networks. Again, the focus on individuals within post-Soviet politics should be recalled while considering this sort of activity.

Some of these individuals have notable foreign audience as well and can be considered “networked microcelebrities.” A networked

³⁴ Bennett and Segerberg. 2012. “The Logic of Connective Action.”

³⁵ Bennett and Segerberg. 2012. “The Logic of Connective Action.”

³⁶ W. Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg. 2013. *The Logic of Connective Action: Digital Media and the Personalization of Contentious Politics*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

³⁷ Bennett and Segerberg. 2012. “The Logic of Connective Action.”

microcelebrity activist “is a politically motivated actor who successfully uses affordances of social media to engage in a presentation of his or her political and personal self to garner attention to a cause.”³⁸ Further, “networked microcelebrity activism refers to politically motivated noninstitutional actors who use affordances of social media to engage in the presentation of their political and personal selves to garner public attention to their cause, usually through a combination of testimony, advocacy, and citizen journalism”.³⁹ Zeynep Tufekci argues that these people serve a particular role in a movement - often writing in a bridging language (English) - to gain the attention of a global audience, but this may also have a negative consequence within the movement because of the opportunities provided by global microcelebrity. Dahlgren’s idea of “online public intellectuals” is also pertinent to understanding these individuals. According to Dahlgren, these public intellectuals play a significant role, especially within alternative politics, and digital media allows for amplification of their messages.⁴⁰ These public intellectual microcelebrities allow for effective activation of social networks for connective action.

Examples of Connective Action

Protest Events

Connective action networks can be particularly effect in protest events.⁴¹ (Although as Henry Hale notes, social media may not have a *primary* role in unrest.⁴² Nonetheless, I argue that in the 2013 cases described here, social media *was* central to organizing.) Since early 2013, there have been a number of protest actions organized primarily via Facebook without any sponsorship from any of the traditional opposition parties, rather individuals spread through their personal social networks. Moreover, there was a personalized action frame: conscripts’ deaths because of hazing and the government’s attempts to cover up these deaths. Pictures of soldiers were spread on social networks and personalized catch phrases were commonly shared on image memes or as Facebook status. While attendance at these protests was sometimes large and sometimes not, the number of individuals *saying* that they were going to attend an event via Facebook was quite high, especially for such a public statement. Over time, the protests’ focus

³⁸ Zeynep Tufekci. 2013. “‘Not This One’: Social Movements, the Attention Economy, and Microcelebrity Networked Activism.” *American Behavioral Scientist* (March 26): 0002764213479369-. doi:10.1177/0002764213479369.

³⁹ Tufekci. 2013. “‘Not This One’.”

⁴⁰ Peter Dahlgren. 2013. *The Political Web*. Houndsmill: Palgrave Macmillan.

⁴¹ Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg. 2013. *The Logic of Connective Action*.

⁴² Henry Hale. 2013. “Did the Internet Break the Political Machine? Moldova’s 2009 “Twitter Revolution that Wasn’t” *Demokratizatsiya* 21 (4) (September 1): 481–506.

moved away from conscript deaths and into more generalized protest, and perhaps not coincidentally, support decreased.

Fundraising

After individuals received fines for participating in the winter 2013 protest actions, some individuals, not affiliated with traditional opposition parties, created a campaign to raise small amounts of money to pay off the fines. In less than a week, they raised 10,500 AZN (US\$13,000). These efforts were notable for connective action for two reasons: first, the fundraising was *for* individuals rather than for a cause. Secondly, the focus on pocket change (the campaign was called 5 cents), made it accessible for individuals wanting to engage.

After the success of the donate change campaign, the government put greater restrictions on fundraising for NGOs and charities. Individuals, again, not affiliated with traditional opposition parties, started a new fund-raising effort through selling personal photographs, the monetary exchange representing a donation. While this is an illustration of personal action frames by these individuals, it should be noted that this sort of microcelebrity behavior fits in well in post-Soviet political culture where individuals are symbolic of organizations as well as within personal action frames in connective action.

Effect of Connective Action Networks

The result of connective action is that seemingly disjointed networks can achieve coherent organizational forms in that they develop capacities for resource allocation and distribution; they respond to external short-term events; and they also can create long-term adaptive resources. Because of this, they are, essentially, an organization, despite not being a cohesive unit.⁴³ As an illustration, protests organized via connective action networks tend to scale up more quickly, have large participation, are quite flexible, and are more inclusive than traditional protests.⁴⁴

These informal connective collaborations through social media are challenging the meaning of civil society.⁴⁵ Milan and Hintz even argue that decentralized activists organized online (connective) will “play a crucial role in building the digital backbone of contemporary social movements, experimenting with technological infrastructure, and enabling innovative forms of organization and citizen action typical of the digital age.”⁴⁶

⁴³ Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg. 2013. *The Logic of Connective Action*.

⁴⁴ Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg. 2013. *The Logic of Connective Action*.

⁴⁵ Stefania Milan and Arne Hintz. 2013. “Networked Collective Action and the Institutionalized Policy Debate: Bringing Cyberactivism to the Policy Arena?” *Policy & Internet* 5 (1) (March 15): 7–26. doi:10.1002/poi3.20.

⁴⁶ Milan and Hintz. 2013. “Networked Collective Action and the Institutionalized Policy

Although, it should be noted that the sustainability of connective action networks remains to be seen.

Additionally, there seems to be a conflict between the traditional organizational networks and the newer connective action networks. Today in Azerbaijan, due in part to the Internet, traditional opposition parties no longer have a monopoly over the opposition. Instead, the connective action individuals and their networks that oppose the government make it possible to disseminate information and build an audience without the infrastructure of a formal organization. However, as Zeynep Tufekci suggests, more ad-hoc connective action networks may be hindered and specifically have difficult sustaining themselves because they are not building network internalities and organizational capacity due to their digitally-enabled coordinating.⁴⁷ While it remains to be seen if these networks will be sustainable, there is some evidence that they are already having some impact in Azerbaijani politics.

At this point, the established opposition parties may want to consider some of the successful collective action that non-traditional oppositionally-minded Azerbaijanis are engaging in. While it is possible that these successes are partially attributable to the lack of affiliation with formal parties, they do demonstrate that social media can have concrete and sometimes meaningful outcomes. The non-traditional oppositionists may have aspirations for larger political actions and should consider these successes as well to determine best practices and leverage their triumphs to continue engaging the social media users that already have done so. Both traditional and non-traditional opposition should consider the potential power of the “real” and virtual social networks that they have and the opportunity to grow their audiences and followers could be better utilized with strategic thinking about how to best organize and promote activities and events.

Government Internet and Social Media Policies

The Azerbaijani government controls the Internet and social media at multiple levels. Using Deibert and Rohozinski's⁴⁸ three “generations” framework, I will describe these levels and provide examples of each.

First Generation

First-generation controls “focus on denying access to specific Internet resources by directly blocking access to servers, domains, keywords, and

Debate.”

⁴⁷ <http://dmlcentral.net/blog/zeynep-tufekci/capabilities-movements-and-affordances-digital-media-paradoxes-empowerment>

⁴⁸ Ronald Deibert and Rafal Rohozinski. 2010. “Control and Subversion in Russian Cyberspace.” In *Access Controlled: The Shaping of Power, Rights, and Rule in Cyberspace*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 15–34.

IP addresses. This type of filtering is typically achieved by the use of specialized software or by implementing instructions manually into routers at key Internet choke points. In some countries, compliance with first-generation filtering is checked manually by security forces, who physically police cybercafés and ISPs.⁴⁹

Filtering and Blocking

In Azerbaijan, filtering with software or hardware is fairly uncommon. However, the technology does exist, as there are some recent occurrences of filtering. However, there are some exceptions, specifically Azerbaijani secondary schools' Internet access is filtered for pornography and other harmful content.⁵⁰ Particular sites such as the web forum of the Free Azerbaijani Movement (<http://www.azdiaspora.org>), created by an Azerbaijani military officer, is not accessible through ISPs connected via Delta Telecom, while those connected via Azertelecom allow access to the site, according to Expression Online. In times of crisis some media sources have been blocked.⁵¹

However, the first known instance of the blocking of a site that hosts content beyond that of a justifiably-threatening nature has occurred. In January 2012, 1.7GB of internal documents from the Special State Protection Service of Azerbaijan were leaked by the Anonymous organization.⁵² Documents that were deemed *interesting* by Anonymous were also uploaded to the image sharing site Imgur.com.⁵³ Imgur.com is a popular site for anonymous hosting of images, especially for the website Reddit. Soon after the release, Azerbaijani Internet users were unable to access any images hosting on Imgur.com.⁵⁴ As of August 2013, Imgur was still inaccessible in Azerbaijan. Overall, the technology for filtering exists, the Azerbaijani government has used it in the past, recently has used it on a site that is not exclusively a security risk, and public rhetoric has suggested that the government has considered filtering Facebook.

Facebook is a particular threat to the Azerbaijani government. After an increase in Facebook activism in early 2013, some pro-government Azerbaijani politicians made statements about limiting or blocking Facebook. "These networks create a threat to Azerbaijan's statehood" Fazail Agamali, leader of the pro-government party Motherland said to

⁴⁹ Deibert and Rohozinski. 2010. "Control and Subversion in Russian Cyberspace."

⁵⁰ Expression Online. 2012. "Searching for Freedom: Online Expression in Azerbaijan." Baku. http://expressiononline.net/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/Report_EO_1.pdf.

⁵¹ Expression Online. 2012. "Searching for Freedom: Online Expression in Azerbaijan."

⁵² <http://par-anoria.net/releases2013.html#dmx>

⁵³ <http://imgur.com/a/cylKb#0>

⁵⁴ <http://advocacy.globalvoicesonline.org/2013/02/07/imgur-com-blocked-in-azerbaijan/>

Turan on March 11, 2013⁵⁵ and other news outlets.⁵⁶ The government quickly responded to this statement that it was not planning on blocking Facebook,⁵⁷ but that was not the last mention of Facebook as a threat. Azerbaijan's Interior Minister Ramil Usubov also criticized Facebook on March 13, 2013.⁵⁸ And the Azerbaijani National Security Minister Eldar Mahmudov linked Facebook in Azerbaijan to international terrorist rings at the International Conference on Strengthening Cooperation in Preventing Terrorism on March 18, 2013.⁵⁹ On April 2, 2013, MP Hadi Radjabli, Chairman of the Permanent Committee for Social Policy of the Azerbaijani Parliament, attacked Facebook as a bad influence and suggested that social media should have more pro-government content.⁶⁰ While these assaults on Facebook are not filtering, *per se*, the public discussion of Facebook as a threat to security implies that the government has considered filtering Facebook.

Policing cybercafés

While there is no widespread policing of cybercafés, there is some evidence that they are targeted,⁶¹ and some claims about the danger of cybercafés for children. The Azerbaijani State Committee for Family, Women and Children's Affairs "has conducted monitoring in Internet cafes to examine the situation in this area. The results showed that children were going to "Internet clubs" during lessons and visit websites with negative impact."⁶² This experimentation with monitoring cybercafés is an example of experimentation with monitoring as well as framing the monitoring as for the protection of children.

Second Generation

Second-generation Internet controls "create a legal and normative environment and technical capabilities that enable state actors to deny access to information resources as and when needed, while reducing the possibility of blowback or discovery." These controls are both overt and covert. Overtly, there is a legal infrastructure to control access to content. For example, concerns about cybersecurity and extending slander and defamation laws to the online space are evoked to create policies about Internet

⁵⁵ <http://www.contact.az/docs/2013/Politics/031100031350en.htm#.UYfz38p49ks>

⁵⁶ <http://gunxeber.com/?p=60815>

⁵⁷ <http://news.lent.az/news/119078>

⁵⁸ <http://en.apa.az/news/189340>

⁵⁹ http://en.apa.az/news_azerbaijan_s_minister_of_national_securi_189718.html

⁶⁰ <http://www.haqqin.az/news/4775>

⁶¹ Expression Online. 2012. "Searching for Freedom: Online Expression in Azerbaijan."

⁶² <http://www.azernews.az/azerbaijan/46785.html>

control. Covertly, procedures and technologies are deployed to control access at times of crisis.⁶³

Overt

Telecommunications law in Azerbaijan was created in 2005, but does not cover access to content. However, in June 2012, the Azerbaijan criminal code was amended to reflect the Council of Europe's Convention on Cybercrime that it signed in 2008. The amendments are fairly standard regarding data integrity and preventing the use of computers for criminal purposes.⁶⁴

Until April 2013, online and offline content was regulated by the same set of laws, as the Internet is considered part of the mass media⁶⁵. Of particular interest are Azerbaijan's criminal and civil defamation laws, which are quite broad.⁶⁶ On April 30, 2013, however, the Azerbaijani parliament introduced amendments to the criminal code that would specify the Internet (including both media websites and personal social networking sites) in defamation and libel laws⁶⁷ and on May 14 the law passed.⁶⁸ Azerbaijan's minister for Communication and Information Technology supported the amendments in statements on May 6, 2013⁶⁹ and President Aliyev signed the online defamation law on June 6, 2013.⁷⁰ The first criminal online defamation case occurred in the fall of 2013, when a former employee of a regional Azerbaijani bank was accused of defaming his former employer by creating a Facebook page about that bank being unfair and corrupt. (Notably only 26 Facebook users "liked" the page, implying that it did not have a wide reach.) He was sentenced to one year public work and 20 percent of his monthly salary will be withheld for a year.⁷¹

Moreover, publicizing opinions that instigate extremism or have "harmful content" is illegal, as per Articles 214-216 of the Criminal Code.⁷² In May 2011, officials claimed that spreading misinformation is a

⁶³ Deibert and Rohozinski. 2010. "Control and Subversion in Russian Cyberspace."

⁶⁴ <http://president.az/articles/5426>

⁶⁵ Expression Online. 2012. "Searching for Freedom: Online Expression in Azerbaijan."

⁶⁶ Expression Online. 2012. "Searching for Freedom: Online Expression in Azerbaijan."

⁶⁷ <http://www.azcontact.info/docs/2013/Politics/043000034485en.htm#.UYA8eMqGkXF>; <http://www.news.az/articles/society/79350>; <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/66910>; <http://netprophet.tol.org/2013/05/03/azerbaijan-legislating-civil-web-discourse/>

⁶⁸ <http://www.contact.az/docs/2013/Politics/051400036136en.htm#.UZJoVspXrDt>; http://en.apa.az/news_azerbaijan_sets_punishments_for_internet_192821.html

⁶⁹ <http://en.trend.az/capital/business/2147219.html>

⁷⁰ <http://www.rferl.org/content/azerbaijan-internet-defamation-law-criminal-aliyev/25008799.html>

⁷¹ <http://www.mediарights.az/index.php?lngs=eng&id=79> and <http://www.rferl.org/content/azerbaijan-ebrd-libel-law/25082305.html>

⁷² Expression Online. 2012. "Searching for Freedom: Online Expression in Azerbaijan."

cybercrime and noted Skype and Wikipedia as threats to national security.⁷³

Covert

Internet Service Providers in Azerbaijan legally can cut Internet service under broad circumstances and during war, emergency situations, or natural disasters, an Internet kill switch can be activated.⁷⁴ Also, distributed denial of service (DDoS) attacks, which can overwhelm an Internet website host, effectively taking down the site, can be ordered by anyone.⁷⁵ There are some claims that attacks are ordered by the Azerbaijani government.⁷⁶ And in particular, a DDoS attack on an opposition newspaper is claimed to have originated at the Azerbaijani Ministry of Communications and Information Technologies.⁷⁷

Third Generation

Third generation controls are more sophisticated and multidimensional. Third generational controls compete with potential threats through effecting cognitive change rather than deny access.⁷⁸ Deibert and Rohozinski focus on three types of third-generation controls: surveillance, state-sponsored information campaigns, and direct action. This paper will elaborate on the state-sponsored information campaigns with a focus on trolling. Trolling has four sub-categories: memes, Twitter shenanigans, blocking, and Kompromat. This is also where the individuals and organizations within the Azerbaijani government hierarchy begin to emerge.

Surveillance

While there is evidence that the Azerbaijani government does engage in online surveillance, there is a widespread belief that the government does monitor citizens offline and online, and this impacts people's behavior online. A report by Swedish investigative news show *Uppdrag Granskning* found that the Swedish telecommunications company Teliasonera (amongst others) has sold surveillance equipment to the Azerbaijani government.⁷⁹ "Black boxes" or "black rooms" are installed in the server rooms of mobile telecommunications companies and Internet service providers.⁸⁰ There is also substantial anecdotal evidence of surveillance. Azerbaijani activists

⁷³ <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/63554>

⁷⁴ Expression Online. 2012. "Searching for Freedom: Online Expression in Azerbaijan."

⁷⁵ Deibert and Rohozinski. 2010. "Control and Subversion in Russian Cyberspace."

⁷⁶ <http://www.irfs.org/news-feed/azerbaijani-government-sparks-an-open-season-on-critical-websites-amid-pre-election-crackdown/>

⁷⁷ <http://www.indexoncensorship.org/2012/11/azerbaijan-internet-freedom/>

⁷⁸ Deibert and Rohozinski. 2010. "Control and Subversion in Russian Cyberspace."

⁷⁹ <https://www.eff.org/deeplinks/2012/05/swedish-telcom-giant-teliasonera-caught-helping-authoritarian-regimes-spy-its>

⁸⁰ Expression Online. 2012. "Searching for Freedom: Online Expression in Azerbaijan."

report having printed Facebook private messaging transcripts handed to them while in police custody. Others have seen logins from multiple IP addresses in Facebook and Gmail.

In March 2013, a number of opposition youth activists from the group N!DA (Exclamation in Azerbaijani) were arrested and were directly accused of using Facebook for illegal activity – which they deny. On March 8, 2013 the Ministry of National Security and the Chief Prosecutors office issued a statement that the three activists, Bakhtiyar Guliyev, Shahin Novruzlu, and Mohammad Azizov, 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 in a street rally. Reportedly, the authorities found 23 Molotov cocktails; approximately \$100,000 in cash; 507.67 grams of hashish; and 190.02 grams of marijuana in the homes of the activists, although they and their parents are adamant that the drugs and cocktails were planted and have excuses for the amount of cash in the homes.⁸¹ Notably, some of these young men were also administrators of an anti-government parody Facebook page.⁸²

It is difficult to determine if the surveillance activities described above are automated, such as the black boxes, or human. However, there is speculation that police departments pay young people to monitor Facebook and report opposition activities.⁸³

State-Sponsored Information Campaigns

Over the past few years, the Azerbaijani government has waged an aggressive media campaign against social media. Television programs show “family tragedies” and “criminal incidents” after young people join Facebook and Twitter.⁸⁴ In March 2011, the country’s chief psychiatrist proclaimed that social media users suffer mental disorders and cannot maintain relationships.⁸⁵ In April 2012, the Interior Ministry linked Facebook use with trafficking of woman and sexual abuse of children.⁸⁶ An April 2013 story mentioned drug and alcohol addictions, jealousy, suicide, and the destruction of friendships and families related to social media use.⁸⁷

⁸¹ <http://www.vancouversun.com/news/student+activists+arrested+Azerbaijan+ahead+protest/8074031/story.html#ixzz2N6DOnfv0>

⁸² <http://elitar.az/nida-cilar-heyd%C9%99r-%C9%99liyev-adina-s%C9%99hif%C9%99-yaratidqlari-ucun-h%C9%99bs-olunub/>

⁸³ <http://bizimyolinfo.com/?sehife=1&xeber=9314#.UWm4Jjoo7Zp.facebook>

⁸⁴ Katy E. Pearce and Sarah Kendzior. 2012. “Networked Authoritarianism and Social Media in Azerbaijan.” *Journal of Communication* 62 (2) (March 14): 283–298. doi:10.1111/j.1460-2466.2012.01633.x.

⁸⁵ <http://en.trend.az/news/society/1841409.html>

⁸⁶ <http://en.trend.az/news/society/2014898.html>

⁸⁷ <http://xezerxeber.com/XeberOxu.aspx?id=55717#.Un1KMxDORt5>

In May 2013, the Minister of Communication and Information Technology stated that Facebook causes divorce.⁸⁸

This sort of framing of social media as dangerous may not deter all Azerbaijanis from using these services, but it certainly helps the government do two things: first, keep a portion of the population away from social media⁸⁹ and, second, sets the stage for these sites being dangerous in case it chooses to block them in the future.

Trolling

While there is little academic research on the phenomenon of trolling, it can be understood as the “posting of incendiary comments with the intent of provoking others into conflict”⁹⁰ and a *troller* is a computer-mediated communication user who has the intention of causing disruption and/or triggering or exacerbating conflict for the purpose of their own amusement.⁹¹ Similarly, Rafferty defines trolling as “the attempt to hurt, humiliate, annoy, or provoke in order to elicit an emotional response for one’s own enjoyment.”⁹² And Bergstrom defines trolling as the transgression of community norms that results in anger, harm, or discomfort. Trolling differs from teasing in its intensity and level of mercilessness.⁹³ Phillips gives a particularly cruel example of trolling where individuals make jokes on Facebook memorial pages of the recently deceased.⁹⁴ As McCosker argues, trolling is a complex set of practices, and thus, in the author’s estimation, is difficult to define in an all-encompassing way.⁹⁵ As such, this article will describe some types of trolling in Azerbaijan to better understand the set of practices. Although all of these definitions acknowledge that trolling is by nature antagonistic, it is important to note that, as Milner argues, trolling is a communicative tool that can be used

⁸⁸ <http://en.trend.az/capital/business/2147219.html>

⁸⁹ Pearce and Kendzior. 2012. “Networked Authoritarianism and Social Media in Azerbaijan.”

⁹⁰ Claire Hardaker. 2010. “Trolling in Asynchronous Computer-mediated Communication: From User Discussions to Academic Definitions.” *Journal of Politeness Research. Language, Behaviour; Culture* 6 (2) (January). doi:10.1515/jplr.2010.011.

⁹¹ Hardaker. 2010. “Trolling in Asynchronous Computer-mediated Communication.”

⁹² Rebecca S. Rafferty 2011. “Motivations Behind Cyber Bullying and Online Aggression: Cyber Sanctions, Dominance, and Trolling Online”. Ohio University. https://etd.ohiolink.edu/ap:10:0::NO:10:P10_ACCESSION_NUM:ohiou1306953934.

⁹³ Kelly Bergstrom. 2011. “‘Don’t Feed the Troll’: Shutting down Debate About Community Expectations on Reddit.com.” *First Monday* 16 (8). doi:10.5210%2Ffm.v16i8.3498.

⁹⁴ Whitney Phillips. 2011. “LOLing at Tragedy: Facebook Trolls, Memorial Pages and Resistance to Grief Online.” *First Monday* 16 (12).

⁹⁵ McCosker, Anthony. 2013. “Trolling as Provocation: YouTube’s Agonistic Publics.” *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* (September 12): 1354856513501413-. doi:10.1177/1354856513501413.

to diverse ends and serve multiple purposes.⁹⁶ Thus, there can be other goals of trolling, as we see in Azerbaijan, such as control or deterrence of expression or dissent. A revised and expanded definition then could be that trolling is the creation of (with intent to share) and sharing of digital content by individuals or groups with the intent to antagonize, provoke, harm, humiliate, or control other individuals or groups.

Four types of this provocative and conflict-generating trolling in Azerbaijan are memes, blocking, shenanigans on Twitter, and Kompromat. Memes, shenanigans, and blocks seem to be mostly conducted by the pro-government youth organizations, while Kompromat is not attributed to the pro-government youth organizations, the resources put into it are evidence for in-direct government involvement.

Memes

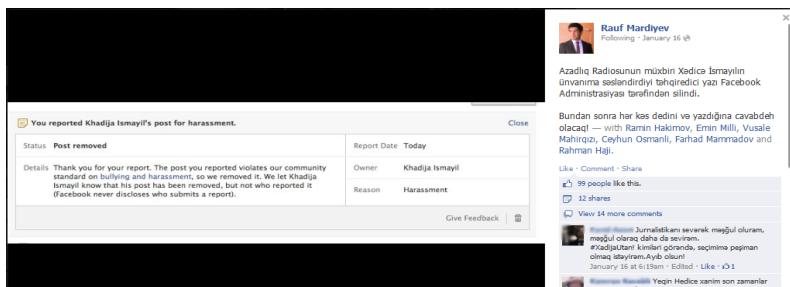
Pro-government forces in Azerbaijan to humiliate oppositionists commonly use Memes. A more detailed discussion of memes is included in the article by Pearce and Hajizada in this issue, and thus will not be discussed here.

Blocking

Another technique that the government and its allies use is filing complaints with Internet services about users that it wishes to silence. This can be done with a specific post or a user's profile overall.

The example in Figure 1 is a boasting post where a pro-government youth group chairman shows how he reported the well-known opposition journalist Khadija Ismayilova's Facebook post for "harassment."

Figure 1. A blocking action by a pro-government activist secured the removal of a post by an opposition journalist.



⁹⁶ Ryan M. Milner. "Hacking the Social: Internet Memes, Identity Antagonism, and the Logic of Lulz." *Fibreculture*.

Although the systems for reporting harassment are designed to protect users, in Azerbaijan it is not uncommon for social media users affiliated with the opposition to find themselves blocked from the service with little recourse. For example, Facebook users may find themselves accused of posting something that violates Facebook's policies and being blocked from using similar features for 24 hours or more.

Facebook has means for becoming "unblocked" but the steps involved are difficult, especially for those not fluent enough in English to read through the legalese-laden terms of service and community standards. Reasons for blocking may be viewed as "technicalities" like copyright infringement by those whom are blocked, but for Facebook, these are serious issues and are possibly best dealt with through a strict policy. Thus, when a blocked individual attempts to argue for being unblocked because of political motivations on the part of those who filed the original complaint, it is difficult for Facebook to deal with these individual cases and have to make exceptions to its own policies.

Twitter Shenanigans

While Twitter is not nearly as popular in Azerbaijan as Facebook is (as is the case globally), some elite users do engage with it. While Twitter posts often mirror Facebook posts (for both individuals and organizations), one difference is that analytics are readily available. The ability to measure social media reach is attractive to some Azerbaijani social media users.

Hashtags are keywords to organize information to describe a tweet and aid in searching.⁹⁷ When a hashtag "trends" – it is noted by Twitter as being popular at a particular time. Users want a hashtag to trend to gain visibility and attention. While occasionally hashtags trend organically, it is much more common that hashtags are artificially pushed to the trending list.⁹⁸

The pro-government youth group is particularly boastful about the number of tweets that its sponsored hashtags receive by "winning" with the largest percentage of Twitter posts. The interest in having metrics for and "winning" hashtags has caused this group to engage in Twitter shenanigans in four ways: hashtag creation, hashtag hijacking, zombie tweets, and mimicking profiles.

Hashtag creation

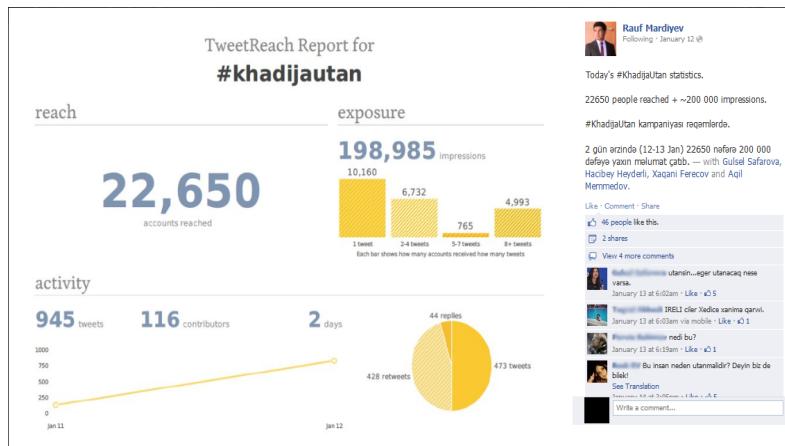
The pro-government youth group members create hashtags to troll and attack particular individuals. Opposition journalist Khadija Ismaylova

⁹⁷ Tamara A. Small. 2011. "What the Hashtag?" *Information, Communication & Society* 14 (6) (September 19): 872–895. doi:10.1080/1369118X.2011.554572.

⁹⁸ Raquel Recuero and Ricardo Araujo. 2012. "On the Rise of Artificial Trending Topics in Twitter." In *Proceedings of the 23rd ACM Conference on Hypertext and Social Media - HT '12*, 305. New York, New York, USA: ACM Press. doi:10.1145/2309996.2310046.

was the victim of “Shame on Khadija” #khadijautan.⁹⁹ The pro-government youth group chairman proudly displayed the large reach that the anti-Ismayilova hashtag and that a hashtag campaign against an opposition youth group, N!DA, had, according to their analytics (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Analytics for a Hashtag creation campaign.



Hashtags attacking the detained N!DA members and asking Ruslan Asad about his military service (described in the article by Pearce and Hajizada, this issue) were created and similarly celebrated.

Hashtag hijacking

When a hashtag is proposed for an event or topic, the intention is for a community of users to share information with each other. When a hashtag is hijacked, a group of individuals “take over” a hashtag by posting messages unrelated to the “spirit” of the hashtag as an information resource and conversation. For example, #armvote13 was about reports of election violations and election results, and people were using it to write things against Armenia and Armenians. The pro-government youth group engaged in hashtag hijacking for all of the 2013 protests,¹⁰⁰ and election in Azerbaijan,¹⁰¹ as well as two hashtags of interest to Armenians, #armvote13¹⁰², and #armeniangenocide,¹⁰³ to varying degrees of success.

⁹⁹ <http://www.katypearce.net/khadijautan-update/>

¹⁰⁰ <http://www.katypearce.net/protestbaku-now-that-the-weekend-is-over-what-happened/>

¹⁰¹ <http://www.katypearce.net/shenanagins-again-and-again/>

¹⁰² <http://www.katypearce.net/armvote13-hashtag-got-taken-over-looks-suspicious/>

¹⁰³ <http://www.katypearce.net/why-is-it-impossible-to-hijack-armeniangenocide-on-twitter->

By taking over hashtags, the pro-government youth groups can destroy the affordances that Twitter provides. For example, during a protest Twitter can serve promotional purposes, give locationally situated information (such as police presence), and allow for live reporting.¹⁰⁴ Hijacking damages these affordances and takes the alleged power of social media back. Thus, this is another example of controlling information flow as a tool.

Zombie tweets

To get high numbers of users on a hashtag or hijack an existing hashtag, the pro-government youth group has had to coordinate its members to use the hashtag and tweet on it. First, it appears that the pro-government youth group members are either directed to tweet statements *or*, more likely, that someone at the pro-government youth group has control (password access) of members' Twitter accounts. In the images reproduced in Figure 3, you can see that the same text was posted on Twitter by multiple accounts, only a few minutes apart or even at the exact same time. This is indicative of a Twitter client or service that allows for massive posting from multiple accounts nearly simultaneously. (Tweets in gray are exact duplicates). This differs from "retweeting", where a message is intentionally duplicated, but with attribution to the original.

The second technique that the pro-government youth group uses is to create or purchase fake Twitter accounts (not an uncommon practice globally¹⁰⁵) to both tweet messages on a particular hashtag and to "follow" the pro-government youth group users in order to make it appear that they have a larger audience than they actually have.

hye-jack/

¹⁰⁴ Jennifer Earl, Heather McKee Hurwitz, Analicia Mejia Mesinas, Margaret Tolan, and Ashley Arlotti. 2013. *Information, Communication & Society* 16 (4) (May 21): 459–478. doi:10.1080/1369118X.2013.777756 and J. Penney, and C. Dadas. 2013. "(Re)Tweeting in the Service of Protest: Digital Composition and Circulation in the Occupy Wall Street Movement." *New Media & Society* (March 15): 1461444813479593-. doi:10.1177/1461444813479593.

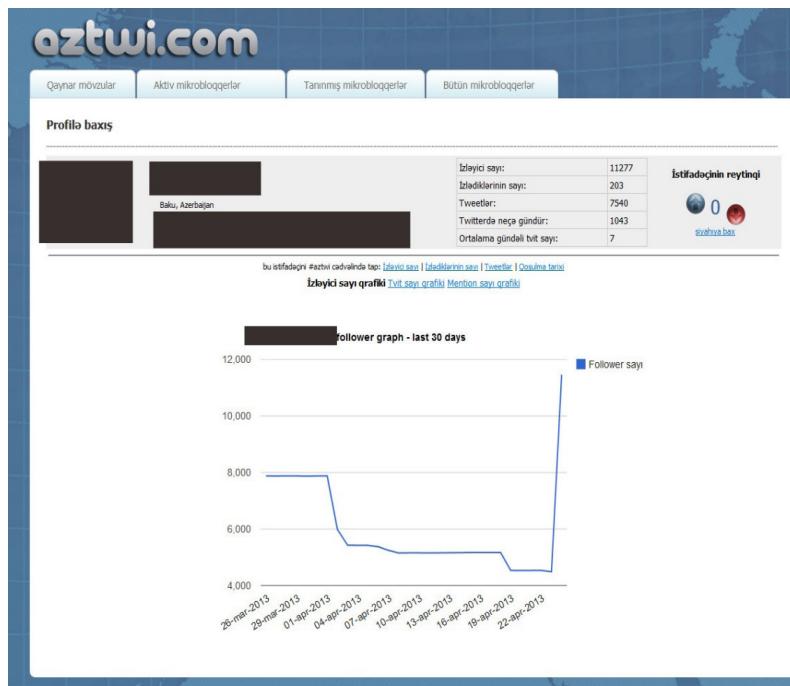
¹⁰⁵ http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/23/fashion/twitter-followers-for-sale.html?_r=0

Figure 3 Evidence of zombie tweets.

A	Q	R	S	T	U	V	
1 Vertex 1	Tweet	URLs in Tweet	Domains in Tweet	Hashtags in Tweet	Tweet Date (UTC)	Twitter ID for Tweet	
17 fxaqani	Planları baş tutmadı, Molotovsuz qa protestbaku ar	protestbaku	ar	3/10/2013 8:02	https://t.co/		
18 GunayEmra	Planları baş tutmadı, Molotovsuz qa protestbaku ar	protestbaku	ar	3/10/2013 8:45	https://t.co/		
19 ArxayFerec	Planları baş tutmadı, Molotovsuz qa protestbaku ic	protestbaku	ic	3/10/2013 8:06	https://t.co/		
20 SevinjKasur	Planları baş tutmadı, Molotovsuz qa protestbaku ic	protestbaku	ic	3/10/2013 9:19	https://t.co/		
21 adilogluadi	Praqada oturub Bakida insanları mit bakuprotest ar	praqada	oturub	Bakida insanları mit bakuprotest ar	#####	https://t.co/	
22 ArxayFerec	Protest Baku starts with Molotov #10mart moloto	Protest	Baku	starts with Molotov #1	0mart moloto	#####	https://t.co/
23 MuradAgab	Protest Baku starts with Molotov #1 10mart moloto	Protest	Baku	starts with Molotov #1	10mart moloto	#####	https://t.co/
24 Aziza_Mzao	Protest Baku starts with Molotov #1 10mart moloto	Protest	Baku	starts with Molotov #1	10mart moloto	#####	https://t.co/
25 Aslan_Azim	Protestors of the year: 2003-Isa Gan ireli molotovlu	Protestors	of the	year: 2003-Isa Gan	ireli molotovlu	#####	https://t.co/
26 imam_guliy	Protestors of the year: 2003-Isa Gan protestbaku m	Protestors	of the	year: 2003-Isa Gan	protestbaku m	#####	https://t.co/
27 Narmin_Ma	Protestors of the year: 2003-Isa Gan protestbaku m	Protestors	of the	year: 2003-Isa Gan	protestbaku m	#####	https://t.co/
28 mahmudza	Protestors of the year: 2003-Isa Gan protestbaku m	Protestors	of the	year: 2003-Isa Gan	protestbaku m	#####	https://t.co/
29 fxaqani	Protestors of the year: 2003-Isa Gan protestbaku m	Protestors	of the	year: 2003-Isa Gan	protestbaku m	#####	https://t.co/
30 Vusal_Qas	Protestors of the year: 2003-Isa Gan protestbaku m	Protestors	of the	year: 2003-Isa Gan	protestbaku m	#####	https://t.co/
31 MuradAgab	Protestors of the year: 2003-Isa Gan protestbaku m	Protestors	of the	year: 2003-Isa Gan	protestbaku m	#####	https://t.co/
32 Aziza_Mzao	Protestors of the year: 2003-Isa Gan protestbaku m	Protestors	of the	year: 2003-Isa Gan	protestbaku m	#####	https://t.co/
33 Nazaket_Al	Protestors of the year: 2003-Isa Gan protestbaku m	Protestors	of the	year: 2003-Isa Gan	protestbaku m	#####	https://t.co/
34 bekirli_elvi	Protestors of the year: 2003-Isa Gan protestbaku m	Protestors	of the	year: 2003-Isa Gan	protestbaku m	#####	https://t.co/
35 Orxan_Eliye	Protestors of the year: 2003-Isa Gan protestbaku m	Protestors	of the	year: 2003-Isa Gan	protestbaku m	#####	https://t.co/
36 sariyyaabuz	Protestors of the year: 2003-Isa Gan protestbaku m	Protestors	of the	year: 2003-Isa Gan	protestbaku m	#####	https://t.co/
37 Narmin_Ma	Pul qazanmagin yeni usulu muxalif protestbaku m	Pul	qazanmagin	yeni usulu muxalif	protestbaku m	3/10/2013 8:12	https://t.co/
38 IsaMuradov	Pul qazanmagin yeni usulu muxalif protestbaku m	Pul	qazanmagin	yeni usulu muxalif	protestbaku m	3/10/2013 8:17	https://t.co/
39 MuradAgab	Pul qazanmagin yeni usulu muxalif molotovlugen	Pul	qazanmagin	yeni usulu muxalif	molotovlugen	3/10/2013 8:13	https://t.co/
40 Rhesenov	Pul qazanmagin yeni usulu muxalif molotovlugen	Pul	qazanmagin	yeni usulu muxalif	molotovlugen	3/10/2013 8:16	https://t.co/
41 Aslan_Azim	Qaya qrupunun mahniisi:"Ay Xedice molotovlugen	Qaya	qrupunun	mahnisi:"Ay Xedice	molotovlugen	3/10/2013 8:30	https://t.co/
42 bekirli_elvi	Qaya qrupunun mahniisi:"Ay Xedice molotovlugen	Qaya	qrupunun	mahnisi:"Ay Xedice	molotovlugen	#####	https://t.co/
43 Rhesenov	Qaya qrupunun mahniisi:"Ay Xedice molotovlugen	Qaya	qrupunun	mahnisi:"Ay Xedice	molotovlugen	3/10/2013 8:33	https://t.co/
44 nargizgurba	Qaya qrupunun mahniisi:"Ay Xedice molotovlugen	Qaya	qrupunun	mahnisi:"Ay Xedice	molotovlugen	3/10/2013 8:34	https://t.co/
45 MuradAgab	Qaya qrupunun mahniisi:"Ay Xedice molotovlugen	Qaya	qrupunun	mahnisi:"Ay Xedice	molotovlugen	3/10/2013 8:35	https://t.co/
46 IkoAhmadb	Qaya qrupunun mahniisi:"Ay Xedice molotovlugen	Qaya	qrupunun	mahnisi:"Ay Xedice	molotovlugen	3/10/2013 8:37	https://t.co/
47 RaufMardiyy	Rebecca Vincent isn't important en ireli azerbaijan	Rebecca	Vincent	isn't important en	ireli azerbaijan	3/9/2013 23:48	https://t.co/
48 RaufMardiyy	Rebekka Vinsent #ireli'dən 152 tvit	Rebekka	Vinsent	#ireli'dən 152 tvit	ireli molotovlu	3/9/2013 23:49	https://t.co/
49 Quseynov9	Rebekka Vinsent #ireli'dən 152 tvit	Rebekka	Vinsent	#ireli'dən 152 tvit	ireli molotovlu	3/10/2013 0:01	https://t.co/
50 EdibAyar	RT @AnarAsadov: bu da demokrata molotovlugen	RT	@AnarAsadov:	bu da demokrata	molotovlugen	3/10/2013 8:41	https://t.co/
51 xalid90	RT @ArxayFerecli: @eminmilli artiq molotovlugen	RT	@ArxayFerecli:	@eminmilli artiq	molotovlugen	3/10/2013 8:25	https://t.co/
52 farxad_ibrahimov	RT @ArxayFerecli: @eminmilli artiq molotovlugen	RT	@ArxayFerecli:	@eminmilli artiq	molotovlugen	3/10/2013 8:27	https://t.co/
53 Quseynov9	RT @ArxayFerecli: @eminmilli artiq molotovlugen	RT	@ArxayFerecli:	@eminmilli artiq	molotovlugen	3/10/2013 8:54	https://t.co/
54 93Hesenov	RT @ArxayFerecli: @eminmilli artiq molotovlugen	RT	@ArxayFerecli:	@eminmilli artiq	molotovlugen	3/10/2013 9:09	https://t.co/

Figure 4 tracks the pro-government youth group's chairman's personal Twitter account. On the day before April 24, Armenian Genocide Memorial Day, his Twitter followers tripled.

Figure 4. Evidence of an artificial increase in the number of followers



An analysis of his followers (see Figure 5) showed that the majority are obviously fake accounts. Normally Twitter users have written at least one tweet and follow some people. Furthermore, no native English speaker would write his or her location as CANADA, Regina or USA, Connecticut. (The second column is number of followers, the third is number of tweets.)

Created accounts are also common. In an analysis of the October 2013 Azerbaijani presidential election hashtag, created accounts were found. In February 2013, hundreds of accounts were created within minutes of each other. These accounts were tweeting the same messages at the exact same time. Moreover, a reverse image search of the profile photographs of these created users determined that the images were found to be freely available on the Internet and used on dozens of different websites, associated with multiple countries and names.¹⁰⁶

Mimicking profiles

Perhaps the most creative Twitter shenanigans that the Azerbaijani government and its allies has engaged in is creating Twitter profiles that mimic the profiles of some of the most popular opposition Twitter users.

¹⁰⁶ <http://www.katypearce.net/shenanagins-again-and-again/>

Figure 5. Evidence of fake Twitter accounts

8606	Doggan_73896	0	6	5 thinks that friends help you move but real friends help you mo Canada, Greater Sudbury
8607	Kris74495	0	6	5 a close talker Canada, Edmonton
8608	Trautman_33216	0	6	5 He who laughs last thinks slowest. CANADA, Halifax
8609	Echokmosa	1	6	5 sdriwicab gnpT Canada, Richmond
8610	Lakesha88868	0	6	4 isn't buying an apple ipad. Period of time. Canada, Toronto
8611	Melia_4704	0	6	5 is so cool which he wasn't delivered, he had been let loo CANADA, Edmonton
8612	Making_04213	0	6	5 Just saved a bunch of money on my Mental Insurance by switch CANADA, Medicine Hat
8613	Pfenning_81568	0	6	5 Will not bump weather; nine-tenths of those could not take up CANADA, Iqaluit
8614	Blanch_5735	0	6	5 's friend, Eddie, spends several hours a day lubricating a CANADA, Regina
8615	Audry48673	0	6	5 considers which friends assist you to shift but actual buddies Canada, Ottawa
8616	Lucienne49333	0	6	5
8617	Iona_aocc	0	6	5 sure that they misundrestimated me! Canada, Lethbridge
8618	Berthamptsg	0	6	5 is actually telling you in which 742. Several pct of data are mac Canada, Grande Prairie
8619	Kelliyezv	0	6	5 when I'm at the supermarket I like to look at my cashier: Canada, Grande Prairie
8620	Freddie_5805	0	6	5 Researchers at the Mayo Clinic have found a way to slow the a Canada, Iqaluit
8621	Davnya_9303	0	6	5 Most of us can keep a key. It is the individuals all of us inform i CANADA, Medicine Hat
8622	Sherises4655	0	6	5
8623	Blondell_estz	0	6	5 wonders is the Hokey Pokey is really what it's all ab CANADA, Iqaluit
8624	Eilda_jubl	0	6	5 isn't 49. Fifty, I am 49.5 additionally tax. Canada, Greater Sudbury
8625	Ruben_97739	0	6	5 needs somebody to answer for me, what is it exactly that the Canada, Fredericton
8626	Victoria27573	0	6	5
8627	Clarissa18307	0	6	5 In the event that in the beginning you are trying and don't CANADA, Medicine Hat
8628	Alana1tdg2	0	6	5 when I'm at the supermarket I like to look at my cashier : Canada, Yellowknife
8629	Keniston_70315	0	6	5 should win best performance in pretending to understand the CANADA, Charlottetown
8630	Harp_39890	0	6	4
8631	Claudiaxchug	0	6	5 is actually remembering North America Day putting on their t CANADA, Hamilton
8632	Merrileed2630	0	6	5 not the droid you're looking for. CANADA, Lethbridge
8633	Cervantes_75444	0	6	5 didn't say it was your fault... I'm just blaming you... CANADA, Red Deer
8634	Suellen_ybeh	0	6	5 The USA should invade the USA and win the hearts and minds : CANADA, Mississauga
8635	Shalon_wlud	0	6	5
8636	Michael_8101	0	6	5 wonders if illiterate people get the full effect of Alphabet Soup Canada, Calgary
8637	Isaura_pueg	1	6	5 is going around telling people that you're really 16 Canada, Medicine Hat
8638	Creolidepej	0	6	5 bubble boy Canada, Montreal
8639	FaraJ_08879	0	6	5
8640	Anneliese_2206	0	6	5 's friend, Eddie, spends several hours a day lubricating a Canada, Richmond Hill
8641	Risa_zvh	0	6	5 raging against the machine! Canada, Whitehorse
8642	Shanicejpwe	0	6	5 is rushing to KFC to get a Double Down Combo... Fries, Drink a Canada, Calgary
8643	Consuelo_4093	0	6	5
8644	Tatiana_bylm	1	6	5 believes at the woman's age, getting lucky signifies findi Canada, Sault Ste. Marie
8645	Kenneth_3757	0	6	5 is having a beer on this glorious Sunday morning. After all, bee CANADA, Red Deer
8646	Consuelo80526	0	6	5 allow canines out there CANADA, Toronto
8647	Brande_6955	0	6	5
8648	Migneault_88147	0	6	5 in a gadda da vida baby CANADA, Mississauga
8649	Seandhord	0	6	5 wonders if illiterate people get the full effect of Alphabet Soup Canada, Barrie
8650	Neudtimes	0	6	5 is DANGEROUSLY under-medicated. CANADA, Winnipeg
8651	Devindgrx	0	6	5 says there's my life. Deal with it. Oh, wait, can't prc Canada, Grande Prairie
8652	Amyloydr	0	6	5 InchesDude what exactly are an individual doing?! That isn't just that in Alaska, CANADA, Red Deer
8653	September07519	1	6	5 knows what the Bush Doctrine is. It's just that in Alaska, CANADA, Red Deer
8654	Gaegeam20764	0	6	5 says only within Europe..... are there disability auto parking a Canada, Whitehorse
8655	Gena_msly	0	6	5 is status-free Canada, Montreal
8656	Shalon58096	0	6	5 thinking inside the box because too many people are thinking CANADA, Yellowknife
8657	Jackie14139	0	6	5 Hey my vegetarian friends, just a reminder that my food poop: CANADA, Toronto
8658	Alvardo_70143	0	6	5
8659	Mandi_zaq	0	6	5 is actually nominated the best assisting actor or actress insid CANADA, Barrie
8660	Adina_5026	0	6	5 sure that they misundrestimated me! CANADA, Ottawa
8661	Nanci72398	0	6	5 It's really a occur whenever your region has an being ove CANADA, Grande Prairie
8662	Maurine_nreg	0	6	5 pretends to be effective. These people make believe you spen CANADA, Montreal
8663	Kamala_jhs	0	6	5 afraid of Americans CANADA, Edmonton

During the March 10 protest, opposition activists Emin Milli, with the Twitter username of @eminmilli and Adnan Hajizada, with the Twitter username of @fuserlimon, were tweeting posts with the hashtag #protest-baku, retweeting Twitter posts from their friends, and writing @replies to other users. After a few hours and some tweets from both of these men that seemed odd, other Twitter users realized that the accounts were not Milli and Hajizada, but rather mimicking accounts with @eminmiili and @fuserlemon. (Both with significantly fewer followers than the men's real Twitter accounts have.) However, with the exact photographs in their Twitter profiles and only one letter different, it was easy to fool others (See Figure 6).

Figure 6. A fake Twitter Account



Emin Milli
@eminmilli
I am dissident writer living in Azerbaijan. Baku, Azerbaijan - eminmilli.posterous.com

78 TWEETS 374 FOLLOWING 23 FOLLOWERS [Follow](#)

Tweets

Emin Milli @eminmilli 11 mins
@GulselSafarova Siz anlayanda gec olacag xanım!
[View conversation](#)

Emin Milli @eminmilli 13 mins
@niyazaliyev @fxaqani @RaufMardihev Tərbiyiniz elə buna catır!
Həyat yoldaşım orada meydanda idi. Digərlərinin həyat
yoldaşlarında fərgil!
[View conversation](#)

Emin Milli @eminmilli 16 mins
@EFatullayev Turan kək obyichno polzuetseya doverchivostyu
çitatelей K sожалению! #protestbaku
[View conversation](#)

Emin Milli @eminmilli 18 mins
@GulselSafarova Xanım yanılırsınız! Səhfinizi anlayanda cox gec
olacag! #protestbaku
[View conversation](#)

Emin Milli @eminmilli 19 mins
@fxaqani Biza hec bir şey edə bilməyacəksiniz!!! @RaufMardihev
#protestbaku
[View conversation](#)

Emin Milli @eminmilli 20 mins
@QanTural @narminkamal həmin 3 gənci şəxsan tanıyıram. Cox
əqidəli gənclər idil! Əsl NIDA-cılar idilər! #protestbaku
[View conversation](#)

Katy Pearce @katypearce 24 mins
Caucasus aren't giving me a break today.
 Retweeted by Emin Milli
[Expand](#)

Kompromat

Kompromat, meaning “compromising material” or “blackmail files,” “refers to discrediting information that can be collected, stored, traded, or used strategically across all domains: political, electoral, legal, professional, judicial, media, or business.”¹⁰⁷ Kompromat can be character assassination, blackmail, and manipulation of public opinion. Today it usually implies unsubstantiated or unproven damaging information. Szilagyi further defines kompromat as information with intent to denounce, expose, unmask, slander, destroy, or neutralize. Kompromat functions as a commodity for mass consumption, as a weapon to destroy opponents, and for bargaining and blackmail. Ledeneva finds that about 90% of kompromat is perceived as fabricated, yet it remains a popular political technique.¹⁰⁸

Ledeneva’s typology of kompromat includes political, economic, criminal, and private.

Political kompromat consists of political activities such as abuse of power, relationships with oligarchs, or political disloyalty. Economic kompromat includes misappropriation of budget funds, embezzlement, and bribery. Criminal kompromat includes ties to organized crime, contract violence and killings, and spying. Private kompromat includes illegal income, sexual behavior and orientation, unpopular ideologies, and family member misbehavior. Private kompromat, according to Ledeneva, is the most effective because of the strong social prejudice against these activities.¹⁰⁹

Kompromat is nothing new in Azerbaijan, but the Internet provides an effective and fast channel for kompromat dissemination. While kompromat has been disseminated in various ways, in late April 2013, the website <http://www.ictimaipalatka.com/> and in early May 2013, <http://www.gelherekati.com> opened with the exclusive task of kompromat dissemination. Registered under a seemingly fake name for Ictimai Palataka and with a privacy service for Gel Here Kati, these sites are updated multiple times a day with videos, photographs, and cartoons, many of a sexual nature, featuring opposition members. The production quality is very high. The “sex tape” videos appear to be either coincidental lookalikes or hired lookalikes. The photographs appear to be photoshopped, but look fairly professional.

¹⁰⁷ Alena Ledeneva. 2006. *How Russia Really Works*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

¹⁰⁸ Ledeneva. 2006. *How Russia Really Works..*

¹⁰⁹ Ledeneva 2006. *How Russia Really Works.*

Impact of Government Control of the Internet

The Azerbaijani government effectively controls the Internet by focusing on second and third generation means of control. By using psychological techniques as well as selectively punishing online dissent, it creates an environment of self-censorship. By not engaging in a great deal of first generation controls, the government can claim that it is not blocking access to content. Yet, second and third generation controls are likely more effective because of the psychological effect and creation of a self-censoring user base. Trolling is a particularly effective means of controlling and deterring dissent in Azerbaijan, in part because there is little that a target can do about it. The government's co-opting of some of the social media strategies of the opposition may continue beyond memes and trolling. While GONGOs have less need for fundraising than opposition groups do, activities like the pro-government youth group's social media academy¹¹⁰ demonstrate that there is increased interest in using social media. And certainly, as Internet penetration grows in Azerbaijan, opportunities for citizens to demonstrate their loyalty online will continue.

Currently the psychological techniques and selective punishment are working in the Azerbaijani government's favor. However, if Internet use continues to grow, it may need to increase either the quantity or type of those punished or deepen the punishments. While the "Donkey Blogger" case possibly had a slight negative impact on the global public opinion of Azerbaijan, it did little to deter the government from further punishment of online dissent. With the adoption of the new online defamation law, there may be no need for a "cover story" of hooliganism or drug use because the online action itself can be punished. It remains to be seen if this new law will increase sentences for online actions, but certainly it provides an easier path for taking such action.

Conclusion

Azerbaijan is a unique case for understanding the political use of the Internet because, while it is the primary space that the opposition has to disseminate information (to varying degrees of success), the government responds with a multilevel system of control, with a particular focus on effective psychological means of control. This article is not meant to be a case study of the failure of the Internet as a tool for democratization, but rather points out that, as Oates argues, "[U]nderstanding how particular nations harness the power of the Internet illuminates how national power can limit the international potential of a communications technology."¹¹¹

¹¹⁰ <http://news.az/articles/society/76906> and
<http://ireli.az/en/announcements/20130530043807690.html>

¹¹¹ Sarah Oates. 2013. *Revolution Stalled: The Political Limits of the Internet in the Post-Soviet Sphere*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Page 26-27

It is important to note that the third generation tools of control used by the government are often focused on those engaged in connective action. It is possible that these new action networks are more difficult, even frustrating, for the Azerbaijani government to deal with. The government knows how to understand the traditional opposition parties and has an infrastructure for managing the opposition. With connective action-enabled networks, there is much greater uncertainty about motivations, behaviors, activities, and future prospects. It is perhaps because of this that the government has become increasingly heavy handed in its control of the digital space – including offline punishments for online activities.

The existing and likely growing potential for conflict between the traditional opposition organizations and the connective action organizations could provide an opportunity for the government to exploit these divisions and further fracture the opposition and weaken all the groups.