



Facebook

as a Campaign Platform in Armenia

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FACEBOOK AS A CAMPAIGN PLATFORM IN ARMENIA: PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS STUDY (December, 2012 – April, 2013) General Conclusions

THREE ELECTORAL PROCESSES ON FACEBOOK IN ONE YEAR

In May 2013 elections for Yerevan Elders' Council were the third electoral process, marked by the participation of Facebook social network in one year.

Back last May Region Research Center conducted its first study of Facebook as a campaign tool in the course of Parliamentary elections which aimed to find out which of the three main functions of Facebook (circulation of information, organization of propaganda campaigns and communication with the electorate) was more extensively utilized by the political forces.

- At that time it was found out that the first ever involvement of Facebook in the electoral process was the trial of the social network by the political forces.
- We also observed that for the political forces and the candidates who came out for the political struggle Facebook mainly served as a new channel to disseminate information among a reliable audience with some potential within the Armenian reality.
- In this time period, as usual, the so-called Facebook community would determine the climate on Facebook, which unlike the political forces that joined or became active on the network on the occasion of Presidential elections, felt more confident in the various environments on the network.

The results of monitoring throughout the Presidential elections process (pre-campaign stage, the official campaign stage, Silence Day, Election Day and the two post-election months) and those of partial monitoring of Yerevan Elders' Council election campaign stage, and the revealed trends that immediately followed the Presidential elections, are presented in the previous issues of the bulletin in much detail (Facebook as a Campaign Platform in Armenia: Presidential Elections N1, N2, and N3, See <http://www.regioncenter.info/hy/projects/5.html>).

The study revealed quite another reality in Facebook, considerably distinct in its quality.

FACEBOOK AS THE ORGANIZER OF POLITICAL PROCESSES

Throughout all the three stages of Presidential elections, along with the circulation of diverse and extensive volumes of information, targeted at political causes, attempts were made to organize various actions. In the past the main entities to make use of the organizational possibilities of Facebook were various civic groups and initiatives.

It is true that these attempts made by the political figures would yield fruit in some cases and in others they would remain only at the stage of a startup, just as it was with the Presidential candidate Arman Melikyan. Through his special page on Facebook he aimed to mobilize RA citizens residing abroad, calling to them to notify and help find out whether their surnames were included in the electoral registers or not. The candidate assumed that in this way it would be possible to uncover the principal mechanism of electoral forgery, and the criminal practice of voting for the governmental candidate on behalf of the people not residing in the country would be proven.

This proposal, however, was not largely responded to by the people living abroad, and the initiative failed, regardless of its creativity. We assume this was for a number of reasons. The RA citizens living abroad did not respond because they were unwilling to make the fact of their being an RA citizen known in the countries of their residence. It is no secret that few of RA citizens, “well-settled” in foreign, and especially western countries have introduced themselves as RA citizens to get a residency permit.

Even though the initiative failed, both this and other successful initiatives, undertaken by other candidates, should be regarded as a new phenomenon for the Facebook environment.

Facebook was the first platform where some candidates’ announcements were first published, with various traditional media catching up. The Facebook status generated by the Presidential candidate, Chairman of the Liberty Party H. Bagratyan on his determination to run for office, may serve as a relevant example of the above-mentioned. It was again this candidate that selected one of his campaign slogans at the proposition of Facebook users. The public first learnt of the nomination of two other candidates – A. Ghukasyan and V. Sedrakyan – via Facebook, too.

Up until the Election Day it was possible to correlate and compare both the nature and the number of various mobilization activities, undertaken by Presidential candidates and their supporters.

The intensive utilization of the mobilization function of Facebook began at the post-election stage (during BaREVOLUTION, until the protest actions of April 9th). This was mostly due to the Heritage Party team, its members and supporters, who appealed the official results of the elections.

Along with organizing various actions on the real physical square, our monitoring group would record also so-called “purely Facebook actions,” limited to the virtual space: the dissemination of congratulatory flyers and cards to R. Hovannisian that opened with Facebook “hellos” (later, termed as “barev writing”), the dissemination of electronic flyers, appealing to join a demonstration or rally at a fixed time on a concrete date, and in general, calling to join BaREVOLUTION and so on.

All the examples of this kind testify to the following:

- Facebook has not just penetrated into the electoral processes in Armenia, but it has turned into an influential social and political communication channel. And this phenomenon – the active participation of the social media in significant internal processes – must be regarded as irreversible.

FACEBOOK AS AN INDISPENSIBLE CAMPAIGN TOOL

In the course of Presidential elections we observed some quite active and some fairly passive stages on Facebook for the political forces, which were involved in or had withdrawn from the elections. And this apparently came from their political decisions.

Thus, in December 2012, among most heated discussions on the format of the participation of this or that political force in the elections, or to put it differently, on the issue of participation and non-participation in general, the Facebook activities of the representatives and the supporters of all these forces were quite comparable.

They shared diverse content, participated in and initiated different discussions, debates, and brief anti-propaganda campaigns.

Ever since the launch of the official campaign (January 21st), the political forces that withdrew from the elections – ANC, PAP, and ARF – were relatively inarticulate also on Facebook, with this silence broken from time to time by the Facebook activists who supported them.

The same style of writing sustained into the post-election stage. Even though at a larger scale the circumstance of non-participation was not supposed to impose silence and a timeout onto the so-called “political outsiders” on Facebook, too.

And on the contrary, after the political decision to participate in the elections of Yerevan Elders’ Council, starting from the second half of March, when in fact the wave of post Presidential election developments had not faded out yet, the representatives of the above-mentioned forces restarted their activities on Facebook. Some of the 8 Presidential candidates started separate pages as

candidates on the eve of these elections. The others, in addition to the traditional means, would disseminate information also through mailing lists and through other channels.

But they all used Facebook as a campaign tool. We have already mentioned that the candidate of the ruling party S. Sargsyan did not have a Facebook page after his name, but he also made use of Facebook as a campaign tool, since his interests were promoted and his campaign was advanced on Facebook by the members of his party.

For four candidates (Arman Melikyan, Andrias Ghukasyan, Aram Harutyunyan, V. Sedrakyan) Facebook was their only “own” means to disseminate information.

All these facts give us sufficient ground to assert that

- Facebook has become an indispensable political tool, applied in electoral processes.

Interactivity: Facebook Audiences

In the course of the past year the number of Facebook users from Armenia constantly grew.

According to the data provided by the socialbakers.com company on Armenia, in the period between April 2012 and April 2013, marked by the Parliamentary and Presidential elections, as well as the official campaign stage of Yerevan Elders’ Council, the number of the users grew respectively from 280.000 to 443.000.

In the course of the last ten days of April 2013, again according to the indicators provided by socialbakers.com, Facebook users approximately amounted to one third – 32.4% of Internet users in the country (<http://www.socialbakers.com/facebook-statistics/armenia>).

The numbers quoted are not absolute, rather approximate, since first of all the indicators tend to alter quite dynamically, and within a couple of days we may record a significant sharp rise, just as it happened in some periods previously, too.

And secondly, under this circumstance we believed it more important to monitor not the increase or decrease in the numbers of Facebook users, but rather how these changes in the number of Facebook users related to the significant processes underway in the country.

Hence, is the increase in the users’ number conditioned by the need to hold campaigns, present and promote the interests of some political forces on Facebook in the course of the elections?

This was a central issue also because it was possible to decide

- What the correlation between the growth in the number of a candidate's Facebook supporters and the abrupt rise in the total number of Facebook users is,
- Whether those indicators reflect the real number of supporters political forces and candidates have.

These issues were more than problems, posing merely research interest also because there was quite an apparent tendency of competing with Facebook ratings in the course of the two most recent electoral processes.

It should be straightforwardly mentioned that when categorizing the dynamics of the data published by socialbakers.com in accordance with the chronology of the key stages in the last two elections, we discovered a considerable increase in the users' number: about 35.000 new accounts were opened on Facebook around April 5 – 6, that is, on the eve of the launch of the official campaign for Yerevan Elders' Council elections. To compare, it would suffice to mention that such an increase in the number of Facebook users was not recorded either before or during the official campaign for Presidential elections.

This table presents the data provided by socialbakers.com
(<http://www.socialbakers.com/facebook-statistics/armenia>)

Time period - 2013	Number of Facebook users from Armenia
January 21 st (First day of the official campaign for Presidential elections)	376.820
February 16 th (Last day of the official campaign for Presidential elections)	395.340
February 17 th – April 15 th	395.340
April 7 th (First day of the official campaign of Yerevan Elders' Council elections)	433.060
April 17 th (10 th day of the official campaign for Yerevan Elders' Council elections)	441.060

The Facebook ratings of the 5 media outlets, operating mainly as dailies that we monitored in the course of our study have not risen sharply. In the reporting period their audience was enlarged from about 2000 likes to about 4000 likes. About 90% of the audiences of these media outlets are consumers from Armenia (the source of the last indicator is <http://www.socialbakers.com/facebook-pages/media/armenia/>).

The table presents indicators, published by the media outlets on their own Facebook pages

Media outlet	21.01.13		16.02.13	
	Like	Talk about	Like	Talk about
Lragir.am	8721	293	10951	1917
Zham.am	13509	641	13612	701
Tert.am	72925	7482	74576	6334
News.am	70693	3648	73405	3398
1in.am	74659	3798	79212	5394

No considerable changes have been recorded on the presidential candidates' pages either, apart from the one belonging to R. Hovannisian, whose Fan audience in the post-election period rose very abruptly, at a rate largely exceeding the respective indicators of the above-mentioned media outlets. In the course of the campaign the number of "Likes" on R. Hovannisian's page grew by about 7000, and in the post-election period by about 24.000. On the last day of our study – April 9th – this indicator had gone up to 32.090.

All these indicators testify to the fact that particularly in R. Hovhannisian's case the number of "Likes" on his page was a sign of solidarity with and support for his actions in the post-election period. However, these actions were later accompanied by a more modest number of supportive signs (for more details see [http://www.regioncenter.info/static/bulletins/Facebook and Presidential Elections N3 arm.pdf](http://www.regioncenter.info/static/bulletins/Facebook%20and%20Presidential%20Elections%20N3%20arm.pdf)).

A page for Yerevan Elders' Council elections opened on April 1st and named "A Better Yerevan" is the campaign platform of the RPA candidate for Yerevan Mayor, the incumbent Mayor Taron Margayan

(http://www.regioncenter.info/static/bulletins/Facebook_and_Presidential_Elections_N3_arm.pdf).

Within 25 days it hit about 43.790 “Likes.”

The rapid growth brought about heated discussions among Facebook users.

There were users who complained about not having liked the page, but having appeared on its fan list.

It is certainly difficult to tell what technologies were applied in order to ensure such a record page rating, unattainable for any candidate in the course of Presidential elections. However, on the first days of the operation of the page we managed to figure out one of the technologies applied. This was a simple advertising trap.

Thus, at the beginning of April, when the April 9 parallel swearing-in ceremonies of the elected and unelected Presidents were being actively discussed in the real and virtual network spaces, along with protests to be organized, two quite intriguing links appeared on Facebook advertisement section: *Raffi Hovannisian’s Last Call to the Armenian People* and *Tsarukyan Forbids Raffi to Hold a Demonstration on April 9th, or Else...*

In order to access these materials, the user was asked to click on the “Like” button. Subsequently, it turned out that the user had liked Taron Margaryan’s page “A Better Yerevan.”

- In Presidential elections the incidents with or the actions of the candidates, initially not on the agenda, for example the assassination attempt against P. Hayrikyan, the hunger strikes of A. Ghukasyan and R. Hovannisian, and the detainment of V. Sedrakyan did not impact on the number of their page fans, resulting neither in intensive growth, nor in reduction.
- It should also be underlined that, in general, the so-called fan audiences do not reflect the true number of a politician’s supporters. Among these fans it is possible to come across with active representatives of the opposite party, aiming to follow each other’s actions and to always be “in touch” in order to oppose and debate with each other, if appropriate.

What Are Facebook Users from Armenia Looking for on Facebook, if ...

as alleged by a number of specialists, Facebook has a number of so-called “side effects?”

- Meanwhile, media outlets and civil groups that sympathize with different political forces are also partaking in campaign processes on Facebook every single one of which promotes its own propaganda platform, thus creating a hard-to-digest information menu for the undecided voter.

- In the course of the political struggle numerous fake accounts emerge which start disseminating misinformation, do black PR and do not let the average potential voter to tell the real from the artificial.
- And finally, what does Facebook propaganda give in terms of influence, if at large the mass of people represented here have concrete preferences, and it is difficult to make them shift from one camp to another.

These are definitely relevant questions since they reflect the current reality in the Armenian segment of Facebook.

But not the whole of it. Since on the other hand, Facebook is a virtual and an additional job for a public figure with a number of extra possibilities unavailable to this figure on other platforms.

Here public figures can

- Design their own political agendas and act accordingly,
- Constantly “be in touch” with their supporters and adherents, as well as opponents and groups, to be aware of the developments in their own and opponents’ camps and the debate motivations, and to respond to these in a timely manner.
- Present exclusive materials and come into the focus of traditional media’s attention. It is already an established practice by a number of media outlets in Armenia to actively reprint Facebook comments, for they are exclusive.
- Have constant audiences and follow their perceptions, thus being aware of the attitude of Facebook users from Armenia to their own writing style, and this is a factor that cannot be currently ensured by any other media outlet (including television).
- Propaganda on Facebook is free of charge. Various slips, linguistic, propaganda and other kinds of mistakes, may however “cost a lot.” They immediately become topics for humor, sarcasm, and black PR. Memes are formed on their bases, which are also circulated beyond the virtual space of Facebook.
- But at the same time there are unlimited possibilities of responding to sarcasm with sarcasm, and with equivalent content to black PR.
- It is possible to bring in new terms for public discussion, terms that did not use to be of such great urgency before (propaganda struggle inside the country, hunger strike as a means of political struggle, the new formatting of the opposition, various means of civil disobedience, structures alternative to the state, civic councils and so on).
- And in the end, Facebook gives a possibility to draw up information lists that meet one’s interests, and provides with a possibility to watch live stream broadcasts while following immediate

responses to them on the same wall.

- This is the reason why today Facebook is not a platform to merely host various civil initiatives and activities of active citizens, as it was only a couple of years ago.
- Currently Facebook has become a space and a tool of political and propaganda struggle.

WHAT ARE WE DEALING WITH NOW?

This last factor may radically change the traditional schemes of pre-election campaigns in Armenia, and consequently, it may also impact on the methodology applied, while studying the specificities of campaign efficiency, format, and content.

Before the development of online media and the wide spread of Internet access for the people in Armenia, there were only two driving forces for pre-election campaigns: the candidates to be voted for and the channels they used to be presented to the public. In the conditions of this unilateral information flow the electorate played only a passive role.

The main goal and methodology of various campaign means were fully in line with this logic and in essence came down to answer one question - “What are the possibilities given to a political force to present their own standpoints?” To cut it short, the study aimed to find out how much newspaper volume/air time is allocated to concrete political forces in the course of the campaign, and whether the received results comply with the established legislative norms.

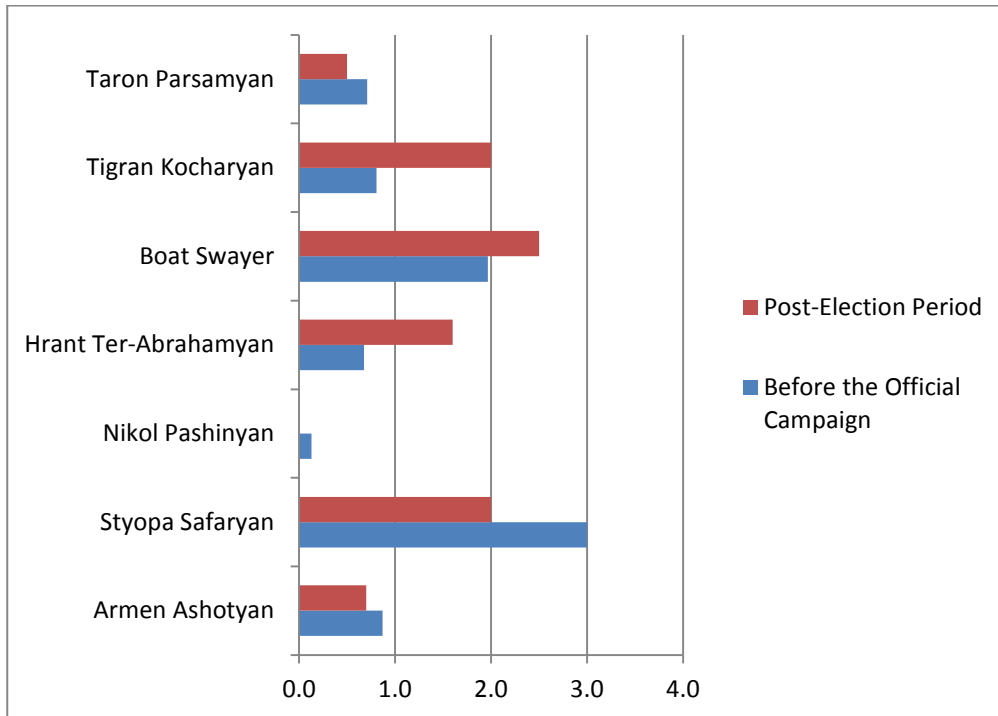
At the stage of the spread of Internet media the political forces received more possibilities to present their standpoints to the public. In the end, they could open their own websites, to have their own Internet media, including Internet TV.

However, taking into consideration the undeniably lower level of Internet access in Armenia only five years ago, the possibility of acting through a party’s own website could not yet be as efficient as the attempt to distribute CDs and to inform people on the electoral and post-election developments via cell phones, practiced in the 2008 Presidential elections. At this stage the study of election campaign continued to develop after the above-mentioned scheme. This was the only right route.

In the course of the past two years a massive shift towards Facebook social network was recorded in Armenia, including political forces and civil movements, adhering to politics, famous authoritative figures, journalists and others.

The course of our one-year long (with short intervals) study of Facebook of our center showed that a group of political figures and young activists was formed in Armenia whose activities in this period are comparable with bloggers' activities.

Degree of Average Daily Activity of Political Figures and Facebook Activities Monitored



Judging by the published data, the Facebook audiences of the above-listed figures are comparable with the audiences of media outlets, considered serious information bodies in Armenia. And they keep growing.

Apparently, time has come to call these individuals “*political figures of the new media space.*”

Today we can assert that

- Apart from socially significant activities, popular political actions in Armenia are in some way related to Facebook social network.
- In electoral processes, along with the candidates running for election and the media, the electorate has also begun to act in the information space not as a passive target of propaganda activities, but rather an active third party.

The changing mechanisms of election campaign and relevant processes in Armenia require the development and application of new methods of study while analyzing them.

In essence, our work was an example of the development and trial of those methods.