Facebook

as a Campaign Platform in Armenia

Electronic Bulletin N4

2012 Armenian Parliamentary Elections on Facebook

2012 RA Parliamentary elections on Facebook:

Executive Summary

This study of the 2012 Parliamentary elections coverage by political forces and Armenian electronic media via Facebook social network has been conducted by Region Research Center within a project implemented with the financial support of Open Society Foundations - Armenia.

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Why and How Did We Choose to Monitor Facebook?

Psychologists at Bergen University, Norway, have recently developed a unique test, with only 6 rather primitive questions. This test helps the currently 845 million Facebook users all over the world to assess for themselves how dependent on this social network they are. Two years ago the triumphant spread of Facebook was accounted for more extensive geographic coverage and the new account holders, joining the network from different countries. Today more in-depth criteria used in Facebook studies, such as:

How much time during the day do users devote to Facebook?

What is the attendance rate of users from different countries during the day?

What the majority of the users look for in this network: information, discussions, correspondence, a constantly open platform for public statements, or rather an audience to promote their own activity?

How does the virtuality of Facebook impact on the political and social reality in different countries all over the world?

These criteria have not yet been assessed for Armenia, and we can only make approximate assumptions on these matters. Even more so, since the users' activity and the time they spend on Facebook, the nature of this activity and the content they share is conditioned by the moment in time (elections, other socially significant developments, or summer and Christmas vacations with an appropriate level of relaxation).

However, there are general indicators on an average Facebook user. According to the data, published by FINAM Holding, a month Facebook users spend five times more time on Facebook (about 6 hours and 35 minutes) than on the most popular search engine Google (with an indicator of an hour and 21 minutes, see http://www.finam.ru/investments/promo00009/default.asp).

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Thus, we can conclude that Facebook provides its users with what they are looking for and what they actually need. By the way, this is true for Facebook users all over the place.

This gives media outlets additional audiences and enables to increase traffic. Political and social figures as well as the organizations they affiliate with are given an opportunity to enlarge the number of their followers and supporters and maintain contacts with the public, thus enjoying constant visibility and becoming well-recognized and renowned by the general public. Facebook serves as a free, though quite an effective advertising channel. And individual users are given an opportunity to establish contacts and stay in touch with them, receive alternative information and express their opinions on this or that event.

Facebook Users from Armenia in the First Half of 2012

From January to late this June the number of users from Armenia increased rapidly from 193 thousand to 304.460. During the first fortnight of July the number of Facebook users from Armenia increased by additional 6.660, and the total number of Facebook users from Armenia amounted to 311.280.

In February we witnessed a rapid growth in users' numbers– the 193.000 users, holding Facebook accounts on the eve of the Parliamentary elections in Armenia, were joined by over 100.000 new account holders in the following two months.

By other data, provided by Socialbakers.com statistical website, the degree of the use of Facebook by general population was 10.26% as of the end of June.

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The general picture of users' age groups did not change in the past six months. The largest group is made up by younger users, aged 18 – 24, followed by young people, aged 25 – 34, with users aged 35 – 44, coming third. In general, people aged 18 and over make up 84% of Facebook users in Armenia, which makes Facebook activity more important in the context of electoral, political and other social processes.

Since last autumn some political figures, already former members of the Parliament, signed up to Facebook. New Facebook groups were opened, and new online media outlets emerged in the Armenian electronic domain with a concurrent representation on Facebook.

Even the three well-known political parties (RPA, ARF and Prosperous Armenia), which had never had a problem with being constantly visible to the public (each of them disposes of one or more TV channels), started to present not only their central headquarters, cells and leaders, but also their local bodies and youth organizations on Facebook.

The Prosperous Armenia Party was especially noted in this regard, since it was presented on Facebook in multiple directions at the same time with the official page of the party, its leader's page, and the pages of the local bodies, functioning in almost all communities throughout the Republic. The content would often overlap, however, the representation of the Prosperous Armenia Party was quite impressive and assumed quite broad, as the party obviously believed.

In January we observed that the high-ranking officials of the RA – the Prime Minister, the former Speaker of the National Assembly, and a number of Ministers, as well as a number of other renowned social and political figures, also held personal Facebook pages. Meanwhile, there were no "Facebook clones" in the Armenian segment of Facebook. Even if we detected a few pages with the same name, the analysis of their timelines showed that one page was sequential to the other, which means that initially the group came up with one page, but continued their activity on a newly launched page.

The fact that there were no "clone Facebook pages" with the names and photos of the figures we focused on, on the one hand, facilitated our activities, and on the other, highlighted the intention of using Facebook seriously. The situation was different from that in Ukraine, for example, where it was possible to find 193 Facebook pages with the name and photo of the President of Ukraine Victor Yanukovich and 114 pages with the name and photo of the ex-Prime Minister of the country Yulia Timoshenko. And these examples are but indicative.

All Armenian media outlets – both classical (TV, print and radio), and the co-called new media – are represented on Facebook.

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Specifics of Facebook Monitoring

Since February 2012, we launched the study of the Armenian segment of Facebook, aiming to find out the extent to which the three main actors –media, political parties and their members, and various civil initiative groups represented on Facebook – would address the May 6 Parliamentary elections.

The main factor to make our monitoring activity different from that of others was its aim to collect information and detect trends, rather than control processes. This focus was also conditioned by the technical specificities of Facebook as a social network and, particularly, by the circumstance that no Facebook indicator is ever static - starting from the users' number, age and geography, the size of a Facebook page audience and the degree of interest in page content users displayed up to interactivity levels and fluctuations during the day and within shorter (a few-hour long) time frames. Identically with blood test readings, different in the morning and in the evening, Facebook data may also vary within an hour or even less than that. **Facebook is a living organism, and its indicators depend on the activities of numerous users.**

Hence, throughout our monitoring stages we aimed to reveal the tendencies of using Facebook as a campaign tool in Armenia. We also aimed to discover the level of interest in elections, shared by Facebook users. We did this, studying "yesterday's content," bearing in mind the theoretical possibility of retrospectively reacting to Facebook content (one, even two days later). However, since normally a huge amount of information accumulates on the walls of the users during the day, a fewer number of users make retrospective comments; hence this does not affect the general picture and data correlation.

Another specificity of our monitoring was the obvious restriction for comparison, also mostly conditioned by the technical possibilities provided on Facebook. For example, the pages of the political parties and MP candidates, dependent on the degree of their openness to public and their type (as a personal account or an official page), presented various options for posting content and applied different approaches to measuring audiences. The pages of some MPs were also open for content shared by other users, while other MP candidates' pages allowed only the account holder or page administrators to post content onto the Wall. This was an important factor that impacted on the correlation of the topics, covered on MP candidates' pages during the campaign.
Hence, the rating we provide must be viewed as conventional. This conventionality is another reason why our study was not designed as a control activity.

We provided an explanation of the specific methodology applied at the press conferences we convened; however, the rationale for this methodology was not always and unequivocally accepted by reporters: as usual, of all the reported outcomes, the journalists were most interested in ratings.

The use of Facebook, especially for campaign purposes, largely affected the significance of control monitoring. As a free platform, where there are no restrictions in the form of either "the day of silence," or limited space and prices charged for political advertisement, or any other practice, Facebook is essentially different from other online media: if the media outlets we monitored stopped posting materials on elections onto their Facebook pages on May 4 – "the day of silence" - nothing could restrict (including the enforced legislation) reporters and editors to continue covering the same issues on their personal pages. Legally they are individual citizens on Facebook, and not a media outlet, even though people primarily perceive them as editors and reporters. The MP candidates were also silent on Facebook on that day. However, some of them and/or the members of their political parties could participate in the discussions on Facebook also on the Election Day. And they did. The incident that took place on Republic Square during the meeting of the RPA with its supporters (when the balloons exploded and caused bodily injuries to the participants), began to be immediately discussed in some Facebook groups. These discussions continued into the "day of silence." This was an opportunity to address the issue of elections at a time when theoretically it was prohibited to speak on that matter. Everywhere, yet not on Facebook.

Facebook as a Campaign Platform in Armenia
Summary of media, political parties and Facebook groups monitoring in February 1 – May 20, 2012

This was the first attempt to conduct an in-depth and systemic monitoring of electoral process in Armenia on a social network, the rationale and character of which essentially differed from other monitoring initiatives, conducted in Armenia throughout the election period.

All the results can be found in the three previously published issues of the bulletin (http://www.regioncenter.info/en/electronic-bulletins/).

All the four bulletins should be perceived as sections of a whole.

All the results of the study are exclusive.

The general conclusions in Bulletin 4 are based on the quantitative results and content analysis, presented in Bulletins N1, N2 and N3.

Facebook as a Must for Political Parties

Hrant Bagratyan
http://www.facebook.com/hrant.bagratyan

On June 12, the RA National Assembly deputy and ANC block representative **Hrant Bagratyan** posted an overview of 50 legislative initiatives on his Facebook page. He claimed he was going to promote these bills during the autumn sessions. With that initiative the deputy aimed to contribute to the solution of various urgent issues in Armenia. He asked Facebook users to comment on the appropriateness of these bills and to perhaps suggest new ones. This status received 33 different comments, expressing the opinions of Facebook users. The MP later summed up the comments, interpreting them and addressing the users' suggestions. There was no such substantial discussion on the MP's Facebook page in the campaign period. This was a unique case when compared also with the campaign content, posted onto the pages of other political figures. However, Hrant Bagratyan is not the only political figure who ran for election as a candidate to have started to use Facebook more actively later in time and not during the actual campaign period a few months ago.

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Another member of the National Assembly and a representative of the Prosperous Armenia party, **Vartan Oskanian**, is now more active on Facebook than before. On his Facebook page he actively presents his post-electoral perspectives, establishes contacts and has discussions with other Facebook users.

Vartan Oskanian

http://www.facebook.com/VartanOskanian

Styopa Safaryan, a Heritage party member, is still coming up with statuses on his failure to be elected into the Parliament and initiates discussions on various and general post-electoral reality. By the way, he was the most active Facebook user candidate throughout the monitoring period.

Styopa Safaryan

http://www.facebook.com/profile.php?
id=100000434784551

We have monitored the personal pages of the representatives of 10 political forces, in some cases also the official pages of the political parties during the official campaign (April 8 – May 4) and during the post election fortnight. Logically, it was during these two stages that the politicians were to display maximum activity, to present their campaigns maximally thoroughly, to bring their platforms to the Facebook users, to have discussions and debates with the Facebook audience. In other cases, it could be used to express the candidates' opinions on the elections held, to evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of the adversaries and their own tactics and so on. In a word, it was used to maintain contacts and communication with the electorate who either voted for or, oppositely, criticized them. This is important because, after all, party activity does not end with elections.

The activity of MP candidates varied in a number of aspects. However, as a whole, they used the Facebook pages mostly as a vehicle for disseminating information, rather than a platform for dialoging with the potential electorate, represented on Facebook. A number of party representatives had dialogues with Facebook users in the form of questions and answers not on their personal pages and at their own initiatives, but during the Facebook press conferences organized by Radio Liberty, while they answered the questions of the Facebook audience of Radio Liberty.

If we leave aside the pages of a number of candidates (Styopa Safaryan, from the Heritage Party, Karapet Rubinyan, who is not party affiliated, but was nominated on the Heritage slate, Armen Ashotyan from RPA, Vartan Oskanian from the Prosperous Armenia party), the pages of the other parties running for election (DPA, CPA, United Armenians, OEK, and ARF) were mostly updated with announcements on the live meetings to be held with the electorate during the campaign.
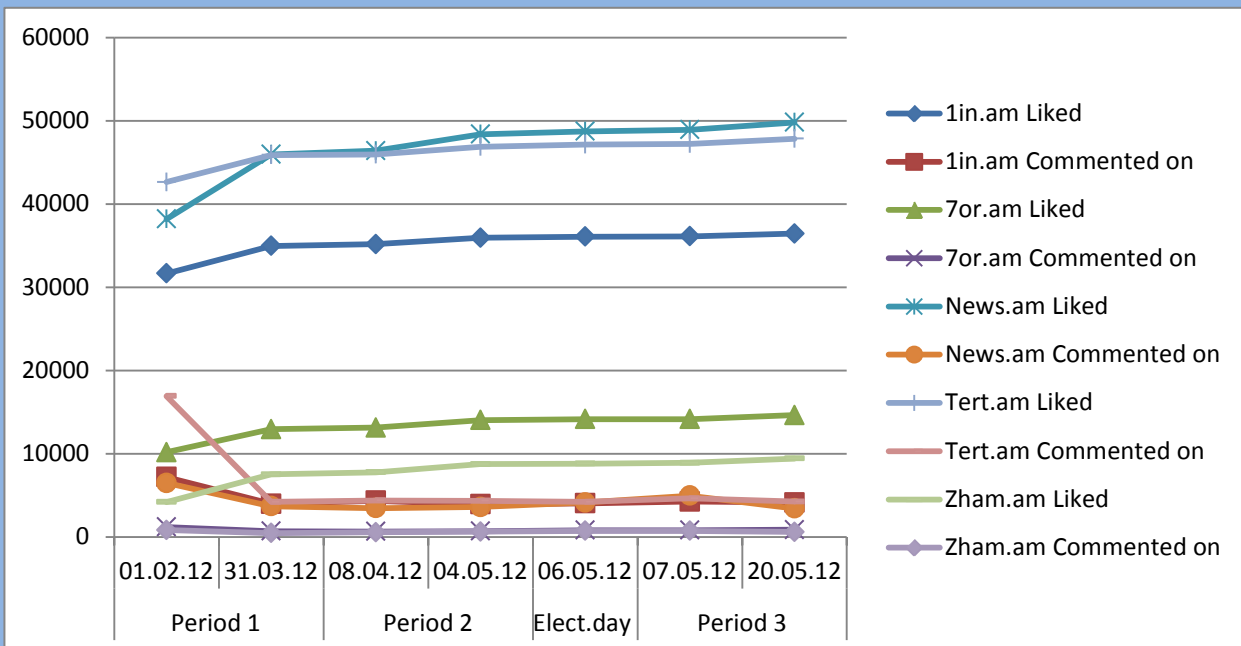
The election stage was a period when content was posted onto the official Facebook pages of some parties. These pages were not updated after the elections were over (for example, the page of the OEK party).

The use of Facebook by a number of forces and individual figures in the election period marked every occasion, since the parties and the candidates they had nominated tried not to lag behind their adversaries, but only formally, rather than content-wise (for more detail, see Facebook as a Campaign Platform in Armenia, Bulletins N2 and N3, http://www.regioncenter.info/en/electronic-bulletins/*).*

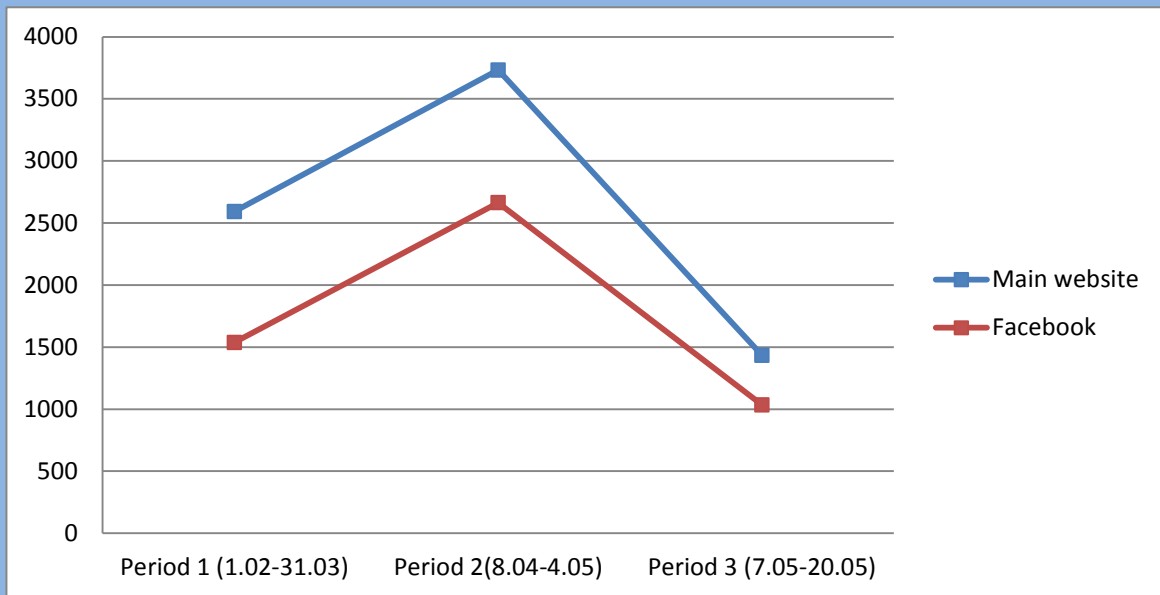## Elections on Facebook Pages of Media Outlets

The audiences (the number of likes to the page) of the monitored 5 media outlets (www.news.am, www.tert.am, www.1in.am, www.7or.am, www.zham.am) grew gradually from February to the end of May. This trend was typical of other outlets and beyond Armenia, too. The intention to increase traffic is the main reason why media outlets are represented on Facebook. However, the degree of interactivity with regard to Facebook contents (Likes, Shares and Comments) is approximately 10 times less than the number of the so-called "general audience" (the total number of Likes to the page).

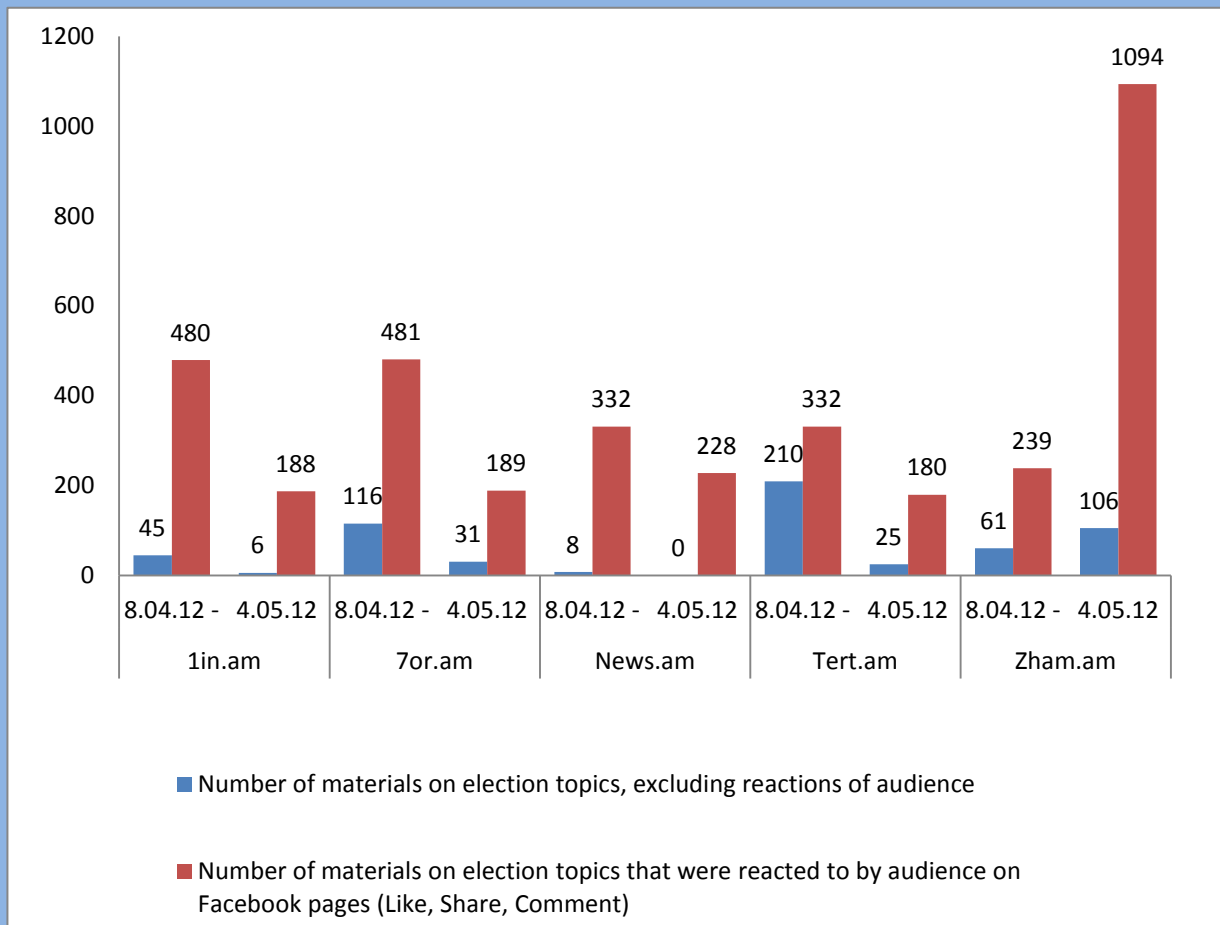Dynamics of audience numbers and interactivity at electoral stages

The media outlets served as the main sources of information on electoral processes, circulating on Facebook throughout all the three stages of monitoring – two months before the elections, in the course of the official monitoring and during the first post-election fortnight. The election day was an exception, when along with the materials on elections published in the media outlets, Facebook users started to share statuses and content on the developments in their polling stations and around them (as a classical example of "citizen journalism").

Number of materials on elections on the main websites of media outlets and their Facebook pages (February 1 – May 20)

The level of interest in the materials on election topics was especially high in the campaign period. The number of materials on election topics, reacted to by the audience on the Facebook pages of all monitored media outlets, was considerably larger than that of the materials which were not reacted to at all.

Level of interest in the elections, held by the audience (April 8 - May 4, May 7 – 20)

■ Number of materials on election topics, excluding reactions of audience

■ Number of materials on election topics that were reacted to by audience on Facebook pages (Like, Share, Comment)
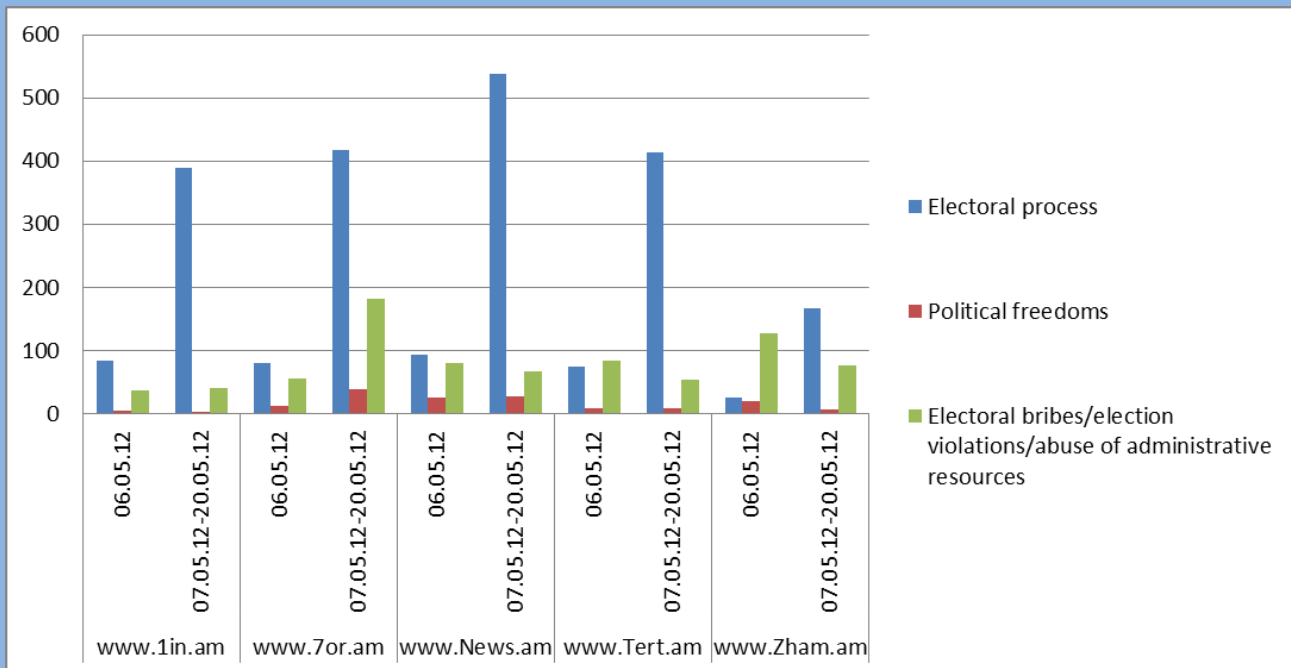
Coming from the specifics of the monitoring stages, we applied a differentiated approach when analyzing the materials on election topics. In the period of February – March and throughout the campaign, we marked the diversity of the topics, covered in the media outlets. On election day and in the following fortnight, when the frequency of occurrence of materials on election topics was still quite high, we focused on three topics – electoral processes (the course of the elections on election day and commentary on the elections in the following fortnight), political liberties (materials on the various restrictions that had taken place on election day and relevant evaluations in the following fortnight), electoral bribes/election violations/abuse of administrative resources (and similar violations in the mentioned periods). The obtained results revealed that at all the stages of the monitoring the media outlets most often addressed issues, related to electoral processes and covered the topics of electoral bribes/election violations/abuse of administrative resources (that is to say, the process and ways of organizing the elections), rather than topics which derived from the political platforms of the political forces and would unfold various issues vitally important to Armenia (such as socio-economic development, security/army/Karabakh, culture and environmental protection).

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It is noteworthy to emphasize that we witnessed an identical picture when we were analyzing the results of the materials, posted onto Facebook during the official campaign

(for more detail, see Facebook as a Campaign Platform in Armenia, Bulletins N1, N2 and N3, http://www.regioncenter.info/en/electronic-bulletins/*).*

Number of topics addressed in materials on elections

Elections and Armenian Facebook Groups

In 2010 the first discussions within Facebook groups grew beyond the virtual limits of the social network, as Armenian media outlets began to cover the debates on different matters, held within these groups. The movement against opening foreign language instruction schools in Armenia, the Facebook protests of the citizens against pulling down the only open-air cinema in Yerevan impacted on public mind. Now it has already become impossible to tell the exact number of Facebook groups, and it is hard to identify the concrete orientation of every individual group, especially if they are general-profile groups and have not specified their mission in their profile information.

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Especially on the eve of National Assembly elections, new names appeared next to the old and well-known ones. The largest groups were Verjin Lurer (Latest News) and 11 thousand Polit Club with 31.000 and 11.000 members, respectively. The average number of members of those groups that were active in the election period ranged from 1000 to 5000.

Some groups which included the word "election" in their name and were launched on the occasion of these very elections are active even today (for example, "National Assembly Elections, May 6").

We monitored the general activity and the topics of the discussions in open groups and the public discourse on elections.

In the groups and in the social surroundings of individual users (among their Facebook friends) elections were among important if not central issues. The main incentives for discussion in all the groups were the references to this or that media outlet. There have been considerably fewer discussions, triggered by different statuses. Political party members also participated in the well-known groups. The members of the Heritage party were especially active *(for more detail, see Facebook as a Campaign Platform in Armenia, Bulletins N2,* [http://www.regioncenter.info/en/electronic-bulletins/)](http://www.regioncenter.info/en/electronic-bulletins/)*..*

THUS,

Facebook is reinforcing its role as the main platform to discuss and protest against developments in Armenia and all over the world.

In the course of the past six months Facebook-related actions were the most popular ones among Internet-based activities in Armenia.

Facebook is a trendy brand in Armenia, staying away from which is already perceived as isolationism, especially for such competitive corporate groups as media outlets, political parties, civic organizations and movements.

Facebook enables to stay in touch. It is a different matter how well users, just like MP candidates during the Parliamentary elections, make use of this opportunity. But everything is still lying ahead, since Presidential elections are awaiting us early next year.

Facebook influences media content even though the vast majority of posts in Facebook groups and on political figures' and MP candidates' pages are references to the materials, published in different media outlets, and the discussions roll out mostly on the issues address in them. Media outlets often refer to Facebook statuses and judge of the social importance of any issue by the intensity of reactions it gets on Facebook.

For the first time ever in the history of political processes in Armenia a social network acted as a new campaign platform, the degree of activity in which is not directly proportional to the outcomes of the elections. In other words, being active on Facebook does not yet mean to be a success in the elections, just as non-linear is the correlation between the content of the information and its perception, between the content and the behavior caused or the confidence inspired. According to our observations, Facebook activity did not lead to a seat in the National Assembly, rather those candidates received mandates that were on the slates of parties "to pass". In Armenia the proportional system is hegemonic to the majoritarian system.

Facebook discourse impacts on the reality of this or that field of activity in the country. The most recent example is perhaps the event that took place in mid June, when the RA National Assembly Deputy renounced his mandate. Let us not go too deep into the political reasons of the resignation, however, it is undeniable that Facebook turbulences and the coordination of protests through the network were essential for such an outcome.