

SOCIAL NETWORKS IN THE LIFE OF MODERN SOCIETIES: USING AND USERS

Yerevan Conference Diary

(20 November, 2013)





European Union



The “Role of Social Networks in the Life of Modern Societies: Using and Users” conference was organized in Yerevan, November 20, 2013, to jointly discuss the influence of social media/networks in the life of modern societies, as well as the modes and specificities of their use in different countries.

The organizers of the conference - the OSCE Yerevan office and Region Research Center - experts were invited from Armenia, Georgia, Poland, Ukraine, and the USA.

The whole of the conference was livestreamed by CivilNet TV.

The conference was organized within the framework of a project on strengthening electoral processes in Armenia in line with international standards, implemented by the OSCE Office in Yerevan and financed by the European Union. The views expressed during the conference, as well as in this document, can in no way be taken to reflect the official opinion of the European Union or of the OSCE.

EVERYTHING ABOUT SOCIAL MEDIA

Let us imagine the life of modern human being and society without social networks. I assume that in that case generally and specifically we would not have the opportunities, the changes and the challenges that political technologists, political/social/state figures, media specialists and media representatives, sociologists, psychologists, marketing experts, anthropologists and others have been trying to understand and describe.

This collective and so far strong interest is conditioned by the fact that the social media and the social networks, though relatively new phenomena, have already had an unprecedented impact on the life of the people, societies, and states.

After our conference was over, an analyst, an acquaintance of mine who followed the whole course of the conference told me the following, word for word: "All that I heard today was rightly said, that social networks are progressive, and they have brought in many challenges with them. The evaluations and comments are made by the effect of touching the giant elephant: every single person mentions what they can see and perceive from this giant organism."

I think that this comment is very accurate and comprehensive. And really, if we take into account the changes that the social media have brought to different fields and areas, it will not be difficult to find not only different, but opposing evaluations of the same phenomenon.

For example, what do psychologists say about self-evaluation and socialization among people due to social networks? Thus, according to a number of studies, being in a social network for a few hours a day leads to overcoming the sense of solitude and inferiority complex. There are also opposite perspectives, that social networks deepen and aggravate various psychological problems and bring about feelings of the low quality of life among people.

The corporate rules of using social networks in various business structures again come from opposite evaluations: for example, approximately 1/3 of business companies operating in Russia and 1/4 of US employers forbid their employees to use social networks in the working hours, to publish information that may reveal corporate and other realities. These rules are already stipulated as separate conditions in the work agreements. At the same time there are businesses the leaders of which not only allow but also encourage the presence of their employees in social networks in the working hours. In some cases, because this is dictated by the essence of their work (to always be connected, to be informed of the latest news and so on), in other cases, because social media help employees to rest and get psychologically recharged during the long hours of work.

In the recent years social media and networks have penetrated into the various spheres of the Armenian reality – politics, business, education and culture, the world of advertising and marketing, as well as everyday life.

We are not yet aware of Armenian cases when the management of a business would have developed a regulation regarding the social network behavior of their employees coming from corporate interests. However, as the survey conducted among Facebook users in Armenia manifested, in Armenia, too there are business entities, which consider any information appearing on Facebook on their brand activity as information of corporate significance, not subject to publishing. In a word, there were business corporations that simply refused to answer our questions with such reasoning.

In Armenia we had two cases of journalists being dismissed because of their Facebook comments. We turned to the management of a few media outlets in Armenia when these events were long in the past, asking them to express their positions regarding the conduct of their journalists in social networks, whether they had corporate rules for social network and whether they needed them.

Here are a few answers:

Anna Israelyan, aravot.am Editor

We are going to add a separate point in our Code of Conduct that our journalists should refrain from expressing biased positions on Facebook. Our reporters mostly share the materials they author on their Facebook pages. We warn journalists against posting the Aravot materials on the walls of non-thematic groups, so that they are not considered as spam.

Armenuhi Vardanyan, galatv.am Editor

We do not force our reporters to share the Gala materials, but they use all the possible means to make their materials visible. And today the most effective platform for that purpose is Facebook. I have seen our reporters express their political perspectives on their own Facebook pages. They are free to express their opinions both on Facebook and outside Facebook. We do not control their activity on Facebook.

Naira Hayrumyan, Iragir.am Russian webpage Editor

Journalists are not obliged to share the materials of the Iragir onto their Facebook pages. They do it voluntarily. They are free to express their opinions on Facebook and to show their perspectives.

Edik Baghdasaryan, hetq.am Chief Editor

I am thinking of developing a regulation on Facebook conduct. I ask Hetq reporters not to insult anyone on Facebook. It is desirable for them not to express opinions on areas they cover because in that case their activities might later be hindered. For example, if an official knows that a concrete journalist has a certain perspective; they may in the future refuse to be interviewed. And besides, the readership will have an impression that the given journalist cannot cover this field objectively because that person is biased about this issue.

Armenika Kiviryan, news.am Editor

We do not have such a regulation. Everyone knows and must have seen our reporters freely express their opinions and standpoints on their Facebook pages.

David Alaverdyan, Mediamax News Agency Chief Editor

We have an internal regulation. I do not want to open that up, but I can say that it contains a few rules. Mediamax reporters must always promote corporate interests, we have ethical criteria that should not be broken both in working and off-work hours, they should keep in mind that they are Mediamax employees.

Aram Harutyunyan, asekose.am and megapolis.am Founder

We do not have a special regulation, but we have a few commonly shared agreements. For example, if on our page or on our journalists' pages opponents or competitors curse or use insulting comments below a material (something that often happens on Facebook), we, according to the common agreement, do not get provoked. Normally, we do not respond at all or, if appropriate, we respond in a civilized manner. All our employees are free to express themselves on their pages as they wish.

Marina Grigoryan, Golos Armenii Deputy Editor

We do not have a special regulation. Every journalist shares our materials as they wish. In Armenia, I think, there are very few mass media outlets that have such codes and regulations, this is something to be addressed in the near future.

Artur Papyan, Radio Liberty azatutyun.am Editor

We do not have a regulation specifically for Facebook, but we have general Internet conduct rules. It is impossible to present fully, for it is quite a voluminous document. But in general the important rule is that no matter how hard we try to speak on our own behalf as individuals, we must always represent Liberty and must always be politically correct.

Salbi Ghazaryan, Civilitas Foundation Director

We are considering this and, of course, it would be right not only for us, but for all Armenian media outlets, to have such a regulation because a journalist's working day is not over at 18:00. This is what a number of famous international outlets have done. There is a common assumption in Armenia that the reporter is not autonomous and is guided directly by the management, but since this is not the case, we end up in an awkward situation.

On the other hand, we would surely do it that way, if there was total freedom of speech in Armenia. But as long as this is not the case, and Facebook is a free platform for the citizens of Armenia to express themselves, such discussions continue among us.

For socialized people it has become an urgent need to have an audience. People write what they want but then they always come back to familiarize themselves with the feedback to their ideas. Isn't this the reason for the momentum that social networks have gained due to the psychological needs of the era? The concrete questions social media and the side effects they bring about among people and groups of people were also discussed during the conference.

During the approximately three-hour discussion with the participation of media specialists and bloggers one of the participants announced that we seemed to be speaking about everything. And this was quite symptomatic.

Laura Baghdasaryan

FRAGMENTS FROM TALKS IN THE DISCUSSION SECTION



Nouneh Sarkissian, Head of Media Initiatives Center

Have Facebook and networks, in general, become media outlets for us today? When I hear statements like “I do not watch TV,” I am not very much surprised because TV itself has changed. And if before we watched the video and audio program broadcast only on air, now we can watch such programs on the Internet, livestreamed or on the phone, this does not mean that we do not watch TV and, in general, refuse this media outlet.



Izabella Sargsyan, Eurasia Foundation

Facebook distracts from real work, struggle, and actions. Now it is common to draw social networks with bright colors and assess it very positively, but I have the opposite opinion. Facebook makes people limited, this is a very serious issue that should also be addressed from the philosophical perspective, because before people used to read and create more serious content. We should be lead by the perception that social networks are something new, and if so, they are good.

Tigran Kocharyan, Blogger

Before, when bloggers were only stepping into the field, and networks were becoming popular, the educational level of the people was higher. When Facebook appeared and became massively popular on the Internet, the Odnoklassniki contingent penetrated into Facebook: this is a mass that is lazy to go out into the streets. They prefer to click on “Like” and “Share,” to write statuses like I am with you, I am joining you, but in reality even 300 people of a 5 – 10 thousand group do not participate in the actual event. Facebook is torn off from reality.



Laura Baghdsaryan, Director of Region Center

I think that now there is a more diverse community on Facebook, and it would not be right to compare the current Facebook stage with the blogger period. Or it is pointless to demand a higher level of conscious and education from this network community, which is the miniature of the real society. There are opinions that, on the contrary, people try to look better online than they are in reality, they strive to appear more intellectual than they are in reality.

As for social networks causing the decrease of the number of people going into the street, yes, it is true. But this can also be explained. Social networks have made it possible to have an idea of the number of real supporters and followers of a political force. Because if before this or that part of meeting participants attended to obtain information (to see everything with their own eyes, to hear first-hand), now they get this information through the social media and networks, livestreams and so on. Simply social networks have truly redistributed every activity and have “positioned” masses according to their needs.



**Artur Papayan, Radio Liberty's www.azatutyun.am
Website Editor**

I see both an opportunity and a threat in social networks. As a media representative I am personally interested in the fact that social media spread out disinformation, and even reliable sources cannot prevent this. There have been cases when wrong information on the death of a person was spread out, and we published the opposite information, but still it was impossible to stop disinformation. Social networks have been competing on unequal terms, because there is a larger number of information sources here. Especially so, when Facebook comes into play with its algorithms, the main aim of which is to digitalize and promote sale of information.



Samvel Martirosyan, Information Security Specialist

As for content being better in the past than it is now. Before we had the Pravda newspaper, and I will now enjoy more to read smiling faces than the Pravda. It seems to me that the issue of social media is not whether people read more or less. The issue is not the little reading, but the writing. Never in the past had everyone had a chance to write all they wanted for everyone else to read without censored.



Natalya Gumenyuk, Media Activist from Ukraine

The new generation is more concerned about media security than the older one. We say that the quality is poorer, that they do not read Dostoyevski and other authors. But in the past we had people who had no possibility of interacting with others living abroad. Of course, with increased network popularity many things are getting worse, and many things are getting better. Media literacy of the general population is the most important thing. There should be media classes at schools for pupils so that they learn how to make social media work for them instead of working for the social media. In Ukraine, I assume, in Armenia, too, there is a huge gap between Internet and network users and those without Internet access.



Adam Przewdziek, a Blogger from Poland

In Poland there are many Internet users, that have come to prefer to turn off their mobile phones and go back to the old school, to read, write and so on.

Tigran Kocharyan, Blogger

The crowd forms the media agenda; media outlets often quote from social networks.

Samvel Martirosyan, Information Security Specialist

As for the the influence of the audience on the medium content, it is applicable all over the world, and it was true even before the appearance of social networks. It seems to

me that we overestimate the role of social networks in this issue.

... There was a time when everyone was carried away by mobile phones; people have started to treat it in a more relaxed way. Similarly, with the social networks, they are still, so to say, at the toying stage, and their momentum will gradually fade out. People are tired of Facebook and are looking for some other place to go to.



Gegham Vardanyan, www.media.am Editor

There is an article in the Guardian on teenagers leaving Facebook, since they do not want to be in the same space with their mothers and fathers. If we consider the dynamics, everything develops, with preference of higher speed. For example, now the fastest developing network is Snapchat, where you can upload a photo for your friends to see, and some time later it will disappear, it will get automatically deleted.



Izabella Sargsyan, Eurasia Foundation

Yes, it seems to me that users in social networks get together due to common positions and activity type, as well as the place they come from or are at. It is still possible to establish a connection between the written comment or status and the workplace. However in case of reporters and media outlets the problem is solved slightly differently. But in all other cases this is a matter of choice. If you, for example, work in an organization, that has democratic or humanistic values, and you in the social networks write to see completely other thoughts, and you must either make a choice or something is wrong with your head.

We have discussed this issue at our organization, which, however, has not been finally formulated, say, it has not been developed into an internal ethics document. I think that there are many organizations with such processes underway.



Suren Deheryan, Jnews.am website Chief Editor

When in 2010 Facebook became active in terms of freedom of speech, many got excited that the network part of the media outlets are under political influence, and the others do not have resources. However, in the course of years the opposite processes started to develop. Unlike those years when it was possible simply to rotate the tumbler and to turn off the undesirable channel, currently people's attention in the social network is tended to be diverted by various information manipulations, since everything is done, in order to prevent people from participating in real world events and actions. For example, if I participate in a public event, I become an activist, but if I express my opinions on this or that phenomenon in social networks, publish all that has been accumulated in me, I get discharged and consider my participation completed.

Please see the full version of discussions here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RAJADekVyB4>

Talks made at conference:

<http://regioncenter.info/en/news/99.html>

See the video, telling about the conference, here:

<http://regioncenter.info/en/video/100.html>