Social Media Development Tendencies in Georgia – Power of the Real Virtual?

(Qualitative Research Report)

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Content

Introduction

Purpose of the Research. One of the determinants of the global transformations taking place in the modern world is the industrial society transitioning to the information society, which leads to emergence of the entirely new principles of the social and technological order. Development of the information technologies has entailed the development of the new/social media, which is characterized by interactivity, pluralism and mobility. Unlike the classical media, information in the social media is "controlled" by its users, rather than the providers, which is a prerequisite to developing the citizen journalism. Consequently, the information distribution occurs, which is tantamount to the distribution of power. This context gives rise to mediocracy, that is, the colonization of politics by media logic (Meyer, 2002). A question that logically follows is whether the social media nowadays has a real potential to control the politics. How do the political actors cope with this situation – do they employ the methods of "rationalization of persuasion", surveying audiences and organizing systematic campaigns (Mayhew, 1997), which in turn enhances their professionalism (Negrine, 2008), or do they try to divert the audience's attention away from the routine political problems, and defuse their dissatisfaction through "infotainment", which, according to the expert judgement, has become a "global ideology" of today (Thussu, 2011). Furthermore, the "outbreak" of the social media brings a whole new perspective to identity problems, as the traditional media audience, which is present "here and now", relocates to the social networks. Hence, an individual can become global, maintaining the local identity at the same time.

The purpose of our research was to examine the aforementioned tendencies in the Georgian social media. To this end, we decided to analyze the social media vis-a-vis its four core functions: information, entertainment, democracy and control. By defining the roles of each, we are able to determine what the present condition of the social media in Georgia is, and what its future development tendencies are.

The Research Method. This report illustrates the findings of the qualitative research, namely the results of the in-depth interviews held with the media-experts (editors, journalists, bloggers, lawyers, etc.). The research was conducted in April-May of 2012 and 40 respondents were interviewed, who were selected through the purposive sampling. The respondents either maintained their own blog, or represented a specific media agency or an electronic publication

(*Tabula, Liberali, Radio Liberty, NetGazette,* regional information centers, forums, etc.). They provided answers to the questions contained in the interview schedule (see Annex 1).

The Traditional vs. the Social Media

The interview schedule starts with the overview of the distinctions between the traditional and the social media. The points of view expressed by the respondents on this topic are essentially identical. They claim that the **social media is much freer,** more flexible and open owing to its less authoritative nature as compared to the traditional media. Majority of experts thinks that the traditional media nowadays is unable to properly mediate between the society and the various interest groups, like between the society and the political elite, whereas the social media has already demonstrated to the society of what the media should be like in reality. While the conventional media is mostly segmented and upholds the discourse in favor of certain dominant or interest groups, the social media, on the contrary, provides a venue for the citizens to establish freer and more egalitarian relations with one another.

"I think that the biggest distinction between the traditional and the social media is that the social media does not rely on the opinions of the decision-makers, producers, editors or the media owners alike. This is what makes the social media appealing, and this is what its main asset is." (O.T., female, editor)

"The social media has active community members as its users. They hold their own opinions on various topics, and also have an avenue to convey and communicate their opinions to the society." (K.B., female, journalist, blogger)

One of the key distinctions is the possibility of the **reciprocal interaction,** which essentially guarantees the sociality of the social media. The traditional media is unidirectional, whereas the social media enables bidirectional interaction. The traditional media does not enable individuals to connect and provide feedback, while the social media manages to do that spontaneously. The social media enables a blogger and a journalist to interact with the audience quite vibrantly. **A possibility of the instantaneous feedback** is what makes a major difference between the two media. A possibility to interact and provide feedback on the one hand, and to immediately reflect

on any event or development on the other, enables individuals to get familiar with an author's own claim/opinion, rather than the opinions that directly resonate with the current state of affairs. Overall, the pluralism of ideas and the absence of a single dominant position or a prevalent opinion assures lesser bias and greater impartality of the social media vis-a-vis the traditional media.

"Direct communication, meaning that you can voice and convey your opinion without a mediator, is very important. This is more impartial, as your reality does not get distorted by others. It is easier to make information public in the social media and tone it the way you want, without others having an affect on that. It is the same as though you were talking to someone face-to-face, and getting their direct feedback." (G.O., female, blogger)

A direct dialogue format in the social media has therefore become an important attribute. Unlike the traditional media space, the internet space is able to manage the media processes through constant dialogue, rather than the monologue. The social media ensures **greater involvement of users in the news creation processes,** and hence, stimulates their active pacrticipation. While the traditional media creates the agenda items on its own, the social media empowers ordinary users to do so and to emphasize whatever seems most appropriate to them.

"What mainly distinguishes the traditional from the social media is that the individuals are usually only users in the classical media, while they are both the users and the providers of information in the social media. They are active, and not only passive – they receive and at the same time transmit information." (V.F. male, media-analyst)

The social media provides ample opportunity for direct connection for a media product creator, its recipients or readers, and the ordinary observers alike. For businesses, it means establishing direct connections with the customers, and for politicians – maintaining direct interface with the constituency, thus helping them in decision-making and priority setting, and enabling them to improve services. However, the inquired experts claim that the steps taken in this direction are still quite fragile in the Georgian reality.

An important feature of the social media is that any individual who has access to it can eventually become a media product maker, and this underlies **development of the citizen journalism.** The emergence of this phenomenon has triggered discussions about what the

journalism standards imply and whether a blogger needs to be aware of them. The experts believe that the social media erases boundaries between the professional and non-professional journalists. Besides, favourable conditions are created for the free movement of the alternative information streams, and the deterrence of the media monopoly by the media-oligarchs. It is noteworthy, however, that while **almost anyone can create information in the social media,** the traditional media delegates news story creation solely to journalists, and hence, an issue of responsibility comes to play. Furthermore, while the accuracy of information in the traditional media is the responsibility of an editor or an editorial board, and the material is published based on certain information sources, the social media is much more sophisticated in this regard: there is noone here to take responsibility, everybody can say whatever he/she wants, and the information accuracy is eventually verified by an end user. This requires relevant resources, which a user might find uncomfortable to employ, but it is much more democratic in essence.

The experts claim that **information in the social media travels faster,** since a citizen journalist can instantaneously transmit and pubilcize the video or audio materials he/she takes via a cell phone, just to name a few devices. When it comes to the form, one of the essentials of the social media is that the **information should be short, succinct and easy to comprehend.** The respondents therefore think that the social media is more superficial, lacks profundity and has fever effects, thus offering less capacity for in-depth analysis of an issue. But they also argue that the traditional media is devoid of profundity too though the febrile effects attain the highest intensity in the new media.

Yet another issue to note is that **the new media is less accessible.** The experts claim that this is what differentiates the social media from the traditional. Access to the social media depends on the internet access. In Georgia, access to the social media substantially falls behind access to the traditional media, and one expert has rightly termed it the "Tbilisicentric." Nevertheless, the experts believe that as the internet coverage starts to expand, the social media audience will start to expand substantially, and the social media will gain momentum.

A side effect caused by the degree of freedom is noted as one of the problematic aspects of the social media. Purportedly, the Georgian emotional temperament takes a full swing in the social media and the conflicting parties may end up "swearing" and "insulting" one another. It is thought that this is especially triggerred by the possibility to stay anonymous in the social media.

"Rather than bringing about a standard of discourse or the exchange of ideas, the freedom of expression provided by law translates into direct swearing, comprophemy. To put it short, the exchange of profanity is an extreme expression of freedom. The anonimity grants courage, and as I have observed, the people acting anonymous are 'perkier,' more rigid and braver in the social media." (E.U., male, journalist)

This observation becomes particularly pertinent by browsing through political discussions on the Georgian site *forum.ge.* Our content and discourse analyses of the political discussions on forum.ge have shown that the audience is often polarized into the pro-governmental and pro-opposition parties, one party constantly attacking and insulting the other under the leadership of their forum authorities, the latter resorting to the special tools of the "rationalization of persuation" (Mayhew, 1997). This phenomenon also comes to forefront with respect to the sites of the electronic magazines like "Liberali" and "Tabula", the content and discourse analyses of which have demonstrated that the comments on their articles are more personally offensive than constructively criticizing.

Despite the aforementioned differences between the traditional and the social media, the respondents assert that the lines are becoming finer between these two, since the traditional media today also strives to have its own online represenation, otherwise its rating will drop. It is interesting that as the traditional media succumbs to the growing influence of the social media, it assumes the elements of the latter, as it actively creates webpages, social network pages, etc.

Social Media Influences

When referring to the influence of the social media, the respondents' opinions diverge into two: the first group thinks that the social media in Georgia still lacks influence in any area. Nevertheless, they talk about its growth potential.

"The social media and the so-called blogs are not influential, but there are certain 'opinion leaders' being formed, who greatly influence not only their followers, but also the people to

whom the information is transmitted. However, the [social media] influence is gradually gaininig momentum." (T.D., male, blogger)

This quote demonstrates that despite the minor influences of the social media, it creates favorable conditions for self-assertion and influencing others. Although one of the bloggers believes that the social media in Georgia cannot be influential as it does not 'capture the social and political problems the way they are in reality,' she still notes in the same vein that the Georgian social media is a comfortable way of self-actualization for individuals who cannot otherwise assert themselves and gain authority. It is thought that an effective self-presentation in the social media enables individuals with the deficient social capital to become opinion leaders and renowned figures.

"This space has already been encroached and the niche occupied. I think that if the social mobility were freer and the individuals were able to self-actualize this way, they would not be in need of such self-presentation. However, the social media today is the only avenue, which can be intruded by someone who lacks social capital, education or some other features, ultimately becoming a celebrity." (G.O., female, blogger)

Despite creating favorable conditions for self-assertion, this group of respondents thinks that the social media in Georgia still cannot be considered as influential, the reasons being trifold: the first is the **limited internet access,** mainly covering the capital and other cities; the second, **age limitation,** which is also emphasized in the CRRC's studies by illustrating that the social media users in Georgia are mostly youngsters; and finally, the population segmentation, namely, existence of a certain "**cyber sect,"** which only captures the limited segments, but does not affect public at large.

The second group of respondents claims that the present-day social media is already quite influential, and this influence extends to cultural and social life. The influence is gradually building up, and represents an attempt to keep abreast of the developments taking place worldwide. The Georgian businesses already show keen interest towards the social media, as it creates favorable conditions for marketing, which the government should also be willing to support not to fall behind the worldwide developments. As far as politics and the political developments are concerned, the social media is still low-key there, but experts believe that its

influence will grow in future to resonate with the social media development tendencies in the world.

The respondents who hold this position assert that the social media influence is particularly conditioned by inability of the traditional media to provide comprehensive and unbiased information to the public, and to create a platform necessary for public dicussions.

"I think the social media is quite influential, because it gives exposure and publicizes all news stories without covering up anything, even those that are left beyond exposure in the professional media. This is the place, where individuals argue, share ideas and express thoughts – individuals, who are unlikely to meet in the professional media or the real life." (K.B., female, journalist, blogger)

The respondents claim that the social media creates an avenue for discussion on topics, which the traditional media tries to avoid, like the religious, sexual or eithnic minority issues in Georgia. Besides, some respondents think that the social media is the only media that offers the discussion format to the public at large, and promotes their engagement in the ongoing political processes by finding like-minded people and planning joint activities without any need to leave home. The interviewed experts note that unlike online discussions in earlier periods, which were mostly anonymous (here they refer to popularity of the *forum.ge* – a forerunner to facebook, the latter growing in popularity after the 2008 events), more and more people tend to openly engage in discussions today, and the public figures are less hesitant to openly respond to questions.

"An avenue for discussions has been created. Until recently, the issues were not discussed online, and if they were, this only happened on the forum and the public figures were only confined to reading posts and stayed away from taking part in discussions. The format was such that it was impossible to know who was discussing what. This is not the case anymore, as more and more people interface with one another openly and non-anonymously." (O.E., male, blogger)

Social Media Users

When referring to the social media users in Georgia, the respondents group them by several distinct features, the core ones being *age* (young vs. old) and *territory/location* (urban vs. rural). The youngsters are believed to be the active users of the social media, especially the digital era "natives," who had their first computer encounter right from birth, and who acquired internet experience in the subsequent years. Talking about the social media influence, one of the bloggers quoted:

"I think the social media lacks influence, because it covers a small population segment. We, the youngsters, have a greater interface with it, and are therefore more influenced, but this does not hold true for others..." (B.Kh., female, journalist, blogger)

As noted above, the second criterion for categorizing the social media users is the *territory/location*, namely, segregation into urban and rural communities, which is directly linked to the country's internetization levels. Internet access is mainly available in the capital and other major cities, and the rural communities are quite marginalized in this regard. More peripheral a region and more distanced a village from its center, lesser the internetization level. Hence, the urban and rural communities have unequal access to internet, resulting in uneven levels of the social media engagement. As the respondents cite:

"Social media is influential among communities, where internetization is present. It is quite powerful in these communities, and the information dissemination is so seamless and routine there that it is barely possible not to affect a broad range of activities." (N.D., male, blogger)

According to the inquired experts, yet another factor affecting people's engagement in the social media is the rate of employed individuals. The social media, especially the professional blogs and electronic publications, are mostly accessed by individuals with higher education, i.e. white-collar workers. This means that another category of the social media users in Georgia includes employed individuals mostly with higher education or some technical skill base.

"If measured solely in terms of the quantitative indicators, the social media influence will turn out to be low, but if measured qualitatively, we could conclude that even a small group, which

holds certain technical and not only technical skills but also some intellectual resources, could be considered influential." (D.Z., female, blogger)

"The key social media users are those who are employed. The infrastructure is more embedded into 'workplace.' Employment and workplace encourages individuals to use various sources here and there and retrieve information." (O.L., female, journalist)

According to the respondents, the social media user profile in Georgia is as follows: middle-class, urban, aged 18-40, students or graduates with internet access. The respondents' descriptions enable us to further break down the profile both in terms of age groups, and the social media consumption functions: the biggest user segment covers people aged 18-25, who use the social media for entertainment purposes. Persons aged 26-40 are also quite active in using the media for two main purposes: to retrieve information and to sustain contacts (bridging social capital); and finally, persons aged above 40, using the social media for social dialogue. These are the active individuals who engage in discussions and become public opinion leaders. Hence, they hold certain authority over the respective social media users and possess effective methods for "rationalization of persuasion."

Finally, according to the experts, the numbers of businessmen and politicians among the social media users in Georgia are rising. The businesses have actively started using the media for marketing their products and attracting customers. The politicians have become active users as well to keep abreast of the worldwide political developments.

As for competition between the traditional and the social media for users, the experts claim that the social media is less competitive compared to the traditional. Television claims the highest number of users today due to its countrywide coverage. As for the internet usage, although the CRRC's study illustrates that 70% of internet users are altogether the social network users, experts unanimously assert that this has to be scrutinized further. This figure does not imply that 70% of users are active in social networks – many people are simply passive and are only formally registered. Some may have created a blog long time ago without having used it ever since, but they still retain the blogger status. It is therefore necessary to perform the internal analysis based on the reliable and valid criteria.

Social Media Functions

When referring to the social media in Georgia, the surveyed experts attribute varied functions to it. One of the positions is that the **social media in Georgia offers an avenue for the exchange of ideas.** As already noted, the social media is a venue for its audience to express thoughts, momentary emotions and most importantly, **it can offer a space for voicing the protest.**

"Somehow everybody gains courage, becomes a hero and resorts to any form of protest available through the social network." (N.B., female, editor)

While it holds true that the activities planned in the virtual space are less extensive and functional in reality, there have been several cases in Georgia when the actions planned in the social media were translated into reality. This provides sufficient grounds to claim that the social media can possibly function as a venue to plan protest actions. Interestingly, the respondents claim that while the social media directly creates the protest waves in the Arab countries, the media in Georgia only reacts to the already existing waves.

"Unlike the Arab countries, where the protest waves are created by the social media, this looks more like playing with the waves here, where the media has managed to catch the wave." (O.N., male, blogger)

As the experts have rightly noted, actions are planned quite frequently in the Georgian virtual space, but the turnout is usually much less than expected. The experts trace the problems to the boundaries between the virtual and the real, however, there is an assumption that the actions planned in the virtual space will gradually start to translate into real life.

As cited above, voicing of the protest is associated with courage, and the courage is generated by the virtuality of network. The latter gives more courage to its users, since the degree of freedom in the virtual space is relatively higher.

"People share ideas and thoughts in the social media; there are always some actions planned, people are freer, more active there. Although there are many, whose posts are anonymous because of fear, they are still more active there than in real life." (I.L., female, blogger)

There is also an assumption that the network like *forum.ge,* the significance of which is traced to the past, is well-known for enabling users to stay anonymous, thus making them braver and providing an avenue for "venting their thoughts."

Apart from being a venue for voicing the protest and providing freedom of thought, one of the social media functions is to create space for the exchange of information and discussions. In addition to being quite challenging to engage audience in discussions in the traditional media, another problem is that the latter does not usually air discussion-focused programs. The social media therefore starts to actively assume this function, and the users manage to replace the lack via the social media.

It is important to note that according to the experts, **social media has purportedly acquired a function of criticizing the traditional media.** Besides, bringing less highlighted topics in the traditional media to limelight has become part of the social media's agenda, and the politics is often cited as such. The political topics are especially censored in the traditional media, while the social media is much freer in this regard, and the political discussions are far more frequent. **Emphasizing alternative opinions is the social media function,** which is rated positively by the experts, and is thought to promote pluralism in public.

"There is always a room for discussions and engagement on any topic of interest in the social media, unlike in the traditional media. When the Meladze's show "100 degrees Celsius" is aired (on TV) and some rumors are discussed, are these the genuine discussions?" (K.N., male, editor)

When referring to the information exchange function of the social media, it was cited that this function is performed for a smaller group, a so-called "closed circle" bringing together individuals with similar professional attributes, be it the journalists, editors or the media professionals.

The experts' opinions on the Georgian blog-sphere and the information it holds are very interesting to cite. According to one of the bloggers, the bloggers supposedly tend to be apolitical and look at the political developments from "up above" so as to preserve the status of an "impartial observer."

"Being apolitical is quite popular among the bloggers. It is quite trendy to be apolitical and look from 'up above,' be an impartial observer... A blogger should be a member of the civil society, and should stand aside from everyone and everything." (G.O., female, blogger)

This should definitely be the main reason why the smallest category of bloggers among several others cited by experts, includes those who write about the socio-political issues. It is also assumed that the Georgian blog-sphere was more interesting not so long ago, because the bloggers would discuss much more sensitive and acute issues back then. This activity has now slowed down, since *"many bloggers have joined the government, public relations agencies and businesses. They are virtually swayed by the government." (O.Z., female, journalist)*

The experts often cite that the government has recently started to show keen interest towards bloggers by holding a series of unofficial meetings, like the ministers and the Public Defender arranging retreats and trainings with bloggers. Hence, the Georgian blog-sphere and the social media have already become the government's focus as that of a **media-agent, which can influence politics.** The politicians, in turn, are keen on maintaining this sphere under their control and sharp attention.

"The Public Defender often takes journalists on retreat. Although he is not a government representative, we know that he is quite lenient in his judgements, and the goal is to make the journalists lenient too, especially owing to the overnight field trips. I attended one of those meetings, where the atmosphere was quite relaxed, the Public Defender addressed us by names, and conversations ran open. Under those circumstances, the bloggers would be a little hesitant to write critical blogs, because they may get a call from someone they had close encounter with during the retreat to inquire why they wrote a critical blog. This is what the purpose of those meetings is, and this method is quite effective indeed." (B.Kh., female, journalist)

Apart from the politicians, the businesses are also quite active in gaining influence on the social media. The experts note that the social media, especially the facebook, is gradually becoming a strong venue **for marketing and PR.** As cited, there are many companies today that employ the social media to market their products. On the one hand, the users find it easy to obtain information on almost any product within a single space, and on the other, the producers find it profitable to market their products this way. While this quickly and easily boosts the potential

consumer numbers, it also gives ready exposure to the marketed products. Owing to the ability to receive feedback via the social media, a producer can quickly and easily learn about the consumers' needs and wants and save money.

"What we can say is that the research, which is quite costly, has already transitioned to the social network. Here we have the focus groups to ask what they think on many topics, not all of course. It is not necessary to resort to research companies any more, rather, you can do that easily, quickly and cheaply here." (N.B., female, editor)

Along with discussing the potential of the social media to promote the exchange of information and ideas, offer a venue for debates and to market the products, an entirely contrary opinion was voiced to the effect that the social media in Georgia is not a venue for creating, sharing and discussing the information, rather, it is mainly used for the entertainment purposes.

"Entertainment is what really matters in the social media! Even when its goal is to share information, still the main motive behind it is the entertainment." (B.Kh., female, journalist, blogger)

It is worth noting that the respondents mainly associate social media with the social networks, and when referring to the social networks, they often imply facebook. The latter is cited as a venue for entertainment, sharing and liking photos, and establishing and maintaining desired friends/acquaintances. **Entertainment and obtaining/sustaining social capital** is therefore considered to be the core function of the social media – seen through the lens of the social networks, and some experts rightly believe that the facebook, in this regard, is almost identical to the social network called Odnoklassniki.

"The facebook replicates Odnoklassniki. Its main function is a replica of Odnoklassniki." (D.D., male, blogger).

To recap the expert interviews concerning the four core social media functions, we can conclude that the entertainment function is most dominating in Georgia.

Social Media Development Perspectives in the Nearest Five Years

Although the surveyed experts do not foresee any radical changes in Georgia in terms of developing the social media in the nearest five years, they still claim that its future development tendencies are quite optimistic. On the one hand, they link this to the social media developments taking place worldwide, and on the other, they think that the potential political and economic changes in Georgia might provide impetus for development.

Referring to the popularity of the specific social media channels, the respondents contend that the facebook hegemony will continue in the near future, will grow further and the new means will start to emerge within the facebook itself. However, we should expect other technologies, like Twitter and Google+, to gain popularity as well. The respondents also believe that the number of bloggers will rise too, but the most successful bloggers will continue to transition to the "professional" media.

Yet another future tendency that the respondents refer to is the growing sociality of the social media. As cited above, the present-day Georgian social media is often perceived as a venue for the "cyber-sect" and the cyber authority activities, although the experts contend that this will change soon, and a broader segment will get involved in the social media.

"The state of affairs will change, and the social media will grow more social. One of the reasons is that the representatives of this closed circle are satiated and fed up with being so closed. I have often heard and have often discussed myself that there exists a social suicide moment – deactivating facebook, deleting a blog, etc. That is why I think that this sect will gradually fall apart, and will become broader, embracing others more openly." (G.O., female, blogger)

As for the future interrelation between the traditional and the social media, the experts claim that the numbers of the TV viewers will drop along with the continuous rise of the internet user numbers in Georgia, resulting in the growing significance of the role of the social media. The experts claim that the social media workers have less to do with this, rather, this will occur as a result of the technological developments.

Even though the skeptics believe that there is still a long way to go until the social media supersedes the traditional, the other major part of experts believes that the social media

development tendencies worldwide point to the gradual replacement of the traditional by the social, Georgia being no exception. The proponents of this opinion claim that if the social media continues to develop at this speed, the traditional media will try to emulate the social media and adapt itself to the new circumstances.

"If the trend that is prevalent in the world is maintained, the social media will gradually supersede the traditional. This means that the social media will become most influential." (T.D., male,blogger)

Overall, there is a prevailing assumption that the social media influence will gradually rise, and we should expect that it will become more active in the political and social processes, and its role in organizing protests, charitable or other kinds of actions will be reinforced. It is also anticipated that the role of the social media in business and marketing will further increase, and the respondents expect that the social media will be more actively applied for educational purposes both by individuals, and by training and research agencies. Nevertheless, the experts claim that the development of the social media is accompanied by the side effects, which we will discuss in the following sub-section.

Positive and Negative Outcomes of the Social Media Development

When referring to possible positive and negative outcomes of the social media development, the respondents unanimously agree that the outcomes should be much more positive than negative. Among the positive outcomes is the unlimited access to information, promotion of pluralism, transparency, broader engagement, etc. In general, the social media in Georgia, unlike the traditional, is perceived to be quite democtratic and the experts claim that its further development will be a prerequisie to advancing democracy.

"Internet and the social media are very positive developments owing to the internet's ability to liberate individuals from cliches and trite, obsolete judgements." (M.G., female, media-lawyer)

One of the measures of democracy is the diversity of and access to information. According to the respondents, one of the key positive outcomes of the social media development is raising awareness on political issues. They claim that the citizens can obtain alternative information, it is

harder for the government to monopolize information, and this in turn guarantees that the media will be less effectively controlled by the government in future. As the number of the social media users grows, more and more people will gain access to alternative information sources, thus promoting independent and critical thinking, and serving as a prerequisite to the growth of the civil consciousness.

"It is very good in terms of raising user awareness. More accurate the information, more accurate the choice by voters. It is not because I supply certain information, but because they have an opportunity to analyze and to arrive at correct conclusions. He/she does not rely on ready-made solutions, rather, makes his/her own judgements and becomes proactive." (V.A., female, editor)

Yet another measure of democracy, as foreseen by the respondents, is that there will be a broader engagement in the social and political life owing to the social media. It is anticipated that the community groups will use the social media as a lever to influence the government, strengthen their self-governance, and address a series of problems. It is believed that given diversity of the local and multi-ethnic cultures there will be a broader engagement of all individuals from all cultural spectra, and the constructive relations will be built among them owing to discussions and dialogue in the social networks. Owing to the pluralism of ideas, people will be able to choose whatever is acceptable and works best for them, whereas the open discussion format will enable them to become more tolerant to others' judgements.

"Development of the social media will promote broader engagement of individuals in open discussions. There will be the diversity of ideas, and people will start to distinguish and choose those that will appeal to them the most." (T.P., female, blogger)

As noted above, the social media may become a platform for consolidating people with the common interests and opposing points of view. It can therefore be considered as one of the best venues for creating and accruing social capital. Nevertheless, the surveyed experts claim that apart from consolidating and promoting solidarity among people, the social media can in fact sow confrontation and segregate the society.

"In positive terms, the social media may become a venue for mobilizing, consolidating, solidifying the society, but in negative terms, it can disintegrate the society, trigger confrontation and cause its further breakdown into micro-colonies." (P.D., male, blogger)

The respondents demonstrate similar ambivalence when referring to the diverse information publicized by the social media. They claim that even though availability of the alternative information is only positive, abundance of information complicates its categorization and sorting, as it becomes harder to identify which piece of information is reliable and impartial.

"Information becomes hard to manage. Information sources are so diverse that it becomes harder to filter, classify and understand all these different pieces. Less information is sometimes better than plenty." (M.M., male, journalist, blogger)

How do the social media users cope with this situation? The Georgian experts' judgements somehow echo the latest studies conducted in the West, based on which the abundance of and access to information does not raise the society's democracy levels for two main reasons: (1) abundance of information causes further fragmentation of the society, since people tend to select information that already replicates their political predispositions in an attempt to understand and classify all these various information streams (Iyengar, 2011, p. 59), and (2) abundance of information prevents people from getting familiar with the news and they switch to light infotainment that further increases inequality in the acquisition of political information (Iyengar, 2011, p. 63).

The experts also pinpoint that the social media may negatively affect not only the people's political awareness, but also their social activism. This issue triggers ambivalence, since it is believed that the social media provides impetus for social engagement on the one hand, and suppresses such engagement on the other. The rationale is that the negative emotions are easily discharged on the spot, and the protest is not vented. The social media may encourage the users to let the steam out and thus suppress activism, this being further exemplified by a series of unsuccessful actions planned in the social media.

"It is quite rare for any activity to go beyond the limits of the social media. It is my observation that a certain news story may suddenly become hotly debated to an extent that the online

petitions are created and some follow-up activities are planned. However, this rarely turns into real action, and if it does, there are only few people who take part in it." (T.P., female, blogger)

Yet another serious threat ensuing from the social media development, as cited by the respondents, is that due to the evergrowing popularity of the social media and its intrusion into private lives, we make more information public, be it private, corporate, etc. This information can successfully be used by stakeholders (politicians, businessmen, etc.) for propaganda or "brainwashing." Moreover, since it is extremely hard to manage the disclosed information in the social media, it can turn into a favorable place for stealing and abusing such personal information.

"We are disclosing more and more information to the social media, be it either personal, corporate or any other, and entrusting such information to internet. I think this is a global problem – unless the society finally understands of what to share and disclose, and how to create necessary safeguards, the outcomes will definitely be negative." (O.E., male, blogger)

And finally, the large-scale development of the social media can possibly entail one serious threat or a negative consequence – this is a phenomenon of the second world, a so-called virtuality, implying that the virtual reality could be perceived as more real than the reality itself. People may detach themselves from the day-to-day problems and focus on the virtual problems instead.

"I think the reality is threatened. What in fact is the reality? It depends. Whatever you want to choose and accept is what becomes real. The threat is that the bodily senses are lost, you don't want to see friends anymore and are too lazy to go out... you are involved in virtual relations all day long and do not feel lonely at all." (G.O., female, blogger)

Social Media vis-à-vis the Political Domain

The experts actively discuss the intrusion of the social media into the political playfield, which they mainly attribute to the growing numbers of the internet users, including the social media users. The mere fact that there has been the growth of the internet user numbers in recent years and that the facebook is becoming more and more popular, encourages political figures to

establish their presence in this space, and remind a certain socially networked segment of the constituency of their existence. It is assumed that the state agencies and politicians create their facebook profiles to simply gain exposure, establish their presence, and attract the electorate.

According to the interviewees, the facebook pages are almost identical to the traditional media products, because they mostly display dry, "packaged" information, i.e. information on politicians' visits and statements, accompanied with the official photos and video materials. The experts assert that these pages have not been able to create a discussion venue necessary for political communication and for raising the society's political culture. Apart from being unable to stimulate discussions, there is also a lack of differing and conflicting positions there.

"The politicians have come to realize that the social media is gradually gaining momentum, and everybody has created profiles, but this in no way promotes the political culture. The information contained there is only general, there is no discussion and how can this possibly do any good?!" (K.N., male, editor)

The same applies to online conferences organized by politicians. As already noted, these conferences are substantially similar to those in the traditional media, as all sorts of undesirable questions are removed, and it is impossible to voice differing opinions.

"I remember Gigi Ugulava having a facebook conference with Tamar Chergoleishvili. There was a big tribune, lots of people, cameras, etc. However, the questions our journalists (from "Liberali") asked were removed from the wall. This is not an authentic illustration of the social media, in a real sense of this word. The filter certainly exists." (O.T., female, editor)

The experts therefore contend that there is a certain illusion that the social media is having a special say in the politics. In reality, there is not much that is being changed. However, the mere fact itself that the political actors have started to become active in this direction, is positively rated. The experts claim that the political actors, especially the government officials, have realized that the social media significance is on the rise, and they have started to transition to a completely new mode of interacting with the bloggers. The politicians invite bloggers to meetings and organize informal gatherings, but again, this is quite "unhealthy," since they try to coax them and differentiate them into "ours" and "theirs." Then they invite the "our" bloggers to subsequent meetings to write "lenient" and indulgent, rather than critical posts, for readers.

"I recall when Khachidze took the bloggers to Bakuriani for the Ministerial meeting, so that they could ask critical questions. Upon their return, the bloggers wrote that the Minister was a nice person, with a good sense of humor... Unfortunately, this is what usually happens and there are very few independent bloggers who would not extol Khachidze's sense of humor, rather, ask him some challenging questions. By the way, the same technique was applied by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Prime-Minister, and one of the bloggers wrote: I wanted to ask a question regarding Kimeridze's death, but I did not dare to." (B.Kh., female, journalist, blogger)

Even though the above-mentioned actvities have taken place quite often lately, the social media is still not considered to be the most important and efficient agent for politics, since it covers a relatively small portion of the electorate. The social media is important for a very narrow audience circle, and the traditional media, especially the television, is still thought to maintain the strongest influence.

"This is directly tied to the number of users a country has. Since the social media users are less than those of television, the social media cannot therefore be a main avenue for politicians..."(D.L., male, editor)

The experts claim that under these circumstances the social media plays an important role for those to whom the traditional media is closed, or for fledgling politicians who want to try their strength. Nevertheless, this statement is contradictory, since David Bakradze, Giorgi Khachidze and Vera Kobalia are rated as the most active politicians in the social media, for whom the traditional media is completely open, and whom we cannot call unseasoned at all.

Apart from focusing on the importance of the social media for a closed circle, attention is paid to the fragmentation factor, noting that the social media is unable to influence the electorate with the already established points of view and a strong outlook. In fact, the social media or a specific narrative it offers is only effective for reinforcing, rather than transforming, the existing opinions.

"Those who hold strong opinions, they have already created their own archenemies relative to one or the other publication, and neither Liberali nor Tabula has arguments strong enough to neutralize these politically engaged individuals." (G.O., female, blogger)

Notwithstanding this attitude, experts still positively rate the politicians' activities in the social media, which was brought under the key focus upon emergence of the second political center (Bidzina Ivanishvili). These activities can be viewed as an attempt to try one's own strength in the social media. Since the number of the internet users is still relatively small compared to the traditional media users, it is quite logical that the activities are mainly planned and carried out in the traditional media. Parallel to that, the new media is gradually gaining momentum, growing popular, and becoming an arena for the political activities. The experts acknowledge that the attempts to communicate via the social media are in fact being made, but they are geared towards gaining exposure in this domain on the one hand, and on the other, they target a very narrow segment.

As already cited, the experts are actively discussing a very interesting tendency, a so-called "like-mania," which is associated with the distorted perception of the essence and significance of the social media. The activation of the second political front in the social network and pursuing "likes" escalated a battle for the "likes" in the governmental circles, further referred to as the "war for the likes" in the social network. The experts believe that the parties spending financial and administrative resources to secure "likes" is quite ludicrous.

"Number of likes makes no sense. I was told to pay GEL 20 to secure 100 'likes' for my page. Who can possibly believe in the 'likes'? It is ridiculous. The number of 'likes' can strike so high that it can in fact exceed the number of facebook users." (K.N., male, editor)

This points to the fact that the politicians have misconstrued the purpose of the new media and the networks, and they are not using them for discussions, dialogue and interaction with their constituencies. As a result, instead of raising the constituency's awareness, there is a growing "cynical" attitude among the social network users. They come to realize that the growing number of "likes" accrued through these methods creates a fake picture, and this has nothing to do with the reality. It can also be said that the active users of the social media and social networks, who are interested in politics, have different judgements about how the political domain employs this new platform.

"The politicians' personal facebook pages do not play a role in raising political culture of the constituency, as they are entirely PR-oriented. Political culture will be raised by the discussion

23

space, which they have not created. They neither gain nor lose the supporters, this is just illusory." (M.A., female, editor, blogger)

While it is true that a social network user expects to see politicians in a more "domestic environment" and to get to know them from a different perspective unlike in television, he/she surely gets disappointed as the politicians' facebook pages only offer a "well-packaged and edited" information geared towards making a desirable self-presentation. These pages do not therefore offer informal backstage information, and this ultimately leads us to thinking that the politicians' activities in the social networks are not different from those in the traditional media. Their facebook pages and profiles offer products that are similar to those in the traditional media, the only difference being the placement space.

About Mediocracy and Political Awareness

Due to the fact that the information dissemination is not considered to be a key function of the social media in Georgia, the experts assert that it cannot therefore be geared towards raising political awareness. The rationale behind it is that the audience is entertainment-oriented, and is satisfied with the shallow information even if such information is meant to be pivotal. Other experts claim that it is in the political actors' best interests to provide as little information as possible, since an informed citizen is considered to be very dangerous.

Given that the experts refer to colonization of media by politics, rather than "colonization of politics by media logic," i.e. mediocracy (Meyer, 2002, p. 71), disseminating limited information by policy-makers makes some sense. Under these circumstances, a concept of the "Media-Framing" acquires relevance (based on Goffman's "Frame" concept, (Goffman, 1955)) and the focus is shifted to how the Georgian media reports political developments, and how the Georgian politicians react to such reports.

As one of the media-experts noted, the Georgian politicians actively use their power to set the media backstage limits and not to let the media from the "front region" to the "back region" (Goffman, 1955), i.e. from the front stage to the backstage. According to her, there is a big difference between the Georgian model and the so-called democratic, say, American political

model. In the American model, the politicians try not to obstruct the media from penetrating into backstage, rather, offer the best possible performance in the front region. For instance, a political candidate who is able to raise funds through the social media will score victory. As far as the Georgian political model is concerned, politicians try to prevent the intrusion of the media into backstage as much as they can. Under these circumstances, *"provision of information by the social media turns into a political weapon, which is consciously used by political forces to self-advertise themselves and discredit the oponents. This way, they wield power to penetrate backstage."* (B.Kh., female, journalist, blogger)

We therefore face the media colonization by politics, and the experts claim that there is still a long way to go until the true mediocracy emerges in Georgia.

"Politics, rather than the media, sets the rules of the game." (I.L., female, blogger)

"Unfortunately, the present-day media is unable to perform the fourth government's function. In this regard, it is quite fragile." (N.D., male, blogger)

Furthermore, the political domain has divided the virtual space into two central categories, where some bloggers are referred to as "ours" and some are referred to as "theirs."

"Politics still holds sway. It's the politician's discretion to divide the social media into 'ours' and 'theirs'." (I.L., female, blogger)

The interviews have revealed that undesirable questions are instantly removed from the politician's profiles during the facebook conferences. A contrary, critical opinion is almost never voiced. There are instances when the social media representatives are not invited to various events/activities. This was pointed by the representatives of the *"Liberali,"* who noted that they were never invited to the bloggers' meetings organized by the government officials.

The political actors display growing interest towards the social media, however, they offer open meetings to those, whom they consider as "ours." There is another interesting trend related to the blogger classification into "ours" and "theirs." As already noted during the interviews, the political domain colonizes the media less aggressively. It rarely resorts to direct censorship ("nobody persecutes them, nobody arrests them"). On the contrary, it selects the "coaxing" method.

"There are two parties – the first being the government, which came to realize that the bloggers are strong, hold control over the social media, their profiles are shared, etc. They were not persecuted, but their Achilles heels were found, they were given good drinks to drink and were coaxed in order to change their minds. This is what the bloggers ultimately wanted, they found themselves in "something good" and thought they would make a career out of this..." (D.D., male, blogger)

One of the examples of the indirect political control methods is the information shared by one of the respondents. This information illustrates as to how the interested parties, in this case the government, tries to influence others by paying certain individuals.

"I know for sure that there are people on the forum who are paid to "post" [a person is named]. Some are from the government and some are from the opposition. I do not rule out any possibility that such individuals will soon appear on facebook." (G.O., female, blogger)

The experts claim that the growing interest of the politics towards the social media represents a political order that becomes more relevant as elections approach.

"The government's interest towards the bloggers and the social media is very keen. I somehow think that this can have the political motive or engagement/order. The elections are around the corner, and the government wants to ensure that whatever happened in Russia or the Middle East does not happen here. This is some sort of a "coaxing" principle..." (I.L., female, blogger)

As for raising awareness through disseminating information in the social media, the experts are quite skeptical and believe that the social media is less supportive in raising political awareness. On the one hand, the reason is that the bloggers are unable to create a serious media-product themsleves, and there is no competition in the market to hone their skills and spur their professional growth.

"Whatever I am writing now is the same as to what I was writing three years ago, because there is nobody to emulate or compete with."(O.N., male, blogger)

On the other hand, the blog-sphere is less active when writing about the politics. As cited above, it is "trendy among the bloggers to be apolitical" and when categorizing them, the experts assign political bloggers to the smallest category. In terms of the political activity, the experts traced the

highest activity to *forum.ge* several years ago, which has allegedly fulfilled its mission and exhausted its potential. It is less interesting and less in demand at this point, and its function is now performed by facebook, acting like a present-day information repository.

"Facebook offers instantaneous information on any developments taking place in any part of Georgia. It is the most frequently visited place, where people share and circulate information for others to read. Nothing is ever left uncovered (K.B., female, journalist, blogger)

It is worth noting, however, that facebook fulfills this function only for a limited pool of individuals – these are people who are employed, interested in obtaining information and applying this information to their profession. Yet, for the majority of users, facebook only carries the entertainment function.

About the "Liberal Model"

When referring to the "Liberal Model," which implies the commercial news story model and gives preference to the relatively "lenient" and "well-packaged" news, the experts unanimously agree that it is also quite dominant in Georgia responding to the audience needs. The audience wants to see effective, easily comprehensible and readable product, and to spend less time and intellectual resources. As the expert bloggers note, easy-to-grasp topics or easy-to-understand opinions on the relatively serious topics are simplest to read. Hence, they give a thorough thought not only to the blog content, but also to the effectiveness of headings, selected captions and photos.

"The focus is on the garish headings. If an article is short and has a garish heading, it attracts lots of readers. Nobody will read an article called 'GYLA (Georgian Young Lawyers' Association) Conducted the Election Monitoring,' but if an article is called 'Elections will be Rigged,' it will certainly attract lots of readers." (B.Kh., female, journalist, blogger)

The experts think that there is nothing unusual in this. On the one hand, you cannot ask the audience to be actively engaged as they spend lots of time and energy meeting their basic everyday needs. On the other hand, you cannot ask the social media to create a product that will

not sell. In reality, the Georgian market sells light, entertainment-focused information. Hence, the demand creates the product.

"Information, just like a book, is a commodity. It has no net value without users." (D.Z., male, blogger)

According to the experts, there are certain exceptions when the serious topics are brought to the social media' limelight. It is obvious that the social media is more discussion-oriented than the traditional media; however, it is still not geared towards highlighting the socio-economic hardships and the political issues.

As experts claim, both the social and the traditional media often focus on similar topics, but unlike the social media, the traditional is more scandalous. The social media tries to communicate certain sensitive topics to the audience more "ethically."

"Georgia maintains the same liberal principle. There are topics that are already sold in the traditional media, but are sold unethically. The social media is more ethical in stimulating discussions on the topics, like the ones on minorities." (D.D., male, blogger)

Although the social media tries to create a venue for discussions, it is becoming obvious that the in-depth examination of the serious topics is not its top priority either. The social media tries to share the most critical stories in a way that is comprehensible to the audience. Hence, the form becomes more important than the content. Although this is more conspicuous in the traditional media, the social media is not devoid of this either, provided that the latter "feeds" from the "mainstream" media, i.e. reproduces key discussion topics from the traditional media.

About the Celebrity Culture and Infotainment

According to the experts' judgement, the social media is less oriented on the celebrity culture. A specific individual in the Georgian media-space goes public owing to the traditional media, and the social media, in turn, gives exposure to those who already went public in the traditional media. Although there are cases when a person gains the firsthand exposure in the social media, but these are very rare. This can be explained by the fact that the traditional media offers much

more to its users in this respect. Movement of the celebrities from the traditional to the social, or their parallel exposure in both media, is conditioned by the traditional media's prevailing influence and its large audience.

"Celebrities cannot be created solely by internet. While television reproduces topics from the internet, the internet, in turn, 'steals' celebrities from television. A public 'face' from television accrues more 'likes' in facebook compared to a person who is made successful owing only to the social media, like facebook." (D.L., male, editor)

Furthermore, it was noted that the traditional and then the social media gives exposure to individuals not because of their specific virtues or accomplishments, but because of their established circle of friends or a clan that these individuals belong to. Due to this factor, some people gain more exposure in the media than the others, and it is frequently observed that such exposure is often given to one and the same people.

"These people become popular not because of their activities or virtues, but because they simply gain exposure in the media. There is a principle of close circle of friends or a clan in action. In reality, they do not create anything of value that will make them popular. For example, Armani created the brand first and then became popular. It's quite the contrary here." (V.A., female, editor, blogger)

As experts claim, a focus of the social media on the celebrity culture is associated with selling a product better, rather than with a conscious attempt to divert attention away from more important social and political issues. This factor is more at work in the traditional media, which is much more tightly controlled top down. The social media "reproduces" celebrities from the traditional media by adding exposure and popularity to those figures. As far as the educational subject matter is concerned, the Georgian social media displays less interest in it, as the media product creators themselves are less interested in highlighting these topics.

"By taking a look at our blog-space, what strikes is that its representatives are not serious, and it is unlikely they will write anything serious about politics or will make a serious judgement or statement on anything." (I.L., female, blogger)

On the other hand, the audience prefers reading simple topics and writing about the celebrities is more advantageous from this perspective. This is presumably indicative of a low civil culture.

As various cross-cultural studies demonstrate, the societies differ in terms of the varied levels of their demand on information (Genova and Greenberg, 1979; Graziano, 1983; Kwak, 1999; Eveland and Scheufele, 2000), which is driven by a society's cultural and political norms, such as group identity or civic pride or duty. The researchers assert that when such norms weaken, the motivation to obtain political information also weakens, and the audience's focus is shifted to trivial entertaining information or infotainment.

As cited above, the experts attribute the dominating role of the infotainment in the Georgian social media to the audience demand.

"The infotainment is sold the best. If explained by the market economy principles, supply matches demand from the people's side." (O.N., male, blogger)

The respondents note that focusing on entertainment may in fact be the users' choice, as they are so exhausted by the social and economic hardships and the political situation in Georgia that their desire to "detach" themselves from this may create their demand on entertainment-driven information.

Although it was mentioned that there are many diverse topics circulated and discussed in the social media, the manistream information is still tabloid or relatively trivial. As noted on various occasions, the entertaining and tabloid topics are drawn from the traditional media. The social media is therefore referred to as an instrument, which reflects the reality, "captures" ongoing trends and reacts accordingly.

"Everyone is equally entertainment-oriented, but the blogs even more so. A blogger knows what sells and therefore writes about more trivial topics. The demand is mostly tabloid." (I.L., female, blogger)

Censorship and Self-Censorship Issues in the Social Media

The censorship and self-censorship issue has stimulated keen discussions in the Georgian social media. There are two types of narratives in this regard: on the one hand, the respondents allegedly agree that the social media in Georgia is free from censorship, and this is deduced based on the comparison with the traditional media, where the presence of censorship is confirmed by everybody. Given this comparison, the respondents point to the freedom of the social media. On the other hand, the experts' narratives illustrate various examples of indirect or "mild" censorships in the Georgian social media space. The co-existence of these two types of narratives is not surprising given a possibility to divide the respondents' narratives into "cultural" and "collective" stories. The former is retold from the perspective of the dominating or normative position, whereas the other is retold from the position of those, who cannot voice their concerns or are marginalized in the "cultural history" (Richardson in Miller and Glassner, 2004, p. 130). Hence, when making a narrative's discourse analysis, consideration should always be given to the context, purpose and the position a respondent ascribes to a story.

The proponents of the first position are mostly media-lawyers and editors, as well as some bloggers, who refute presence of censorship in the Georgian social media, because they are not aware of any specific censhorship examples.

"I have not heard of any censorship facts in the social media, unlike in the traditional. The restrictions especially apply to the regional journalists for filming, but I think nobody sets any limits on whatever is written in the blogs." (V.A., female, editor, blogger)

"We cannot talk about censorship because there needs to be a precedent for this. For instance, if someone writes that a certain politician is bad or starts to personally abuse him, and if he gets arrested because of this, this is a precedent. No such precedents exist here." (B.U., female, blogger)

Although these respondents claim that the social media in Georgia is nourished on the "tabloid" topics and that the political blogs are rarely written, the rationale they provide for this is not the presence of censorship, but rather, the circumstances like influence of the traditional media on the social. And indeed, as already noted, the social media draws key discussion topics from the traditional, which is saturated with the entertainment topics. On the other hand, they claim that

the internet users are mostly youngsters and the bloggers' average age ranges from 21 to 25. Therefore, as the respondents note, both the media product makers and the end users in Georgia are youngsters, who are interested in entertainment rather than the politics (by the way, some respondents claim that this points to the health of the social media).

Furthermore, some respondents assume that imposing censorship by the government depends not only on the government's will, but also on the available technologies. Since the servers and the addresses of certain sites operate beyond the Georgian space, it is quite difficult to control them.

"I think that the government will find it very hard to censor the sites whose servers and the addressess belong to the non-Georgian space. The censorship is therefore very weak, I mean the censorship of the blogs. The internet-space is quite free." (D.D., male, blogger)

Despite denial of the censorship presence in the media, even the proponents of this position acknowledge the fact that it is still popular to write on sensitive topics (like politics, religion, gender, etc.) using pen names. The mere fact that the users prefer to stay anonymous indicates that they stay away from open confrontation by avoiding overt discussions on some topics.

Nevertheless, there exists an argument that despite absence of censorship in the social media in a classical sense, i.e. absence of events that are characteristic to censorship, like arresting bloggers or some sort of physical reprisal, there are certain facts of verbal threats being made.

"There have been no cases of any arrests, but I have heard of examples of some calls being made on what someone should or should not write." (T.B., male, media-analyst)

Moreover, the interviewed experts openly discuss three different censorship types: the first implies the government authorities pressurizing their employees to demand that they become politically active in the social media, and this is geared towards protecting interests of certain individuals and parties.

"I have heard of some requests made by the government authorities to actively use the social media to voice one's position. This could be geared towards serving some political interests." (M.E., male, media-lawyer)

An often-cited example of such censorship is the government demanding from the state officials to "like" the President's facebook profile.

The second type of censorship is imposed by the editorial board on its staff. Although the internet-journal webpages explicitly refer to the free editorial policy, the experts still claim that *"there is a certain virtual ideological confrontation in the internet-space between the rightists and the leftists. The "Tabula" staff tend to take the right-wing discourse, whereas the "Liberali" staff are more left-wing" (G.O., female, blogger).* The editors therefore hold their own political stance and the blogs they write should be illustrative of their political ideology.

"To illustrate, let me give you the Tabula's example: I know their IT technician very well. The editor would control whatever he would 'like' or share on the wall. Once he even got reprimanded for sharing something 'lightly' anti-governmental on his wall. Can you believe that even an IT technician is being controlled?" (G.O., female, blogger)

The third type of censorship is believed to be the pressure the government exerts on bloggers, which may take the form of indirect or "mild" censorship, but it is still the censorship as such.

*"I recall when Khachidze took the bloggers to Bakuriani for the Ministerial meeting, so that they could ask critical questions. Upon their return, the bloggers wrote that the Minister was a nice person, with a good sense of humor... Unfortunately, this is what usually happens and there are very few independent bloggers who would not extol Khachidze's sense of humor, rather, ask him some challenging questions. By the way, the same technique was applied by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Prime-Minister, and one of the bloggers wrote: I wanted to ask a question regarding Kimeridze's death, but I did not dare to. Such a self-censhorship from a young blogger, who did not dare ask a question to the Prime-Minister, is not surprising at all. What is more, **it can be a method of the 'mild' political censorhip**" (B.Kh., female, journalist, blogger)*

Hence, an attempt to coax the bloggers can be considered as one of the varieties of censorship. The goal is that the bloggers who are being coaxed should refrain from writing critical posts not to put themselves in an awkward situation, or merely for some personal gain. As one of the bloggers cites:

"The comments to my blog guide me as to what to write in the future. I came to a conclusion one day that it will not be any good for me to behave differently and criticize someone all the time – someone with whom I may have business encounter tomorrow. Aside from being a blogger, I am a journalist and have to think about the consequences all the time." (I.L., female, blogger)

This is a sheer illustration that the political censorship, even in its "mildest" form, necessarily entails self-censorship. One of the experts quotes: *"No self-censorship exists without censorship. Presence of censorship always signifies presence of self-censorship" (K.B., female, journalist, blogger).* The researchers, who study the Neo-Soviet Model of media, arrive at a similar conclusion by claiming that the censorship characteristic to the soviet media was superseded by the post-soviet self-censorship (though presence of the political self-censorship was also characteristic to the soviet media) (Oates, 2007).

A good illustration of self-censorship is a comment made by one of the bloggers, who has been maintaining her own blog for years on the socio-economic and political topics, and who has recently joined the *Liberali*. Even though this magazine rates itself as a critical media-agent vis-à-vis others, and what is more, when being interviewed its representatives stated that the *Liberali's* bloggers were never invited to the bloggers' meetings organized by the ministers (and this should lead us to thinking that an attempt to coax them is quite futile), one of our respondents still makes an interesting statement:

"It happens that when you want to write something, you just cannot do. I recall that when I wanted to write a post regarding the May 26 event, I was very afraid. What I can also recall is that I used to have a blog called the "funny rubrics," where I wrote on political topics humorously, but when I joined the Liberali as a journalist, I put this rubric aside, as I did not dare continue in the same vein." (B.Kh., journalist, blogger)

The explanation our respondent provides to this is the following: *"First of all, I am a journalist and have to reckon with my colleagues."* Besides, she adds:

"Truth be told, I still cannot write openly about everything, because one is always afraid of an attack. I am especially cautious when writing about gender and poverty, and when voicing critical opinions. Once in a while I catch myself mitigating my position and making excuses even when I do not have to be doing so." (B.Kh., journalist, blogger)

Hence, one of the ways to make self-censorship work is to mitigate one's own position and to write less critical posts. The other way is to ignore certain problems and not to write any posts on them at all, as illustrated above – although a blogger wanted to ask a question to a Prime-Minister regarding Kimeridze's death, he did not dare to after meeting him face-to-face; he has not written about it ever since.

About the Public and Citizen Journalism

Before we proceed to discussing the public and citizen journalism it should be noted that the respondents often use these two terms interchangeably.

By definition, the public journalism, which became popular since 1990s gives preference to the voice of the citizens vis-à-vis politicians and experts, and advocates the citizen issues. The citizen journalism, which burgeoned in 2000 onwards views citizens as active participants in producing and sharing the news that bears importance to them (Steiner, Roberts, 2011). In the former case, a news story is created by a professional journalist, but with a focus on citizen interests, while in the latter case the news is created and disseminated by the citizens themselves. Since the traditional media format is built on a premise that a professional journalist himself/herself gathers and disseminates information, it does not leave any room for developing citizen journalism. Unlike the traditional media, the social media creates favourable conditions for developing citizen journalism, as it is built on a premise of pluralism and free exchange of information.

When referring to public journalism, the respondents note that it is still underdeveloped in the Georgian media, as it is no secret (as evidenced by the Report titled *Entities Associated with Government and Opposition Taking Over TV Stations,* published by Transparency International – Georgia on February 7, 2012) that there are some political forces behind the traditional media sources, which supply information to the audience at their own discretion. At times when the impartial information is scarce, it seems that the population has to find a solution, produce the information they want and circulate it through the social media. However, the interviewed experts believe that this is still premature – as it was already cited, the cyberspace is only

accessible to a limited population segment, and the development of citizen journalism is still hindered by the immature civil culture.

"And again, this takes us back to the society's mentality problem. Many do not want to speak up publicly, and nothing will change unless there is a fundamental mentality shift. It takes time for individuals to get used to protecting their rights, voicing opinions and initiatives publicly through the media." (T.P., male, blogger)

"I doubt it very much that the citizen journalism will ever develop. One of the reasons could be the society's low verbal communication culture, and another, reluctance to make a public appearance." (E.U., male, journalist)

"People just do not want to bother – if there is something very important to be reported, they think that the traditional media can handle this." (B.U., female, blogger)

The inquired experts note that unfortunately the Georgian society does not fully understand the social media capabilities. They often resort to the traditional media to report their problems but the media is quite biased in publicizing these issues. Contrary to that, a person has an opportunity to create a news story himself/herself, which will resonate better and will draw a wider audience response. One of the respondents gives an example of the refugee evictions and notes that instead of filming these facts and uploading them on the web, people simply waste time making fuss about it.

"In this case it will be much more effective if people take videos of the scenes of some refugees standing and screaming, since the video is more powerful than someone else's story, which nobody ever reads and than just being present in the scene, hearing the people scream and watching the police do nothing about it." (M.M., male, blogger)

It may sound paradoxical, but simply knowing that the traditional media is biased does not bolster the role of the social media, and the population still shows more trust to the traditional media. According to the respondents, the rationale behind it is that the information in the traditional media is created by the media professionals unlike in the social media, where the amateurs with no appropriate expertise are in charge. A question then logically follows – who should we trust when everyone could in fact be an author?

"People mainly trust the experts. They trust those whom the traditional media selects, and less so the blogs, since the competence is what really matters. This statement holds true because writing blogs is just a hobby, not a profession." (D.Z., male, blogger)

There is another assumption that a barrier to developing the social media in Georgia is that the bloggers and other network users in general are not interested in obtaining information themselves. They mainly interpret the information provided by the traditional media, and are less willing to create the news stories themselves.

"There is no established practice whereby bloggers would actively search for and obtain information. They mainly reflect on information obtained by others." (G.O., female, blogger)

Nevertheless, the respondents still observe the rudiments of developing the citizen journalism in the Georgian social media. They claim that although people often do not realize that they are the citizen journalists, it is not necessary at all to be officially termed a "citizen journalist."

"Many people simply do not realize that by disseminating information via the social media, they inadvertently perform a citizen journalist's function." (V.F., male, media-lawyer, blogger)

The respondents cite a number of success stories when the issues raised by citizens via the social media stirred public interest and resulted in the relevant response from specific organizations, thus leading to a positive outcome.

"There are certain facts that are reported and circulated in the social media first, and then transmitted to the traditional electronic media or print." (D.D., male, blogger)

One of the respondents is a founder of an organized citizen journalism network in Georgia. She thinks that this network performed well during the 2010 self-government elections, where the respondents themselves provided information to journalists on the ongoing problems and violations.

"In the run-up to the 2010 elections, we met with the citizens out in the regions and asked them to be recipients and providers of information at the same time; we assured them of the importance of providing the firsthand information to the professional journalists. We did in fact

manage to secure their support. On the day of elections, people sent us text messages, gave us calls, wrote via web. Facebook was a big help in this too." (K.B., female, journalist, blogger)

The young bloggers cite an event that took place at Tbilisi State University couple of months ago as one of the present-day success stories on developing citizen journalism:

"Whatever happened with students at Tbilisi State University (the self-government representatives beat the students, the police did not react to that and the students rallied to protest) is an illustration of the citizen journalism, as the students managed to obtain and report information that was not public." (G.O., female, blogger)

Core Social Media Values

How does the social media in Georgia uphold the five core values that are compulsory for information systems in democracies and are relevant to the citizen journalism (The Knight Commission, 2009)? These values are: **Openness,** i.e. everybody can have access to information production and consumption; **Inclusion,** i.e. capturing interests of the entire society; **Participation** for personal and public purposes, engagement of individuals in information production; **Empowerment of Individuals and Communities,** and finally, **Common Pursuit of Public Interest.**

Openness: there are two different positions with respect to openness of the social media in Georgia. The first is that the Georgian social media fully echoes the openness principle. It is accessible to everybody who has internet access, there are no limitations, all web-resources are accessible, and the efforts are made to promote broader community engagement by improving the media's technical operations by making technical equipment cheaper and expanding its availability. Besides, various measures are undertaken to motivate the social network users.

"I think that the internet is the most open space in Georgia as far as the media is concerned. Everybody has access to it, meaning that it is authorized, not because it is physically available. That is why we can call it open." (T.P., female, blogger)

"Internet is certainly accessible to everybody, and virtually no social network is closed in Georgia. Forum.ge was closed solely due to some precedents that occurred during the war. Fortunately, nobody thinks there is any need of limitations in Georgia. On the contrary, there is a tendency to engage as many people as possible, rather than impose limitations. There are no cases of limitations that I have heard of in Georgia." (D.D., male, blogger)

The respondents who hold the sceptical point of view fall into two categories: the first group focuses more on the technical side of it, meaning that since the majority of the Georgian public does not have internet access, this makes it harder to discuss the openness premise; the others discuss the limited availability of information, meaning that information is available to some and is closed to others. Hence, they claim that there are those who are privileged and those who are not privileged in terms of the information access.

"It is a sheer fact that the information is not open and accessible to everybody. All the more, information is produced within a closed circle, which is not easily accessed by others. There are those who are privileged and those who are not." (B.Kh., female, journalist, blogger)

"The media authorities may create barriers for certain people or marginalize certain groups." (G.O., female, blogger)

Inclusion. The respondents mainly agree that the Georgian social media is not inclusive at all and does not capture the public interests, as it does not make any attempts to focus on the real social, economic and political problems. There is an "internet sect" on the one side, and the Georgian population on the other, and there is hardly any communication in between.

"The social media is not inclusive, the public interests are not captured at all. I think this is some sort of an internet-sect… I can visualize this as a sand glass, where there are people on one side and the bloggers on the other, and the communication between them occurs drop by drop, extremely slowly, almost never." (G.O., female, blogger)

Some respondents also claim that the Georgian social media is non-inclusive because it only reports the topics that are discussed in the traditional media, and it merely replicates whatever happens on television, while the traditional media, especially the television, is non-inclusive and entertainment-focused.

"The social media does not have an inclusive character, it does not capture public interests. The public interest and the interest public takes in something are two different things. When an order coming from the public matches an order placed with the mainstream media, this in fact is entertainment. The internet does the same thing. There are some internet information portals, information agency sites and a couple of educational projects, but in reality, same things happen here as in television." (O.E., male, blogger)

Neverthless, there is an alternative opinion to the effect that the social media provides ample opportunity to express oneself and self-actualize, thus reflecting public interests, but it all depends on how each and every one of us uses this opporunity.

"Each and every society member has an opportunity to express his/her interests via the social media. It all depends on their ability on how effectively they manage to use this opportunity." (D.D., male, blogger)

As for **Participation** and **Empowerment of Individuals and Communities**, the respondents stress the potential of the social media to provide public with a chance to fulfill the aforementioned core values. They particularly noted the social media's role in advocating various community groups, especially the minorities, as the social media enables them to make their ideas heard and to interact with one another.

"It is a very good venue for advocating for ethnic minorities. They may be far apart but the social network unites them all and they fight the same battle together." (N.D., male, blogger)

Nevertheless, the media experts still see no more than rudimentary attempts and think that it is still premature to talk about the full adherence to these values. The main explanation they provide is that the Georgian social media is inept to translate individual's activities into real life and sustain a thrust that the cyberspace creates.

"As for protecting public interests, this does not work in practice. As we have seen, the Georgian social media is not strong enough to promote enforcement of any important decisions. It is necessary to escalate the protest that is triggered there into real life with the same power." (N.D., male, blogger)

The fact that the Georgian social media is unable to fully realize the aforementioned values is ascribed by some respondents to the peculiarities of the Georgian society, and not to the social media shortcomings. They claim that the society is prone to stay passive as an observer, which is a demonstration of the immature civil culture. Due to this passivity, or what one respondent refers to as "complete inactivity", it makes no sense to talk about the **common pursuit of public interest** in the Georgian social media.

"This is just a common tendency – out of 100% of users, only 30% are active in commenting, 10% are only information producers and 60% are only observers. The latter group rarely wishes to engage in discussions on the news shared by others." (D.D., male, blogger)

Educational Information in the Social Media

In today's changing world, the social media is capable of sharing the news instantaneously and the users, on the other end, are able to receive the updates in real time. Blogging and the bloggers in particular, who maintain blogs on diverse subjects and professional topics, are named as the main source for disseminating educational information.

Nevertheless, the inquired experts claim that the Georgian social media cannot perform this function, since it is focused on infotainment, rather than supplying educational information. When referring to the Georgian social media, one of our respondents noted: *"even when the social media is geared towards information dissemination, it is still driven by entertainment." (B.Kh., female, journalist, blogger)*

Despite the existence of the several educational blogs, like *Irakli's* and *Luka's* scientific blogs, *socium.ge, burusi.ge, ucnauri.com,* as well as the poetry, prose and art sites, like *lib.ge,* the respondents note that these resources are quite scanty and they have very limited number of users.

It is assumed that one of the reasons for the lack of educational information is the limited activities by the government agencies and think tanks. The experts claim that the resources like

these are funded and supported through foreign funds, but the governmental and domestic foundations do not bother to invest in these.

"We have a series of professional lectures that we upload on the Liberali – we invite professors, philologists, psychologists, etc., but this is what happens – Taia develops a project and secures funding from the Soros Foundation. We do operate sites like these – they are funded by the overseas money, but there are no domestic resources to that end. Our professors are not busy focusing on this. Socium.ge is the best venue but it takes a lot of effort. If it were not for the personal resources, neither the University, nor the Ministry of Education or the country in general would promote things like that." (B.Kh., female, journalist, blogger)

Yet another explanation for the scarcity of the educational information in the social media is the shortage of the interested users. Although many people may benefit from educational information, such information still targets a very "narrow circle." One of the bloggers, who authors an educational blog, quotes:

"Why do I write my own blog and post the information? It is because I find the process rewarding. It's a learning process combined with information sharing and assisting others. People tend to become more active during the exam period and they find the preparatory process more amusing if they read the blogs in parallel. I think my efforts were quite effective, as evidenced by feedback from people asking me to upload certain publications. But anyhow, this still targets a very 'narrow circle'." (G.O., female, blogger)

Due to the fact that the majority of the social media users is satisfied with retrieving trivial, entertaining information and bears less interest in various types of educational information, the social media product makers, bloggers especially, try to match their blogs with the reader interests. They produce information that appeals to the greatest number of readers in the internet-space and that sells the best. This is an illustration of the triumph of the "Liberal Model."

"People do not have time enough to examine something in-depth and they are satisfied with the superficial; media, in turn, prefers to do whatever sells. All is entertainment-centered but the blogs even more so. As the bloggers learn what sells, they choose more trivial topics to write. The demand is mostly tabloid." (I.L., female, blogger)

And this "tabloid" demand, as evidenced by almost all respondents, comes from the traditional media, whose topics are closely replicated by the new media. Hence, our study shows that the modern media, be it the traditional or the social, does not carry the information function. This is not surprising at all, because while the "Liberal Model" dominates, a media product is produced solely to sell, as cited above. Furthermore, a certain media-product, even of the highest quality, may still be declined if it is overly academic and does not properly respond to the infotainment principles prevalent in the contemporary media.

„Ireporter was quite successful at the beginning, but then it was disliked due to its academism that caused it to change a little." (I.L., female, blogger)

One of our respondents' personal example serves as a good illustration. He was asked to emphasize content of the sexual character while working on the educational news story. He thinks that the rationale behind it is that the people are not interested in the educational subject matter, and an appealing façade should be used to package the educational content.

When referring to the lack of popularity of the educational information, some respondents point to the necessity of such a façade, and claim that the educational information in the social media is often times dry, tedious and textual, which makes it less comprehensible and likable by users who are more or less accustomed to infotainment.

There is also an assumption that the lack of popularity of the educational blogs is due to facebook, since the internet users spend so much time browsing through the facebook walls and photos that they eventually neglect the educational blogs. It is worth noting that despite the fact that the educational information (academic, political, etc.) and the links to various internet-publications and articles are often posted on facebook, nobody has cited faebook as a conduit of the educational information.

Social Media and Social Capital

The social media researchers claim that the social networks have a potential to change the social life and relations both at an interpersonal and a public level. It is believed that **at an**

interpersonal level, information about a person in a personal profile reduces barriers in social interaction, and promotes human bonding that would not be available otherwise**. At a public level,** the social networks promote connections among those who have common interests. Hence, both of these processes are positive in terms of linking people, promoting communications and interactions (Ellison, Lampe, Steinfield, 2009, p. 6). Thus, the new media and the social networks embedded there represent the best venue for creating and sustaining social capital.

In the social science, the social capital is mainly divided into two types: the first is the **bridging** and the second is the **bonding** capital (Putnam, 2000). The first implies the "weak ties", i.e. ties with the friends of friends, distant acquaintances, ex-colleagues, etc. However, the studies have illustrated that these ties are most effective in obtaining information about the potential job offers, and establishing desirable interactions. The most recent studies illustrate that the social network users are characterized by abundance of the bridging capital, and that the majority of the existing social networks is geared towards sustaining the already established social ties. It was also illustrated that even though the exceptions exist, facebook is mainly used to sustain the existing "offline" ties, rather than to get acquainted with the new people (boyd, Ellison, 2008, p. 221). The researchers conclude that social networks are characterized by a phenomenon known as the "Strength of Weak Ties" (Mark Granovetter, 1973) in sociology (Ellison, Lampe, Steinfield, 2009, p. 7).

Another interesting conclusion derived from the recent social network and facebook studies is that the underlying motives for using facebook is the habitual pastime and relaxing entertainment, that is why the facebook usage is ritualistic and quite passive. It is interesting to note that the users are less concerned about social capital. Facebook for them is a simple routine, which is also a convenient way to sustain the contacts. To summarize the authors' judgements, social networks offer a new, passive understanding of sociality, as illustrated by facebook. It is surprising though that the passive sociality is still followed by creation and sustenance of the social capital (Papacharissi, Mendelson, 2011).

How do the interviewed experts rate the condition of social networks in Georgia? When referring to the social media, majority of our respondents states that the cyberspace provides an excellent opportunity for creating and sustaining social capital. It needs to be noted that the social capital is perceived differently by various respondents, and even a single respondent holds varying

opinions on it by emphasizing its diverse aspects, like its role in establishing personal contacts, making a personal gain, promoting social mobility, etc.

It should also be emphasized that when referring to the social media as to a venue for creating and accumulating the social capital, the respondents mainly imply facebook, and rarely refer to the forum, twitter and the blogs, and only do that to draw comparisons with facebook. A key distinction among the forum's, blogs' and facebook's social capital is the user identification. Owing to the fact that the blog and forum users may stay anonymous, one of the respondents asserts that the social capital created by facebook is much "healthier" because a facebook user's identity is known and just like in real life, he/she takes responsibility for his/her actions.

Before we proceed with discussing the position of the majority of experts, let us examine the points of view of the limited number of respondents who thinks that the social media in Georgia does not favor creation and sustenance of the social capital.

One of the respondents claims that the existence of the social trust underlies the social capital creation. However, since there is a lack of the social trust in the social networks, social capital is not created and the collective identity is not reinforced.

"It depends on what meaning you ascribe to the social capital. I think that its definition is different in Georgia. It varies in different countries. The social capital in Georgia depends on trust and on how long you have known a person. There is an institute of 'daqaloba-dzmakacoba' (close friendship) that is very strong in Georgia, and the internet has nothing to do with it." (N.N., male, media-analyst, blogger)

There are couple of other respondents who discuss the failure of the social media to create social capital by claiming that the virtual ties will never transform into real in the end. In support of this argument, one of the respondents cites the actions planned through facebook, which failed to ensure sufficient turnout for the rally. This means that even if people unite for a single cause, the virtual social capital is not realized because the ties embedded in the social media are quite feeble.

The experts, who touch upon the possibility of creating social capital via the social media, focus on various aspects of the social capital. Some refer to the vertical and horizontal capital

(Bourdieu), some to the formal and informal capital (Putnam), and yet others to the bridging and bonding capital (Putnam).

Figuratively, the vertical and horizontal capital implies that it is possible to ascend to a higher level of the social hierarchy through the social capital created by the social media. Some respondents actively discuss the possibility of finding a job via the social media by citing several examples of how this happened when the users were actively affiliated with the social networks. Besides, a good illustration of this type of social capital is the establishment of the socially desirable ties, which, again, leads to ascension on the social ladder. It is important how the users define such ascension or "growth": In some instances it means the career growth, expanding visibility/popularity, raising public exposure, getting the voice across and sharing one's ideas with the decision-makers and politicians.

When referring to the formal and informal capital, we can emphasize two important directions: the first covers the ties that are established across various organizations, or between the users and organizations, i.e. the Boll Foundation, ASCN or any other foundation, which reports its news via facebook. Besides, facebook has a function of setting up some informal unions or groups, uniting people with common interests. The respondents claim that the social networks in Georgia are especially effective in this regard. Through an open facebook profile it is easy to find information about a person's political, gender-related or other points of view, and it becomes much easier to gather supporters for, say, voicing a protest on certain issues.

In terms of the social capital, the personal and emotional relations also need to be emphasized. Some respondents claim that the social media plays a certain role in it. One of them even noted that the social media helped some people in socialization. Because certain people are intrinsically shy, they are not able to establish connections in real life, but through the social media, staying anonymous in the beginning, they have managed to cope with these problems.

It is believed that being a friend in the social media is much easier and more flexible than in real life. A reason for this is that the emotions and personal outlook can be communicated more easily in the social media. Besides, conflicts can be averted more easily before hitting the "enter" button. The social media also provides diverse "friendship" functions, resulting in a brand new understanding of a "friend" and a brand new version of the social capital. A person is not limited

to being friends with people who are around him/her, rather, he/she can connect with those who he/she thinks hold similar points of view.

"I do not interact with people anymore with whom the only common interest I had was sharing a desk at school, living in the same street or having the same surname. This is not valuable for me anymore. I got to know people with whom I have common interests, share same tastes and aspirations." (D.D., male, blogger)

Some respondents refer to the social media as an alternative venue for sustaining social capital. This merely implies maintaining connections with close friends and acquaintances.

"The weddings and funerals are not the only places anymore, where many people go just to meet old friends." (D.D., male, blogger)

It is also possible for close friends who meet one another almost every day to be actively engaged in the social networking.

"We are five close friends who have a 'secret group' on facebook and interact with one another 24 hours a day to discuss lots of interesting things." (B.Kh., female, journalist, blogger)

A question therefore logically follows **as to who a "friend" in the social network is.** The respondents claim that in order for a person to be called a friend, there should be a reciprocal consent and expression of the reciprocal interest. The common interests drive people to observe one another's routine and activities. These may be people who have not even met in real life. The respondents therefore believe that a brand new concept of a "friend" established by social networks is a "brand new form of the relationship." They think that such transformation of this concept may influence culture as well, as it changes the conventional relationship forms.

"The social media drastically changes the human behavior rules. A brand new concept of a 'friend' is introduced. A person may not be your friend at all, in fact, you may not have seen him/her in real life, but you may still know when he/she wakes up, what he/she does during a day, etc. This is an entirely new form of the relationship, which will also influence culture over time, as the relationships tend to change, and so do the habits, attitudes and the relationship forms." (S.U., female, blogger)

Even though the existing studies have illustrated that the majority of the social networks, including facebook, is geared towards sustaining the already established social ties, most respondents still claim that the facebook friends are not "authentic" but the fact that they exist is gratifying.

"Everybody agrees that the 'facebook friends' are not the real friends. It is good when one can maintain online contacts, and I like it when many people send me birthday wishes. However, it is not enough for me, it is shallow and I think that it takes the meaning away from relationships." (B.Kh., female, blogger)

Furthermore, some respondents view the facebook friends as a potential benefit. These are people who you can seek support from even by asking them to "like" your profile and posts, or even circulate your professional information, etc.

The respondents believe that one of the central attributes of the facebook "friend" is an "impression management" (Goffman, 1955), which implies making desirable impressions on the networked friends and the friends of friends. Most of the time, this performance is geared towards securing as many ideological followers and supporters as possible.

It turns out that the definition of "friend" substantially differs between the social networks and the Georgian reality. In the social network, a friend also includes a person who keeps an eye on your personal information, unlike the friends engaged in social interaction in real life. Most respondents therefore believe that the facebook friends cannot be considered as "authenitic friends."

"This facebook term 'friend' is psychologically meant to make a good impression on people. I would however say that the Twitter came up with a more appropriate word for this – 'a follower.' The facebook administration soon realized that and added a "subscriber" function similar to Twitter. A subscriber is a person who reads and follows your posts. This is a more accurate definition and it is easier to tell the difference between a friend and a subscriber in Georgia. People we call friends are those with whom we directly interact, and the subscribers are those whose posts we read and follow, and who cannot be considered as friends." (N.D., male, blogger)

Protection of Personal Information of the Social Media Users

The scientific literature makes reference to a term called the **"privacy paradox"** (Barnes, 2006), which means that people are concerned with protecting privacy in the social media on the one hand, and publicize lots of personal information on the other hand. According to the experts, this is driven by the users' desire to strike balance between privacy and making a desirable impression. How does the privacy paradox work in the Georgian social media-space, and how is the users' personal information protected?

As illustrated in the previous sub-section, one of the key characteristics of the social network is to make a desirable impression on the affiliated friends and the friends of friends. Driven by this, a person makes a series of personal information available to others, without even thinking about its negative consequences. Due to this, some respondents impose responsibility for protection of the personal information directly on users, since they think that the social media space is not personal at all and whatever a person posts in a blog or on a facebook wall becomes accessible to everybody. The negative consequences associated with making information public is the sole responsibility of its users, and it is tied to understanding of the social media's technical and ethical peculiarities.

"When you place a post on your facebook wall and you have more than three thousand friends in your network, you make your information public. I do not think the Georgian users are aware of the personal information protection rules and that is why they often fall victims of such ignorance." (V.F., male, media-analyst, blogger)

As referenced above, "impression management" in the social network is geared towards securing as many ideololgical followers and the like-minded people as possible. To that end, a person needs to publicize information about his political, religious, gender and other points of view. Various interest groups, political forces or marketing companies may successfully use this information to serve their needs. This is a common practice worldwide, and it is not unfamiliar to Georgia either.

Given the above, the majority of respondents claims that the users' personal information is not protected in the Georgian media-space, and this cannot be attributed to user negligence. There

are specific examples as to how private correspondence was made public, "accounts" were broken, IP addresses were misappropriated, etc.

"I am certain that everybody's IP address is well-known on the forum, and that the personal information is not protected." (G.O., female, blogger)

In response to how personal information can be misused by the interest groups, for instance by the government, to create problems for the opposition, the above-mentioned respondent quoted:

"It is certainly possible to misuse, but they do not need to intimidate or pursue physical retribution at this point, because the government thinks the forum users are not such significant figures. However, I think that they have all needed information about them." (G.O., female, blogger)

The second respondent provides a clearer illustration of the personal information misuse, which shows as to how certain people, in this case the university representatives, get hold of the students' personal information by breaking facebook for instance.

"As for the personal information protection: there have been cases when my friends' facebook profiles were broken. Tbilisi State University is notorious for this. For example, the self-administration operates a software on all computers, which stores your passwords. There were cases when these passwords were taken away from my friends." (O.N., male, blogger)

It turns out that the respondents themselves have witnessed attempts by the interested individuals to get hold of some personal information.

"I had the case when the former reporters asked me to disclose to them a specific comentator's IP address, and when I refused to do so, they did not understand why." (O.Z., female, editor, journalist)

The interviewed experts scrutinize the issue further by concluding that even the existing legislation is not able to ensure protection of the social media users' personal information.

"A new law on cyber security creates a completely ambiguous situation because it gives the government the right to have access to the IP address database out of the security considerations. That is, when the providers are controlled, the personal data also become

controlled as and when necessary. The issue of the personal information security under the existing legislation, which has not been discussed yet, is that the government has access to e-mails." (N.T., female, editor)

Despite the illustrated examples, it should be noted that for majority of the inquired respondents this topic is either insignificant and it has not been given thorough consideration, or the entire responsibility for the personal information in the social media is imposed on users.

"If I do not wish to post personal information in the social media, and if I do not disclose such information eventually, there will be no problem in this respect." (M.E., male, media-lawyer)

"It rarely happens that a person would suffer due to his/her personal correspondence; however, anyone should control what type of information he/she discloses in a chat, even when talking to a friend. The government representatives should pay special attention to this, so that they do not divulge a commercial or other type of secret." (D.D., male, blogger)

Protection of the Bloggers' Rights

The freedom of media in Georgia is guaranteed by the Constitution of Georgia and the Law on the Freedom of Speech and Expression. It should be noted that there is no special law in place on the new media. The Criminal Code of Georgia imposes responsibility for illegal acquisition of information, including retrieval of information from another person's computer. Furthermore, the Criminal Code includes an additional chapter, which sets forth the provision on prosecuting cybercrime, including intentional damage inflicted on computers, computer systems and networks, and illegal access to information.

In September 2010, the Parliament of Georgia made an amendment to the law, whereby the authorized bodies were granted the right to monitor personal correspondence via internet with a view to identifying criminal suspects. The Georgian Young Lawyers' Association (GYLA) filed a suit with the Constitutional Court to declare this amendment unconstitutional. As a result, the Constitutional Court granted the GYLA's suit.

Proceeding from the above, it can be inferred that the Georgian media-space is quite free, at least formally. The law stipulates for the freedom of speech and expression and the same law prosecutes illegal access to information in the media-space. Besides, it prohibits access to personal correspondence or any other private communication, and this prohibition applies to the government as well. Nevertheless, it is important to determine as to how enforceable this legislation is, and to what extent the rights of the active media users, i.e. the bloggers are protected.

The in-deph interviews revealed three types of narratives with this respect. Some experts cannot recall any cases of the blogger right infringements in Georgia. Some experts assert that there are a series of blogger right infringement cases, and yet others offer a quite ambivalent narrative.

Those who believe that the **bloggers' rights are not infringed in Georgia,** simply cannot recall such cases in the Georgian reality:

"I cannot recall now whether there are any issues associated with the freedom of expression in the social media, or whether any blogger has ever faced any problems, just like in the neighbouring state." (V.F., male, media-lawyer, blogger)

Some experts claim that the non-infringement of the blogger rights in Georgia is attributable to a very limited number of bloggers who write about serious topics. Their blogs target a very narrow user circle, and therefore they are not considered to be a real threat.

"The majority of bloggers writes on topics that target only a small liberal circle of the internet users in Georgia. Their number is so insignificant and the topics they write on are so few that I do not recall that their rights infringements have ever occurred." (O.N., male, blogger)

Another part of experts, who outnumber the former, believe that **the bloggers rights in Georgia are infringed** encouraged by the fact that the people are not aware of their rights guaranteed under the law.

"There are lots of cases of the rights infringements in Georgia. Since people are not aware of their rights for the freedom of speech and expression, the law is not enforced in practice." (M.E., female, media-lawyer)

Indeed, majority of the surveyed bloggers is not aware whether their rights are protected under the law though the lack of the blogger security, starting from the copyright infringements ending with the police interventions, is frequently discussed.

Some bloggers assert that the **copyright infringements and plagiarism in the Georgian media-space are quite prevalent**. There have been a number of cases of appropriation of materials without the authors being specified. Even at times when an author was specified, nobody ever made any effort to obtain permission.

"Plagiarism is an issue here with the social media, specifically with the online information services." (M.G., female, media-lawyer, blogger)

"I do not know to what extent the copyright should be protected, but all I know is that it is not protected in practice. I have seen my article copied several times to other sites. Articles from the Liberali are downloaded without any permission from the authors or the editorial board, although the source is sometimes specified…" (B.Kh., female, journalist, blogger).

The respondents, however, do not recall any interventions from the law-enforcement officials to address this issue. Even if they intervene at times, they mostly violate, rather than protect, the bloggers' rights.

The respondents cite examples when the bloggers were beaten and **the police did not react.** On the contrary, they supported the offenders due to some political considerations.

"I do not know whether the legislation protects the bloggers, but all I know for certain is that their rights are infringed. The recent beating of bloggers is a good illustration. There were two students who publicized a piece of some information. One of them has a blog, where they posted a screenshot of the President of the University's self-administration striking a deal with the self-administration students on their preliminary enrollment and placement at summer jobs. This happened only two weeks ago. These two students, namely the four people, because they were together with their friends, were confronted, taken to the self-administration office and beaten, resulting in the brain concussions and broken ribs. The students rallied and protested. They filed a suit in the end and the Ministry of Internal Affairs circulated a note stating that they provided a verbal notification to eight self-administration members because of age limitations. But they

were 24-25-year-olds anyway, why did the age limitation issue come up?" (G.O., female, blogger)

There have been cases of **the bloggers receiving police notices due to their activities in the social media.** Moreover, the law-enforcement officials visited some bloggers at home, who, regardless of their young age, had been considered as a threat due to certain political considerations.

"What a predicament we have created! The police visited Ms. K… many times at the place of her registration, where her aunt now resides. The police notices were sent to Mr.T… in Chiatura. Because we were quite active and our activities were associated with the social media, we were constantly persecuted." (B.Kh., female, journalist, blogger)

Along with the blogger attack accounts, the respondents also provided some **ambivalent narratives** that should be examined from the abovementioned "cultural" and "collective" story perspective to come up with the real picture. There are respondents who claim that they do not recall any facts of pressurizing bloggers that were left without proper response, and at the same time they note that they do not recall any blogger pressurization facts at all.

"I have not witnessed or heard of any cases of pressurizing bloggers that were left without any response, and overall, I do not recall any cases of such pressures being made at all." (D.L., male, editor)

Bloggers and their Audience in Georgia

The interviews illustrate that the inquired bloggers tend to select discussion topics based on their significance and the reader interests. In case of writing the official blogs, they take into consideration their employers' editorial policies.

"I work at the Radio Liberty. If I post something on facebook that goes against the Radio Liberty's editorial policies, I will be dismissed from my job, and it will be a right decision, because whatever is posted on facebook or uploaded on internet, does not free oneself up from his/her responsibilities." (M.M., male, blogger)

At the same time, the bloggers claim that sometimes it does not matter of what you write or how well you write. What really matters is how you convey your message to the readers, especially considering the infotainment elements, so that a media-product sells well.

The most common practice among bloggers is to select discussion topics based on their significance. Some bloggers note that their piece of writing should convey their immediate reflection on the ongoing or past events. Such instant reflection ensures freedom of the online information and is less subject to censorship, because it represents a person's subjective opinion, which in turn creates new and alternative information streams. This being the case, a blogger becomes an information provider and its critical user at the same time.

"The reciprocity of information means that you are not someone who merely accepts whatever information is out there. Rather, you are a conduit, carrier and supplier of information at the same time." (N.D., male, blogger)

There is a second category of bloggers, who select topics based on what appeals to their readers and what sells the best. Assuming that the topics that bear most significance sell the best, this category of bloggers is closely tied with the former. However, there is a difference between the motivators: in the first case, the motivator is a specific event/development and a blogger's reflection on it, whereas in the second case – this is an event that a blogger thinks will appeal to a reader. The latter category of bloggers selects topics according to the "Liberal Model" discussed earlier – they select whatever sells best and is in demand.

"If you want to be popular, you target a certain segment and you write whatever you know sells best." (I.L., female, blogger)

One of the respondents further specified the topics, which he thinks are "marketable." These are the most frequently discussed issues, and are indicative of the successful posts. They include the Russia-Georgia relations, the church and gender-related issues (T.P., male, blogger).

We should also make reference to another category of bloggers, who work within the "Liberal Model" framework, but who pay attention not only to the reader demand, but also to when their piece of writing is to be published.

"I may write a blog during a week, but publish it on the weekend just to boost the rating when the space is free and available in order to stimulate discussions. This is perhaps a marketing move." (I.L., female, blogger)

This category of bloggers pays attention not only to when a blog is to be published, but also to how the information is to be packaged, i.e. activation of the infotainment elements to expand the reader pool. This implies developing a reader-friendly text, improving its visual elements, providing various multimedia resources, etc.

And finally, there is a category of bloggers who write for various electronic publications (Tabula, Liberali, etc.) on a pre-determined subject matter, and they only have to select a specific topic.

As for the audience feedback, the majority of bloggers positively rates such feedback by saying that the mere fact that there is somebody out there who reads their blogs is gratifying.

"All bloggers find it gratifying when there is somebody out there who reads their scribbles." (O.E., male, blogger)

Nevertheless, many bloggers point that the readers' comments often do not relate to the content of the blog, rather, they are mostly emotional.

"Readers' comments rarely have any significance for a blogger. They are mostly emotional – bloggers are keen to find whether their blogs received the 'likes' or not. No comments are made on the content, rather, the readers just comment whether the post is good or bad." (B.Kh., female, journalist, blogger)

The bloggers therefore often have a rather skeptical outlook on the audience feedback. They think that the Georgian users lack the debate and argumentation culture, and their feedback is therefore useless. In addition, some bloggers claim that the majority of readers is more destructive than constructive in their criticism, which is further evidenced by the content and discourse analyses of the electronic publications and blogs selected by us (as discussed at the end of first subsection).

"I used to often stay overnight debating with my readers and commenting on their posts, but later I realized that none of us benefited from this. We lack the debate culture, arguments often end up unresolved, and the consensus is almost never achieved. It is not pleasant when I provide comprehensive arguments but get scolded in return, or get some senseless counter arguments. Now I try to stay away from these kinds of debates, and refrain from getting involved." (T.P., male, blogger)

Nevertheless, there are some bloggers who positively rate the audience's feedback and state that the reader comments and opinions really matter to them. On the one hand, this helps them to select topics for future discussions, enabling them to receive first-hand information from readers as to what appeals to them most:

"The readers feed me as to the topics, sources, issues, problems. I have generated various interesting ideas and thoughts for my program when roaming the social networks and the social media." (E.U., male, journalist)

On the other hand, the reader feedback helps the bloggers to critically rate their piece of writing and grow professionally:

"Feedback certainly gives me a hint as to which direction to take. I get a sense whether a reader has understood the topic, what exactly he/she focuses on, which piece of writing he/she prefers. This is really helpful, and is a good measure for me." (T.B., male, media-analyst, blogger)

Social Media Influence on the Socio-Political Engagement

When referring to the socio-political engagement, the respondents' answers are quite short and superficial, which is partly explained by the fact that this was already covered in earlier discussions (media vis-à-vis political domain, social media influence on politics, raising political awareness by social media, etc.). The interviewed experts claim that the influence the social media has on its users spurs their engagement in the socio-political activities. At least the media provides an impetus for such engagement.

In our case it will be more appropriate if we distinguish between the user activities within the social media and the real socio-political actions initiated as a result of such activities, like the events similar to the "Arab Spring." The social networks certainly provide a venue for people to gain influence and authority and to ascend the social ladder. A good illustration of this is an interest that the Tabula's editorial board displayed towards individuals active in the social network. They monitored the socially active individuals debating with one another, observing their writing style, values and the reasoning skills. As a result, they hired many people to work for the editorial board.

We can therefore infer that the social media is a very good venue for stimulating activities. It assists people to get engaged in open discussions where the ideas are diverse, and in this competition they can select those that are most acceptable to them.

"This is a free, diverse and competitive space. It can bring about a positive change geared towards developing public and citizen journalism, broader political engagement, etc. There can be a closer interface between the businesses and users in order to improve services, and closer ties between the politicians and voters. The social media provides ample opportunities depending on what your priorities are." (T.P., female, blogger)

The experts claim that broader the user engagement in the social media, greater its influence on the citizens' social and political activities. They note that although the social media influence in Georgia is not as high as in other countries, it is still gradually rising. The examples of this are the activities planned in the social networks, Tbilisi State University being a good illustration, where hundreds of students gathered to rally. The same thing happened after the May 26 violence, when many people rallied in a day's time to protest. The experts also recalled a fact when the Ministry of Environment announced the competition, and several bloggers uploaded photos of how the Kikvidze garden was being ravaged and logged, which resonated across many people. The photos remained posted for a long time.

According to experts, the social media in Georgia is characterized by periodic surges, information outbreaks and instant circulation, but *"there are no instruments in place to work on resolving the real problems on a regular basis. I cannot foretell what will happen in future, but hope that the steps will be taken to that end." (B.Kh., female, journalist, blogger)*

Many experts nevertheless believe that the social activities do not go beyond the social network, and do not greatly affect the reality. While people are quite active in the social media, they remain passive in real life.

"People do not want to act in real life, and it is thought that the Egyptian revolution is an exception, rather than a rule. We are led to thinking that no matter how fervently we defend a position in the social media, we are still incapable of acting in real life. One of the politically active persons once posted that the only way to make people go out in the streets is to disconnect the internet." (M.A. female, blogger)

Indeed, the majority of experts notes that there have often been times of the facebook "outbreaks" on certain events, but without any tangible consequences, like street rallies, circulating appeals or notices, etc. The respondents note that people often end up whining and complaining, but *"whining is good in at least enabling a person to voice a concern. In the past, people would only complain at somebody's home, but now they have a public space to get their complaints across, sometimes to those who have never complained before." (O.E. male, blogger)*

It is worth noting that some experts believe this is an overstatement, and although the social media is unable to affect the masses, it can at least affect certain groups. As a result, people rally out in the streets, as evidenced by the socio-political rallies/actions referenced above.

However, the social media influences should not be measured solely by their real life manifestations. The social media, like an electronic agora, captures the society's diverse points of view and acts as a conduit for any community groups, which in turn affects the society's ideology: *"in fact, any point of view, subculture and outlook has its followers. The social networks just serve as a conduit; they do not give birth to anything that has not existed before. The media merely uncovers whatever has been out there for a long time." (E.U., male, journalist)*

It can therefore be inferred that the existence of the social media (either in the form of the virtual reality or the real virtuality), notwithstanding its brief hirstory in Georgia, plays a role in the formation and reappraisal of the political and socio-cultural values. Free exchange of values and ideas across the network-affiliated communities promotes creation of not only the virtual, but also the real tolerant socio-cultural environment.

Social Media Influence on Personal Traits and Relations

In the modern world, in order to be active in the social media a person has to hone the skills he/she has never had before. The interviewed experts believe that the development of the new skills naturally leads to the transformation of personal traits that are illustrated by comparing lifestyles of the so-called digital era "natives" and "immigrants" (Prensky, 2011, p.3). Due to the fact that nowadays the humans are engaged in computer mediated communications, the digital era "natives" who had their first computer encounter at birth, have an entirely different outlook on life and chain of thought than the "latecomers" or the so-called digital era "immigrants." The experts contend that the difference is particularly notable when it comes to personal traits.

"For a digital era natives, a person he/she gets to meet in the social media is the same as a person he/she meets in real life. An immigrant, however, has a certain barrier with a person he/she does not know in person, and for him/her, an online friend differs from the real one… While a native can do multiple tasks at a time and might find it hard to focus on one, because there are so many things he/she checks and uploads on a computer at the same time, an immigrant, on the contrary, prefers to focus only on one thing at least for psychological reasons." (T.B., male, media-analyst)

The experts point to the ease of human interface through the social media, free communication, anonymity and the security potential. It feels like the social media carries the alter ego functions. It is the virtuality that endows people with a broader sense of freedom, and they manifest brand new attributes in the social media, or simply talk about things they would find hard to discuss in real life.

"When you are in a virtual world, you can write about many things. You are free, all by yourself, with a screen in front of you, wall behind, and the entire world beyond. Whatever you cannot say in real life, you can easily say in the virtual. This is the global perspective that breaks into and changes our lives whether we want it or not." (I.L., female, blogger)

Some experts think that the social media's influence on a user's life is so significant that people even build their own families through the media. Nevertheless, some contend that the social media, especially the social networks like facebook, aggravate self-centered ideology in users, since the networks are built on the principles of selfishness. This escalates a feeling of

detachment and superiority over others. While the forum's main goal is to promote mutual interaction, the facebook emphasizes superiority of one's own position and seeking buy-in from followers.

This point of view speaks to the influence of not the social media in general, but one of the social media offsprings - facebook, in negative terms. The distinctions between the forum and the facebook are also discussed by other experts, but not in terms of putting their collective (group) and self-centered (individual) stance at odds, but in terms of openness. For example, the forum, where users are registered with their nicknames and where their identities are unknown, encourages open discussions on topics that are tabooed in the Georgian society. On the contrary, the users are more reserved in discussing issues on facebook.

Notwithstanding the above, the respondents believe that overall the social networks provide more personal and creative freedom to individuals. As a result, the entire society and not only the specific users, becomes more open and tolerant.

"People gradually become braver and daring to openly discuss certain topics. Over time, the entire society, and not only the users, becomes more tolerant and open owing to the social media." (D.D., male, blogger)

This freedom, which promotes ease and simplicity of personal relations, does not always translate into successful relationships in real life. Although people find jobs and get married through social networks, the experts still note that they often face negative consequences in reality. A person may enjoy a really good relationship with a virtual friend, but may encounter difficulties in real relationships. The images people create that help them sincerely interact with one another in the social networks, may in fact fail.

"Yet another interesting phenomenon is that that's say a boy and a girl have been corresponding with each other for a long time, like a year or so, they meet each other three or four times, but when they get involved in a serious relationship in real life, they discover that they have nothing in common. They have been sincerely attached to each other for a year, 24 hours a day, but seems like people tend to acquire different qualities in the virtual world. I know of three cases when people suddenly discovered different identities, whole new individuals in real life after having interacting online." (G.O., female, blogger)

An explanation for this is that the social networks enable people to present themselves in a favorable light. A person and the image he/she wants to create might be at odds. We can therefore say that the social networks give us more freedom and creativity to establish an image of ourselves with quite a few elements of play, but rather limited responsibility. Perhaps this is a unique attribute of the social media and the virtual world in general vis-a-vis personal traits: a sense of freedom grows without any matching responsibility.

Apart from experts who believe that the social media has a radical influence on the personal traits and everyday relations of Georgians, there are those who are more discreet in their judgements and contend that although the social networks do affect the Georgians, they do not affect their character, traits or ideology, rather, they merely change the routine, everyday habits. While years ago people would not have imagined spending several hours browsing the social networks, now it fell into their habits, and they simply cannot live their lives otherwise.

"Every morning, before I fix myself coffee, I turn on the computer because I know there is something interesting out there for me. For instance, yesterday I left off a hot discussion and I'm interested what answers I got or how the discussions went, etc. This affects my lifestyle a lot. When I do not have internet access, I use the cell phone instead to stay connected. The social networks are an integral part of my life today." (T.P., female, blogger)

Majority of experts believes that one of the social network infuences is that a Georgian user feels he/she is a part of something global, integrated with the rest of the world. This feeling is reinforced owing to being connected to the virtual space together with many other people of diverse ethnic backgrounds, and owing to the existence of various foreign blogs in addition to Georgian. The respondents note that first and the foremost, this is the feeling of not being alone in the world – something that the traditional media is unable to provide.

"We are all together in the social media. I can have foreign friends on facebook and read their feeds. I am able to see what updates there are on the wordpress across the Georgian and foreign blogs. Being part of something global feels very pleasant, and I think this is something that affects the Georgian users. As for the character or the ideology change, I do not think this will happen." (B.U., female, blogger)

Although some experts assert that the social media affiliation creates a feeling of being part of international processes, they do not reflect on the fact that the physically open borders do not necessarily imply that they are open culturally. If we examine the world social network map, we will easily notice that it does not represent a single, unified space, rather, it is a conglomerate of culturally distinct communities. This particularly concerns the Georgian media-space, which is virtually isolated from the global due to the language barrier, and is often confined solely to the Georgian reality.

"I think that the physical borders opened earlier than those in the social networks. There is a language barrier present, which matters a lot. I do not think the Georgians have many foreign friends in social networks, and their numbers are too insignificant to be a factor. Nor do I think they interact with them as closely as they do with their domestic friends." (K.B., female, journailst, blogger)

Neverthess, as some experts note, the language barrier is gradually being diminished and the Georgian digital era "natives" will eventually become full-fledged members of the global social network.

Social Media Influence on the National Identity

When discussing the social media influence on the national identity, the experts take three different stands. These are:

1. Experts who maintain the first stand acknowledge the existence of this influence and rate it more or less positively;

2. Experts who maintain the second stance negate such influence unconditionally;

3. Experts who maintain the third stance hold a more moderate position in anticipation of the scientific research findings.

The experts with the first stand believe that owing to the internet and social media globality, the cultural traditions and national identity undergo transformations first and foremost. An answer to a question "who am I? – I am Georgian, and therefore I am…" becomes an issue.

The interviewed experts hardly believe that a network-affiliated person, who is educated and has access to abundant information, will hold the points of view, ideology and values in future he/she had couple of years ago.

Those who maintain this position claim that the disintegration of the national identity of Georgians and non-Georgians starts in the social media, because *"brand new, say, European and American cultural and mental peculiarities are emerging, which are at odds with our mentality, and the identity crumbles naturally." (P.D., male, blogger)*

To reinforce this position, the experts refer to the discussions on religious topics in the social media. There used to be a big confrontation and intolerance between the believers and people holding secular points of view over religion. The antireligious critique was fervently opposed by the religious people. The social media has transformed this tendency, and the divergent points of view are no longer viewed as an unhealthy criticism. The experts claim that there are quite a few cases of the cultural and religious-related discussions becoming more acceptable to the contending parties, and the reappraisal of values is starting to occur.

"There was the confrontation in the social media long time ago, when the people criticizing religion used to confront people who were religious. Eventually, the religious people who were very aggressive strongly opposed the anti-religious criticism. The situation has changed today and the anti-religious critisicm is no longer viewed as unhealthy, both parties starting to engage into discussions. This is what happens in the social media. The facebook has overcome this problem, and it is now viewed as a venue where differing opinions are expressed." (P.D., male, blogger)

One of the experts refers to the big role that her social media friends (and not the social media itself) played in reappraisal of her religious or national values (visiting her deceased father's grave on Easter) and talks about the sheer influence they made on her outlook. Instead of toasting with her father's friends, she now stays in her room and talks with somebody in a "chat." She quotes: *this entirely changes priorities in your life, and one day you just do not*

realize what you, as a Georgian, are expected to do, 'shed the blood?' I think that a brand new identity emerges, which stands apart from the national identity." (B.Kh., female, blogger)

This is a specific case, which gives us interesting hints about the role of the social media in transforming the national traditions and identity, but it does not provide solid arguments. Without relying on particular arguments, some experts likewise conclude that under the influence of the western values the people in Georgia *"become more individualistic and self-centered"* (G.O., female, blogger).

The experts who maintain the second stance acknowledge that the social media has certain influence, but they contend that it is not powerful enough to change people's ideology or to affect the cultural peculiarities. Since the Georgian cultural space is more conservative, people firmly hold on to their beliefs. For instance, if they believe that the existence of certain social, religious, educational or the so-called "virginity" institute is justified, and their critique is not acceptable just because there are one or two deviation facts, no matter how many critical blogs or posts are written, these people will still remain loyal to their existing convictions.

"You can start a discussion about anything, but changing somebody's outlook, especially on substantial topics, is very hard. The changes in opinions rarely happen." (B.U., female, blogger)

Although the experts note that the social media is a conduit of information and the cultural values, this does not mean that the national identity suffers as a result or is threatened in any way. On the contrary, it is believed that it upholds and reinforces it, because the *"internet users are the nationalists, who actively maintain their own identity" (N.M., male, blogger).* More so, if we read the YouTube and MyVideo comments, *"we will see that there are more people who are the followers of the so-called traditions, and they aggressively react to innovations" (G.K., male, media-analyst).*

Hence, unequivocally acknowledging the social media influence on the cultural values and the national identity is not a proper thing to do. Perhaps the social media is a strong venue, which targets reinforcement of the national values and identity and their disintegration with the same strength. What really matters is the users' national self-consciousness and beliefs. The experts also note that the social media can be successfully used to reinforce the national identity.

"The social media is a very good venue for resuscitating the micro-cultures. For any culture which is short of breath it is always helpful to find an open space to give exposure to and to share identities. More technologically sound the cultural advocacy, more successful it can be (and the social media is the most advanced intellectual technology)." (N.D., male, blogger)

The experts who maintain the third moderate stance view the social media as two-faceted. They are discreet in providing answers and refrain from offering clear definitions. They believe that until the substantial and key issues related to the social media are well examined, judging its pros and cons might be premature.

"Understanding the social media's global influence on culture takes time. This requires more thorough examination, but looking at it from the global perspective, there is no doubt that it will definitely affect the cultural traditions, as it changes people's lifestyles, habits, relationships and attitudes… However, this should probably be measured, while I am not an expert in this and cannot give you a ready answer now." (T.P., female, blogger)

Some experts claim that there is not enough expertise and factual materials to analyze this issue in Georgia, and only some overstatements can be made. The national identity and cultural value changes and reappraisals through the social media and internet can be discussed as successfully as the active safeguarding of the national identity and cultural values by nationalist internet users. Hence, while examining this influence, a lot of conflicting tendencies may emerge, which require close scrutiny.

The Virtual Real or the Real Virtual?

What does the social media signify – the virtual real or the real virtual? The activities in the social media and the relations in the social networks do not imply the actions taken in the imaginary, virtual world, where the personal experience emerges only after collission with the "objective" reality. The social media is an experience in itself and an insight into reality, and the relations in the media entail real consequences. That is why M. Castells et al. refer not only to the virtual-imaginary-possible, but also to the real virtual, an imaginary or possible, which has its

real consequences even in the imaginary space, since the real virtual underlies personal experiences and represents the virtuality transformed into experience.

This is a dialectic outlook on this issue, which originates from the cyberspace and the social network relationships. A person can be all by himself with his computer, but at the same time have a real-time interface with thousands of people. He/she may be so engrossed into the imaginary world that it in fact may become his/her life experience and the real virtual. The internet friends and the online relations are not imaginary any more, they are a brand new reality a person lives in, enjoys and feels. A person has a real-time interface with other virtual friends, with whom he/she argues, debates and sympathizes. This is the case when **the imaginary and the real, and the virtual and the real, ostensibly acquire the same characteristics:** this is the real virtual – neither the imaginary, virtual reality, nor its opposing genuine reality.

This issue is hard to analyze, and the majority of experts therefore found it quite hard to understand its essence. However, the question was also raised in a way as to make some experts discuss reliability of information in the social networks, rather than the possibility of creation of the real virtuality – a brand new form of living.

To illustrate this, we can cite some conflicting points of view that deny and at the same time confirm the existence of the real virtual.

"Why is it virtual if someone wears a wristwatch in the social media? What is real for a person? Is the reality someplace else? This is not the virtuality at all – this is a person's reality. It is up to a person to decide how he/she wants to show himself/herself in the social media and what role he/she wants to assume – this is his/her reality and there is no other reality for him/her. We do not have anything to do with the virtuality. For someone else, this can be the virtual but not to this person, as he/she is in the social media in real time…" (E.U., male, journalist)

Although the experts acknowledge the existence of the real virtuailty, they still ascribe to it the function of the second world, or the second reality. They note that a person is so closely engrossed in this "second world" that he/she loses any sense of distinctions between the virtual and the real.

"The social media truly carries a function of the second world. A person gets so involved in all of these and gets so much engrossed in online relations, debates and political confrontations that he/she loses interest in whatever happens in real life. He/she gets exhausted by life in the social media." (T.P., male, blogger)

Another interesting thought is that instead of discussing distinctions between the virtual and the real, we can talk about two different types of realities – the reality itself and the internet reality. The internet reality is so real that it provides an arena for real life, especially for the digital era "natives." Although these two realities are quite distinct, it does not mean that the connections with people in the internet reality are less important, and are therefore less real.

"The internet is such a big value for me that I can refuse to eat. This is the global internet development tendency... people live there already. The reality in itself and the internet reality are two completely different things." (O.N., male, blogger)

We can therefore conclude that we deal with the real virtual, rather than the virtual real, where people feel they are together with many other people in a single big space, and not all alone at their computers, and at the same time they perform other tasks.

"Facebook does the same thing – there is a feeling of being at a place with lots of people, as though you are entering a crowded hall. You are simply sitting at your computer and feeling there are many people around you. It is a strange feeling – your mom and dad are walking behind you and asking you whether you can hear anything, but in fact you don't. You may be reading a book and at the same time checking your facebook profile." (G.O., female, blogger)

The social media is the real virtuality, or as one of the experts terms it the "real reality," which has assumed the socializing function of culture, thus affecting the values, outlook and identity. This is the reality with a much more accelerated pace.

It should nevertheless be noted that the significance and mode of the real virtuality changes depending on who the social media users are – "natives" or the "immigrants." For "natives," a person they meet in the real virtual is as real as a person they meet in real life, and their bonding is quite natural. On the contrary, the "immigrants" draw a distinction between a person they meet in the real virtuality and in the real reality, and unless they know this person in real life, there is a

certain barrier in interacting with him/her. One and the same reality has two different modes: for an immigrant its is the virtual real, and for a native, it is the real virtual.

In the subsequent discussion, a focus from the real virtuality is shifted to impartiality and reliability of the abundant information in the social media. This gives a whole new perspective to the real virtual.

"Authenticity of information is not something that matters there. What really matters is what a reader is inclined to read. I do not think the social network users seek information that is reliable and impartial. What a reader looks for is the information that appeals to him/her, and something he/she eventually wants to read and hear." (E.U., male, journalist)

We can therefore infer that the social media is like a marketplace, where the demands of the most whimsical buyers are easily met. Provided there is a demand, a media-product will have its users irrespective of how reliable or impartial it is. This is a genuine market expression of the real virtual, where the society at large, and not a centralized media, represents both the market users and the providers.

"Any type of information can be obtained, you simply have to know the right people. By asking this question we assume that the majority of the general public may have broad interests, which is not true. They do not have broad interest simply because I do not think there is an informational interest that cannot be met by browsing the web; you can simply raise a quesiton and someone will send you links on the topics you are interested in." (E.U., male, journalist)

The openness and representation of the social media prevents us from the threat of losing the reality and turning it into the imaginary. The experts contend that the information streams in the social media are so abundant that there is simply no room left for false information. A false piece of information is always negated by another piece that challenges it. Any user can always obtain anything he/she wants to find out where the truth lies.

"Presa.ge's example is a good illustration. No matter what presa.ge posts in the social network, there is always another piece of reliable information that challenges and mocks their posts." (N.D., male, blogger)

Unlike the traditional media, the advantage of the social media is that it is much easier to uncover the truth. Although the users face the problem of sorting out the information, they can verify the information accuracy better. While the traditional media is held responsible for furnishing verified facts, there is no one responsible for that in the social media. Verification of the facts is the sole responsibility of the users.

Thus, there are three stands relative to the reliability and impartiality of information in the social media. These are:

1. Market Stand: According to this stand, a user looks for and finds information that appeals to him/her most and that he/she wants to read and hear. The social media is like a marketplace, where the demands of the most whimsical buyers can be met. Provided there is a demand, a media-product has its users irrespective of how reliable or impartial it is. This is the best illustration of the real virtual.

2. Instrumental Stand: According to this stand, the reality in the social media is not lost, rather, there are far more tools and methods to ascertain how reliable and impartial the reality is. In this respect, the social media is a good indicator of the real virtual – as experts note, everybody acts like an editor of his/her own information and creates the content he/she wants. From this perspective, impartiality, as a measure in itself, has changed its essence, as *"any information is impartial as long as it conveys specific thoughts of specific individuals."*

3. Democratic Model of Information Distribution: According to this model, information that appeals to people the most is something which gets shared and gets most exposure. The only guarantee not to lose anything in this information stream is to obtain as diverse information as possible and to take into account diverse points of view. Information that we receive on a day-to-day basis is so versatile that we still act according to our own values and believe in whatever we think is acceptable to us. As per the experts' judgement, this is a very imperfect and flawed way of the information distribution, but the most acceptable at the same time, because it is a democratic model in essence.

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Appendix

In-depth Interview Schedule

1. What do you think the main distinctions are between the traditional and the social media?

2. How influential do you think the social media is in Georgia?

3. How do you foresee the social media in Georgia in the nearest five years to come?

4. Who are the main social media users in Georgia?

5. What are the key functions of the social media in Georgia? (examples)

6. To what extent are the Georgian bloggers protected by law?

7. Are the bloggers' rights often breached, and does the government protect their rights in pratice?

8. Is the social media in Georgia subject to censorship/free from censorship? (examples)

9. Do the authors of the blogs and the sites resort to self-censorship (what are the reasons? Any specific examples?)

10. Is the private information of the social media users protected in Georgia? (examples)

11. How effective is the interface between the politicians and the public through the social media, either through the political party sites or the facebook conferences (what are the reasons? Any specific examples?) Do the Georgian politicians try to find effective ways to persuade the audience using the social media, and how does this affect the political communication transformation in Georgia? (examples)

12. How effective is the social media in imposing political influence in Georgia? (examples)

13. Is the social media in Georgia geared towards raising political awareness (either through facebook conferences, Tabula, Liberali, Radio Liberty or similar blogs, or any other means)?

14. Could we talk in terms of the approaching era of mediocracy (colonization of politics by media) in Georgia? (what are the reasons? Any specific examples?)

15. Does the social media in Georgia promote infotainment (name specific examples) and can this be the means to divert attention away from the social and political issues?

16. Does the social media in Georgia focus on the celebrity culture, and can this be the means to divert attention away from the social and political issues? (examples)

17. Does the Georgian social media replicate the American "Liberal Model"? [explanations of the "Liberal Model" will be provided to respondents for greater clarity]

18. Could we talk in terms of developing the public journalism in Georgia? [we provide a definition of the public journalism vis-a-vis the citizen journalism, as needed] (any specific examples? Reasons?)

19. Could we talk in terms of developing the citizen journalism in Georgia? [we provide a definition of the citizen journalism vis-a-vis the public journalism, as needed] (any specific examples? Reasons?)

20. To what extent does the social media in Georgia capture the five core values that underlie information systems in democracies and are relevant to the citizen journalism (The Knight Commission, 2009): Openness (the information production and consumption available to everyone), Inclusion (capturing interests of the entire community), Participation (people's productive engagement with information for personal and civic purposes), Empowerment of Individuals and Communities, and Common Pursuit of Truth and the Public Interest. [we provide explanations of each value and work through the values in sequence, proceeding with the next only after receiving an answer to the preceding question.]

21. Does the social media in Georgia provide the information for educational purposes? For instance, how effectively could it be used by the students and professors alike to grow professionally, and are they already using the social media to that end?

22. How effective is the social media in creating and sustaining the social capital in Georgia? How is this achieved? (does it employ the relevant facebook sites only, or thematic groups like "a man and a woman", orthodox site like orthodox.ge, etc.). Who is considered a "friend" in the social network? Consequently, could the social media reinforce the group/collective identity in Georgia?

23. Who do you consider your audience to be? (Questions 23, 24 and 25 are for bloggers/editors)

24. How do you select a topic to post?

25. Do you expect feedback from the audience? Does the feedback help you and how?

26. Do you think the diversified and global nature of the social media affects the socio-political engagement/participation in Georgia? (examples)

27. Do you think the diversified and global nature of the social media affects personal traits and personal relations among Georgians? (examples)

28. Do you think the diversified and global nature of the social media affects cultural traditions and national identity in Georgia? (examples)

29. Do you think the "reality" is threatened by the social media's growing influence at a time when everyday life is so infiltrated by various media images and content that it becomes hard to tell which is real? How is it possible to distinguish what is the "genuine" (credible) information in this information torrent?

30. What do you think the positive and negative outcomes of developing the social media in Georgia could be?