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The effect of the Internet on civic engagement under authoritarianism: The case of Azerbaijan

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Abstract

This study examines civic activities under an authoritarian state — Azerbaijan — focusing on how the Internet may influence them. The role of the Internet in political and civic engagement is a subject of debate in any society. But Azerbaijan offers a unique vantage point to study the Internet's effect on engagement because it views the Internet as an extension of sovereign dominion and controls online discussions. The government maintains the same view of the Internet as it does towards non–governmental engagement: it is unacceptable because it occurs outside state parameters. Using two nationally representative datasets from 2011, logistic regression analysis found that the Internet is associated with public civic engagement (and some forms of private civic engagement) but not with political government engagement. All results were robust to demographic controls, strengthening confidence that the Internet was at least indicative of, if not contributory to, civic life in Azerbaijan outside of the government.

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Introduction

Civic engagement is almost universally acknowledged as desirable, yet there remain many barriers to its practice. Some argue that the Internet reduces those barriers, decreasing the costs of participation and allowing people to engage without being physically present. However, in an authoritarian state where citizens face prohibitive barriers to participation, can the Internet further political and civic engagement?

This is an important question to ask about authoritarian states, as the vast majority of political and civic engagement theory and research have been conducted in democratic contexts. Little is known about how citizens of authoritarian countries participate to solve problems of public relevance such as crime, discrimination, and environmental degradation. But there is a compelling prima facie case to be made that political and civic engagement under authoritarian conditions may differ substantially from that of democracies. One key difference concerns citizens' respective relationships to the state: in democracies, citizens are at least nominally encouraged to shape and influence their government through voting; whereas in authoritarian states, voting is a performative act of fealty to the ruling regime. Second, the laws of many authoritarian states limit non–governmental civic engagement activities by discouraging the kinds of expressive rights people in democracies take for granted. Third, repressive political climates also strongly influence the private sphere, as low generalized trust and fear of the state combine to limit social activities to an intimate circle rather than society at large (Uslaner, 2003). Finally, authoritarian governments position themselves as the only trustworthy and legitimate supplier of public goods (Gahramanova, 2009), which makes independent civic organizations seem less credible.

This study examines civic activities under the conditions of an authoritarian state — Azerbaijan — focusing specifically on how the Internet may influence them. The role of the Internet in political and civic engagement is a subject of intense debate in any society. But the authoritarian states of the former Soviet

Union offer a unique vantage point to study the Internet's effect on political and civic engagement because post–Soviet rulers view the Internet as a virtual extension of their sovereign dominion, and attempt to control and curtail online discussions (Kendzior, 2011, Kozhamberdiyeva, 2008; Kulikova and Perlmutter, 2007; Pearce and Kendzior, 2012). The government maintains the same view of the Internet as it does towards non–governmental civic engagement: it is unacceptable more because it occurs outside state parameters than because of nature of the discussion or activity itself.

Context

Authoritarianism in Azerbaijan

Authoritarianism is both a set of governing practices and an ideological construct. In the political sense, authoritarianism is a form of government in which state authority rests exclusively with sanctioned members of the state. Non–government actors are expressly excluded from governing processes, and citizens are not guaranteed political pluralism, civil liberties, or government accountability (Vaillant, 2012). Operationally, authoritarianism entails low levels of political pluralism and high levels of political apathy and perceived political powerlessness (Linz, 2000). Force, censorship, fear (Vaillant, 2012), distrust of other citizens, denial of resources to opposition, harassment of troublemakers, media control, state dependence for employment, and suppression of autonomous organizing (Radnitz, 2010) are common techniques to enforce exclusive claims to power.

As one of the most repressive of the post–Soviet states (Freedom House, 2012), Azerbaijan exemplifies the extensive level of social control that post–Soviet authoritarian governments exercise over their peoples. Azerbaijan is a petro–state whose oil revenues have allowed the regime to preempt any opposition (Guliyev, 2009). Azerbaijan has been politically dominated by a father and son since 1993. The son and current president, Ilham Aliev, has suppressed opposition groups, violated basic rights and civil liberties and moved the country towards "full–fledged authoritarianism" (Frichova Grono, 2011). This rule has created a "pervasive bitterness and growing sense of deprivation" [1], a general sense of apathy and fear (Abbasov, 2010), and a lack of trust in others (Gahramanova, 2009). As such, Azerbaijani society is fearful and self–censoring (Gahramanova, 2009; Kazimova, 2011).

Engagement under authoritarianism

What does it mean to practice civic engagement under such conditions? According to Henry (2012), authoritarian regimes, by definition, discourage engagement by citizens. "Instead, these regimes prefer top–down systems of public mobilization in order to achieve objectives chosen by the political elite, not the public" [2].

We take the position that civic engagement is possible under authoritarianism, albeit in different forms than are observed in democracies. We propose a two–dimensional framework for understanding political and civic engagement under authoritarianism, with one axis representing a governmental/non–governmental dimension (Delli Carpini, 2004), and a second representing a publicity/privacy dimension. We illustrate the perspective by describing the location of a variety of engagement activities within this framework.

Table 1
Political and Civic Engagement Framework

	Engaging with other citizens – civic engagement		Engaging with the government – political engagement	
Public	• Attended club/civic group meeting • Volunteered • Cleaned public space • Planted tree • Discussed politics	Internet Affordances - Reduced costs for engagement - Engagement without co-presence - Increased likelihood of others monitoring engagement - Potential for anonymity Without Internet	- Attended public meeting	Internet Affordances • Possibly more aware of public meeting due to Internet • Larger potential audience due to Internet Without Internet
Private	• Donated to charity • Gave money to beggar • Helped stranger on road • Helped neighbor with household chores	Internet Affordances • Reduced costs for engagement • Engagement without co-presence Without Internet	• Wrote letter/made phone call to media	Internet Affordances • Reduced costs for engagement • Larger potential audience due to Internet Without Internet

Political and civic engagement

Civic engagement has no universally agreed–upon conceptual definition. Levine (2007) offers a concise, ecumenical formulation that encompasses most of what communication scholars have labeled as such: "political activism, deliberation, problem solving, and participation in shaping a culture" [3]. This definition includes citizen activities that in some way interface with government, such as voting; as well as those that do not, such as volunteering for a civic organization. Indeed, the government/non–government distinction is key in the civic engagement literature, and opinions differ as to whether one is more important than the other (Delli Carpini, 2004). Delli Carpini (2004) labels citizen participation in government as "political engagement" while referring to non–governmental efforts to improve society as "civic engagement," a terminological distinction we adopt for our framework. This decreased emphasis on government is important for this study because in authoritarian countries, there are often no officially sanctioned ways to influence government decisions. Therefore, conceptions of civic engagement that strongly emphasize government are inappropriate in this context (*e.g.*, Tolbert, *et al.*, 2003).

In contrast, studies that focus on citizen activities outside the governmental sphere provide a more apt conceptual starting point. Such studies typically assess multiple political and civic engagement indicators, some of the most common of which are measured in this study: giving to charity, volunteering, and attending meetings of clubs or civic organizations (see Gil de Zúñiga, *et al.*, 2012; Lee, *et al.*, 2013; Xenos and Moy, 2007). In democratic contexts, demographic traits which increase the likelihood of an individual being civically engaged in these ways include older age (Delli Carpini, 2000) and higher education (Xenos and Moy, 2007).

Publicity and privacy

Our framework highlights social influence as described by Verba, *et al.* (1995), and specifically the publicity or privacy of engagement. Because people are aware that their engagement work has repercussions — both positive and negative — publicity/privacy is an important dimension to consider. In this framework public and private are distinguished as "what is individual, or pertains only to an individual, versus what is collective, or affects the interests of a collectivity" [4], to which we add, for the purpose of this study of an authoritarian state, the degree to which an action is capable of being observed. Accordingly, public modes of engagement are defined here as those conducted in the company of others that are similarly engaged. Examples include speaking up at a public forum, volunteering in various capacities, and cleaning public spaces. Private engagement, by contrast, is conducted on an individual basis in the private sphere, and includes such activities as donating to charity, helping strangers, and assisting neighbors. By definition, forms of public engagement are much more susceptible to social influence — not to mention government scrutiny — than private engagement, which often eludes official attention due to its smaller scale.

One of the dominant characteristics of life in an authoritarian state is surveillance. The Soviet and post–Soviet eras feature many formal and informal mechanisms of social control based in fear, including formal

and informal surveillance. Mutual surveillance, collective correction, and self–revelation were the "rules of the game" in Soviet society (Kharkhordin, 1999), with private space reduced to a minimum and a motto of "a true Soviet citizen has nothing to conceal" [5]. Thus, any *public* activity, including engagement, is done with an assumption of surveillance, as described below.

Setting the dimensions of engagement (governmental vs. non–governmental) and publicity (private vs. public) orthogonally against one another, different engagement activities can be placed into one of four categories. We acknowledge that these are not mutually exclusive categories.

Civic public engagement

It is important to acknowledge that reciprocal informal structures — family, friendship, and neighborliness — are essential in post–Soviet society (Babajanian, 2006; Babajanian, *et al.*, 2005; Ilkhamov, 2005). As long as the immediate network benefits, participation makes sense; outside the network, people tend to avoid it (van der Meer, *et al.*, 2010). In both the Soviet and post–Soviet period, there was voluntary participation in "subbotnik" (Radnitz, 2010), clean–up efforts aimed at improving the community. In the past subbotnik was state–sponsored, while today non–state actors primarily organize projects. People take part in subbotnik, but primarily when their engagement is based on their social network and there is a sense that the assistance will be reciprocated (Babajanian, 2005). Similarly, Radnitz (2010) found that people would participate as much as what was expected by those community members observing their participation.

Thus civic public engagement activities in this study include the following: attending club/civic group meeting, volunteering, cleaning public spaces, planting trees, and discussing politics. (Discussion is considered public because others can observe, even if they are trusted others.) Each of these is a non–governmental effort to improve society (Delli Carpini, 2004) that affects the interest of the collective (Weintraub, 1997), and is capable of being observed by uninvolved parties.

Political public engagement

On the other hand, public engagement can be risky because it may be viewed as a challenge to the state under an authoritarian regime. If engagement activities fill a vacuum created by the state's failure to supply basic goods and services, they can be construed as opposition. An individual may consider the effect of joining an environmental club that is later implicated in political opposition. Thus, some of the actions that are considered civic could also be considered political. However, for the purpose of this study, we only consider the most public of political engagement activities: attending a public meeting about town or schools affairs. We consider this to be political engagement because both government and the interests of the collective are directly implicated (Delli Carpini, 2004; Weintraub, 1997).

Civic private engagement

While some public engagement activities can have positive effects, other can have potentially negative effects. Private engagement, on the other hand, is inherently less risky. And while it may not have the positive performative effects of more public forms of engagement, some acts may result in reciprocal benefits (like caring for a neighbor's child). Thus civic private engagement in this study includes the following activities: donating to charity, giving money to beggars, helping a stranger on a road, and helping neighbors with household chores. Each of these is a non–governmental efforts to improve society (Delli Carpini, 2004) that does not affect the interest of the collective (Weintraub, 1997), with the exception of helping neighbors with chores. While some of these activities can be observed by bystanders, they do not tend to attract official attention in the way the public activities do.

Political private engagement

Private political engagement is likely less risky than public political engagement because it is not as easily observed and does not affect the interest of the collective (Weintraub, 1997). In this study only the activities of writing a letter or making a phone call to media are included in this category. Complaint making is a key form of political participation in post–Soviet environments, as Henry (2012) argues. Whether this is in fact private is questionable. During the Soviet period, the state did monitor letters to media outlets (Bittner, 2003; Fitzpatrick, 1999), however, in the current era it would be unimaginable that a letter opposing the government would be published in the state–run newspapers. But this is participation in government that is comparatively less visible than the activities we categorize as public.

Internet and engagement

The central research question of this article concerns how Internet use influences these different types of civic engagement. This question speaks directly to a broad and diverse literature focusing on the role of the Internet in facilitating civic behaviors. The overall case for a positive effect of the Internet on engagement is mixed. Some current studies have detected such effects (Xenos and Moy, 2007; Boulianne, 2009; Gil de Zúñiga, *et al.*, 2009) while others have not (Schlozman, *et al.*, 2010; Baumgartner and Morris, 2009). In a welcome shift, scholars have recently begun distinguishing between both different political and civic engagement activities and different forms of Internet use that can be linked with them. For example, participatory uses of online media — especially those that are explicitly civic or political — are associated with other civic participatory behaviors off–line and online (Gil de Zúñiga, *et al.*, 2012; Lee, *et al.*, 2013). Numerous studies argue that the Internet appears not to level the civic playing field between haves and have–nots: both online and off–line political and civic engagement overwhelmingly remain

provinces of the well–off (Schlozman, *et al.*, 2010). Although a complete review of this literature is beyond the scope of this paper, the findings cited here provide a brief sketch of the state of online political and civic engagement research in democratic contexts. The possibility that the Internet's influence on political and civic engagement might differ in non–democratic contexts has been suggested in both non–empirical work (*e.g.*, Habermas, 2006; Kassimir and Flanagan, 2010; Shirky, 2011) and empirical studies of non–democratic civic activity and social movements (*e.g.*, P.N. Howard, *et al.*, 2011; Nisbet, *et al.*, 2012; Wall and El Zahed, 2011). The few studies of the effect of the Internet on civic activities in authoritarian states are mixed, with some noting that the Internet can give rise to engagement (Yang, 2009; Hoffmann, 2011) and others arguing that it may not (Aday, *et al.*, 2010).

Publicity, authoritarianism, and the Internet

In the digital age, the meanings of public and private are not as simple as they once were. Technology may be eroding the boundaries between publicity and privacy (Weintraub and Kumar, 1997). Therefore, is political or civic engagement that is enabled by or conducted via technology public or private engagement?

In a surveillance state, the Internet provides opportunities for publicity than can be both positive and negative. Some scholars emphasize the ways authoritarian regimes use the Internet for surveillance and control, thereby prohibiting citizens from engaging in non–state sanctioned activities (Kalathil and Boas, 2001; Morozov, 2011). However, the Internet can also afford anonymity and reduce barriers for participating (Earl and Kimport, 2011).

Civic public engagement and Internet affordances

There does not need to be a formal organization infrastructure for civic engagement via the Internet. One could potentially civically engage anonymously. The Internet also reduces financial barriers. Organizations can disseminate information and recruit participants via the Internet at significantly reduced costs. However, public engagement can also increase the likelihood of being monitored. A video of civic engagement could be uploaded to YouTube and result in an individual being identified by security services. Seemingly harmless actions such as "friending" someone on a social networking site or joining a group are not only monitored by one's other social networking site friends, but also by state officials.

Political public engagement and Internet affordances

Political public engagement requires co–presence. However, the Internet can enable greater awareness of political public engagement either through discovery of opportunities for engagement or increased audience viewing the engagement. With an increased audience comes increased risk for one engaging publicly.

Civic private engagement and Internet affordances

The Internet affords ample opportunities for private civic engagement. Donating to charity is increasingly easy with the rise of low–cost methods such as SMS– and Internet–based fund transfers. However, for other private civic engagement activities in this study, the Internet is unlikely to play a role.

Political private engagement and Internet affordances

The Internet can reduce costs for private political engagement as well. Civic–minded individuals can now write emails and leave online comments in addition to writing letters and making phone calls to media outlets. While these represent reduced costs for engagement, they also raise the potential for larger audiences due to the Internet.

Framework

As little is currently known about the Internet's role in potentially facilitating the different forms of civic engagement under authoritarian conditions, we propose three research questions:

RQ1: How many Azerbaijanis are engaging in these political and civic activities?
RQ2: What are the demographic characteristics of Azerbaijanis engaging in political and civic activities?

And our primary research question is:

RQ3: What effect, if any, does the Internet have on engagement in Azerbaijan?

Method

Datasets

Dataset 1 is the Caucasus Barometer, an annual face–to–face public opinion poll conducted in three countries by the Caucasus Research Resource Center. It was collected in November 2011. Dataset 2 was also designed and collected in December 2011–March 2012 also by the Caucasus Research Resource Center in Azerbaijan. Sampling and demographic questions were similar to the Caucasus Barometer, but the focus was on social capital, media, and gender issues. The results are made available to the public via its Web site, www.crrccenters.org. Participation in the survey was voluntary and anonymous.

We use two datasets here for two reasons. First, findings can be triangulated between the two since they were collected within a short time period. Second, Dataset 2 contains additional political and civic engagement activities not included in the broader Caucasus Barometer.

Respondents

Respondents were the adults in Azerbaijan (N=1,482 for dataset 1 and N=1,018 for dataset 2) answering a face–to–face survey.

Sampling

The sampling universe was all adult (age 18+) residents. The sample design was based on multistage area probability sampling. Primary sampling units (PSUs) were electoral precincts. The sampling frame was divided into three "macro–strata" by settlement type: capital, urban and rural. The secondary sampling unit (SSUs) was electoral districts, the third were households, and the final were individual respondents. Municipalities and rural communities were used as PSUs because they have well–defined administrative borders that rarely change, well–defined population that are heterogeneous. Moreover, census information was available about them in order to construct the sampling frames. SSUs were selected in each country with probability proportional to the adult population size from the census information. Household selection was done through a random route method, starting from a randomly selected starting point within electoral district; the "left hand" rule was applied to select the household. Within a household, a survey respondent was selected using the Kish procedure. The response rate was 75 percent for dataset 1 and 82 percent for dataset 2, which is normal for the region (multigenerational households in which someone is always home).

Measures

Urbanness. Interviewers determined if the household was located in the capital (2), an urban regional city (1), or a rural location (0). Urban regions in post–Soviet countries are defined as a settlement with more than 10,000 residents and the majority must not be employed in agriculture (Buckley, 1998).

Age. Respondents were asked to report their age.

Economic well–being. In dataset 1, respondents were asked "what phrase best describes your family's financial situation" and given five choices. In dataset 2, participates were asked: "Relative to most of the households around you, would you describe the current economic condition of your household as ..." and given five choices.

Education. Respondents were asked to self–report their education level as one of eight categories, in dataset 1 and one of six categories, noted in Table 2.

Internet frequency. Respondents were asked "How often do you use the Internet?" and responses were coded (0) I don't know what the Internet is, (0) never, (1) less often, (2) at least once a month, (3) at least once a week, and (4) every day.

Internet activities. Respondents were asked "Which of the following do you do when you are browsing the Internet?" and responses relevant to this study, amongst others, included Use social networking sites (Одноклассники (Odnoklassniki), Facebook, Myspace, etc.) and Read/listen to/watch the news.

Political and civic engagement activities. . In dataset 1 respondents were asked if they participated in the following activities, among others, within the past six months: attending public meeting; discussed politics with friends; gave to charity; volunteered without expectation of pay; and attended a club/civic meeting.

In dataset 2 the following were activities added: Wrote a letter/made a phone call to a newspaper, TV or radio program; Given money to a beggar; Helped a stranger on a road (except giving money); Helped a neighbor or a friend with some HH chores or childcare; Helped cleaning public space (*e.g.*, entrance of your building/house, staircase, school); and, Planted a tree outside your property. Volunteering was not included in dataset 2.

Discussing politics was included as a yes/no question in dataset 1. In dataset 2, the *frequency* of discussing politics was asked about as such: Participants are handed a card for privacy, and told "Please use [CARD], where code '1' corresponds to the answer 'Never' and code '10' corresponds to the answer 'Always'." And the respondent would privately write a number. The following items were included: How

often do you discuss politics with your close relatives? How often do you discuss politics with your close friends? How often do you discuss politics with your neighbors?

Results

Table 2 summarizes the descriptives of both datasets. Table 3 presents the percentage of the sample engaging in each activity. Correlation matrices are available from the authors.

Table 2
Description of the Samples

Variable		
Dataset	1	**2**
N	1481	**1018**
Gender Male	52.9%	**51.9%**
Female	47.1	**46.3**
Region		
Capital	33.2%	**34.4%**
Urban	33.2	**34.5**
Rural	33.6	**31.1**
Education		
1 No primary education	.9%	
2 Primary education	2.3	
3 Incomplete secondary education	13.0	
4 Completed secondary education	48.5	
5 Secondary technical education	13.7	
6 Incomplete higher education	4.1	
7 Completed higher education	18.3	
8 Post-graduate	.1	
	M=4.55 *SD*=1.39 R=1-8	
1 Did not obtain 9 year diploma		**4.8%**
2 9 year diploma		**7.9**
3 10-11 year high school diploma		**47.8**
4 Vocational/technical degree		**18.0**
5 Bachelors'		**17.0**
6 Anything above bachelors		**2.2**
		***M*=3.41 *SD*=1.10 R=1-6**
Best description of family's financial situation (material deprivation)		
1 We don't have enough money even for food	29.0%	
2 We have enough money for food but not for clothes	38.3	
3 We can buy food and clothes, but not more expensive things	30.1	
4 We can buy some expensive things like a refrigerator	6.4	
5 We can buy anything we want	1.4	
	M=2.27 *SD*=.92 R=1-5	

Compared to households around you, would you describe the current economic situation of your household as…		
1 Very poor		**5.5%**
2 Poor		**21.2**
3 Neither good nor poor		**55.7**
4 Good		**12.1**
5 Very good		**1.2**
		***M*=2.79** ***SD*=.83** **R=1-6**
Age	*M*=42.81 *SD*=15.88 R=18-92	***M*=43.06*SD*=17.02** **R=19-95**
Aware of Internet	88.3	**88.3%**
Of total, Adopted Internet	21.6	**23.3%**
Of total, Use Internet		
Never	78.5%	**76.7%**
Less than monthly	6.3	**5.0**
Monthly	2.6	**2.1**
Weekly	5.9	**8.8**
Daily	6.8	**7.4**
	M=.56 *SD* =1.21 R=0-4	***M*=.66** ***SD* =1.31** **R=0-4**
Participate in social networking sites frequently		**13.8%**
Read online news frequently		**8.3%**

Note: R = range (min-max)

Table 3

Percentage of sample engaging

	Engaging with other citizens and not the government – civic engagement		**Engaging with the government – political engagement**	
Public	Attended club/civic group meeting	5.9% (d1)	Attended public meeting	20.7% (d1); 28.0% (d2)
	Volunteered	17.5% (d2)		
	Cleaned public space	36.5% (d2)		
	Planted tree	27.3% (d2)		
	Discussed politics	30.7% (d1)		
	(range 1 never -10 always)	Discussed politics with friends (d2) *M* =3.49 *SD*=2.25 Discussed politics with close relatives (d2) *M*=3.27 *SD*= 2.20 Discussed politics with neighbors (d2) *M* =2.62 *SD*= 2.03		
Private	Donated to charity	15.7% (d1); 17.3% (d2)	Wrote letter/made phone call to media	5.8% (d2)
	Money to beggar	74.2% (d2)		
	Helped stranger on road	68.6% (d2)		
	Helped neighbor with household chores	51.5% (d2)		

Tables 4–8 report the unstandardized binary logistic regression coefficients and odds ratios. A positive coefficient, when significant, indicates the effects of the corresponding variable on the logarithmic likelihood of engaging in an activity. For the non–binary measures, Table 5 contains linear regressions. Results will be presented by type of engagement.

Public civic engagement

Public civic engagement activities varied in the importance of demographic predictors (detailed below), however Internet frequency only influenced attending a civic group/club meeting and volunteering, not cleaning public spaces, or planting a tree. As we expected, the affordances of the Internet for reducing costs and allowing for non–co–presence had the greatest effect on civic club attendances and volunteering through greater awareness and opportunities for engagement through the Internet.

Table 4

Binary logistic regression (on binary DVs)

	Civ mtg					Volunteer					Clean public space					Plant tree				
Explanatory Variables			95% CI for Odds Ratio					95% CI for Odds Ratio					95% CI for Odds Ratio					95% CI for Odds Ratio		
	B (SE)	Wald	Lower	Odds ratio	Upper	B (SE)	Wald	Lower	Odds ratio	Upper	B (SE)	Wald	Lower	Odds ratio	Upper	B (SE)	Wald	Lower	Odds ratio	Upper
Urbanness	.12 (.154)	.612	.83	1.13	1.53	.16 (.093)	2.81	.71	.86	1.03	.04 (.124)	.107	.754	.960	1.223	.43*** (.158)	7.382	1.127	1.535	2.090
Sex	-.24 (.244)	.958	.49	.79	1.27	.16 (.148)	1.13	.88	1.17	1.56	-.46* (.206)	4.901	.424	.634	.949	1.75*** (.246)	50.670	3.559	5.766	9.340
Age	.01 (.009)	.566	.99	1.01	1.02	-.00 (.005)	.681	.99	1.00	1.01	-.01 (.007)	1.974	.976	.990	1.004	-.01 (.009)	1.388	.973	.990	1.007
Econ	.18 (.129)	1.88	.93	1.19	1.96	.12 (.080)	2.21	.96	1.13	1.32	-.08 (.044)	2.926	.851	.928	1.011	.01 (.052)	.074	.915	1.014	1.124
Edu	.50*** (.087)	33.26	1.39	1.65	1.54	.21*** (.061)	14.80	1.11	1.23	1.37	.10(.099)	1.042	.911	1.107	1.345	.02 (.114)	.024	.814	1.018	1.272
Inet freq	.21*	5.43	1.24	1.24	1.48	.20**	11.02	1.09	1.22	1.38	-.12 (.09	1.639	.730	.883	1.068	-.04 (.12	.109	.758	.961	1.218

	(.091)					(.061)					7)					1)				
Constant	-6.21*** (.743)	69.89		.002		-2.50*** (.434)	33.28		.082			.09 (.535)	.026		1.090	-.269*** (.673)	15.912		.068	
Pseudo R2 - Nagelkerke	.13					.08					.05					.20				
Chi-square/df	9.023/8					14.478					20.159/6***					78.926/6***				
N	1481					1481					548					546				

*p<.05; ** p<.01; *** p<.00

Discussing politics was a form of public civic engagement. The influence of the Internet varied. For merely discussing politics, Internet frequency had no effect. However, the use of social networking sites was a positive predictor of frequency of discussion of politics with close relatives and a negative predictor for discussion of politics with neighbors (Table 6).

Table 5

Binary logistic regression (on binary DVs)

	Discuss politics				
Explanatory Variables			95% CI for Odds Ratio		
	B (SE)	Wald	Lower	Odds ratio	Upper
Urbanness	-.03 (.080)	.166	.88	1.03	1.21
Sex	1.55*** (.136)	130.401	3.61	4.71	6.14
Age	.00 (.004)	.206	.99	1.00	1.01
Econ	-.11 (.072)	2.22	.78	.90	1.04
Edu	.30*** (.049)	36.188	1.22	1.35	1.48
Inet freq	-.03 (.058)	.218	.87	.97	1.09
Constant	-2.97*** (.390)	22.95		.05	
Pseudo R2 - Nagelkerke	.18				
Chi-square/df	10.475/8				
N	1481				

*p<.05; ** p<.01; *** p<.00

Table 6
Overall linear regression on explanatory variables

Explanatory Variables	How often do you discuss politics with your close relatives?	How often do you discuss politics with your close friends?	How often do you discuss politics with your neighbors?
Urbanness	-.26***	-.22**	-.29***
Sex	-.23***	-.27***	-.14*
Age	.22**	.23**	.13
Econ	-.04	.00	-.04
Edu	.14*	.13	.10
Inet freq	.03	-.10	.09
Use SNS	.15*	.09	-.13*
Read online news	.12	.20**	-.00
Adjusted *R2*	.17	.21	.11
F	6.606***	8.082***	4.621***
Df	8	8	8

*$p<.05$; ** $p<.01$; *** $p<.001$. Values are standardized Betas

Private civic engagement

Many private civic engagement activities were thought to not be influenced by Internet frequency, and in fact only donating to charity was consistently influenced by Internet frequency.

Table 7

Binary logistic regression (on binary DV's)

	Charity – dataset 1					Charity – dataset 2					Help beggar					Help stranger				
Explanatory Variables			95% CI for Odds Ratio					95% CI for Odds Ratio					95% CI for Odds Ratio					95% CI for Odds Ratio		
	B (SE)	Wald	Lower	Odds ratio	Upper	B (SE)	Wald	Lower	Odds ratio	Upper	B (SE)	Wald	Lower	Odds ratio	Upper	B (SE)	Wald	Lower	Odds ratio	Upper
Urbanness	.03 (.096)	.11	.80	.97	1.17	.35 (.191)	3.298	.486	.707	1.028	.35* (.138)	6.516	.537	.703	.922	.20 (.125)	2.416	.644	.823	1.052
Sex	-.14 (.152)	.79	.65	.87	1.18	.01 (.306)	.002	.556	1.014	1.846	-.41* (.212)	3.807	.436	.661	1.002	.75*** (.208)	12.930	1.406	2.115	3.181
Age	.01 (.005)	3.86	1.00	1.01	1.02	-.02 (.011)	2.001	.962	.983	1.006	-.01 (.008)	3.043	.972	.987	1.002	-.01 (.007)	2.339	.975	.989	1.003
Econ	.13 (.083)	2.39	.97	1.14	1.34	-.04 (.069)	.348	.838	.960	1.099	.01 (.047)	.077	.924	1.013	1.110	.00 (.044)	.000	.917	1.000	1.091
Edu	.22*** (.056)	15.67	1.12	1.25	1.39	.41*** (.154)	7.183	1.117	1.509	2.039	.18 (.103)	3.082	.979	1.198	1.465	.31*** (.100)	9.684	1.122	1.365	1.661
Inet freq	.16* (.064)	6.41	1.04	1.18	1.39	.37*** (.113)	10.653	1.159	1.448	1.809	.11 (.123)	.747	.874	1.112	1.416	.06 (.106)	.318	.863	1.061	1.306
Constant	-3.37*** (.456)	54.481		.035		-.2126*** (.780)	7.322		.119		1.889** (.599)	9.947		6.61		1.99 (.545)	.134		.1220	
Pseudo R2 - Nagelkerke	.05						.19				.08					.09				
Chi-square/df	6.32/8						56.622/6***				31.680/6***					38.724/6				
N	1481						548				548					544				

*$p<.05$; ** $p<.01$; *** $p<.00$

Table 8

Binary logistic regression (on binary DV's)

	Help chores					Public mtg – dataset 1					Public mtg – dataset 2					Contact media				
Explanatory Variables			95% CI for Odds Ratio					95% CI for Odds Ratio					95% CI for Odds Ratio					95% CI for Odds Ratio		
	B (SE)	Wald	Lower	Odds ratio	Upper	B (SE)	Wald	Lower	Odds ratio	Upper	B (SE)	Wald	Lower	Odds ratio	Upper	B (SE)	Wald	Lower	Odds ratio	Upper
Urbanness	-.28* (.124)	4.91	1.03	1.317	1.679	.11 (.088)	1.46	.76	.90	1.07	-.11 (.151)	.53	.830	1.12	1.50	.80* (.311)	6.59	.25	.45	.83
Sex	-1.23*** (.204)	36.272	.196	.292	.436	-.20 (.139)	1.95	.63	.82	1.08	.83 (.236)***	12.302	.63	.82	1.08	.28 (.450)	.38	.55	1.32	3.18
Age	-.01 (.007)	1.512	.978	.991	1.005	-.01** (.005)	6.00	.98	.988	.998	-.02 (.009)	3.16	.98	.988	.998	.01 (.540)	.38	.98	1.01	1.05
Econ	-.08 (.044)	3.247	.847	.924	1.007	.11 (.077)	2.22	.96	1.12	1.30	.06 (.053)	1.097	.96	1.12	1.30	-.04 (.102)	.12	.79	.97	1.18
Edu	.23* (.097)	5.339	1.035	1.252	1.515	.39*** (.052)	56.30	1.33	1.47	1.63	.23* (.115)	3.906	1.33	1.47	1.63	.31 (.216)	2.06	.89	1.36	2.08
Inet freq	-.10 (.095)	1.135	.749	.903	1.089	.02 (.060)	.111	.91	1.02	1.15	.25* (.103)	5.746	.91	1.02	1.15	.17 (.180)	.93	.84	1.19	1.69
Constant	.081 (.530)	.023		1.084		-2.58*** (.412)	39.358		.07		-2.37*** (.642)	13.620		.094		-.3190** (1.150)	7.729		.041	
Pseudo R2 - Nagelkerke	.14					.11					.10					.10				
Chi-square/df	62.241/6***					11.196/8					34.455/6***					17.489/6***				
N	549					1481					549					550				

*$p<.05$; ** $p<.01$; *** $p<.00$

Public political engagement

Attending a public meeting was influenced by Internet frequency, but much more strongly in dataset 2 than in dataset 1. Internet frequency also influenced contacting the media.

Summary

In summary, frequency of Internet use is significantly related to the following civic engagement indicators: Attending public meetings; charity; volunteering; attending a club/civic group meeting; writing letter/making phone call to media; discussing politics with close friends (with reading online news);

discussing politics with close relatives (using SNSs); and, discussing politics with neighbors (using SNS — negative).

On the contrary, Internet use is unrelated to the following civic engagement activities: Giving money to beggars (but with three–quarters of people engaging in this, this isn't that surprising, as it is "normal" behavior in Azerbaijani society, thus less able to be influenced by particular behaviors like Internet use); helping a stranger on the road (over two–thirds of people engage); helping neighbors with chores/childcare (but this is a strongly gendered activity); cleaning public space; and, planting a tree.

Discussion

The primary finding of this study is that frequency of Internet use is generally associated with civic but not political engagement as articulated by Delli Carpini (2004) and others. The more public activities were more likely to be affected by Internet use. Although Internet frequency was correlated with nearly all of these civic activities, our analysis determined that Internet frequency was only related to these activities listed above. All of these results were robust to demographic controls, strengthening our confidence that the Internet was at least indicative of, if not contributory to, civic life in Azerbaijan.

In one respect, these results are not surprising. As noted earlier, Internet use in the U.S. has been associated with civic engagement for over a decade, and non–governmental engagement continues to rise as government engagement wanes (Bennett, 2008). Thus, this study's civic engagement outcomes are roughly in line with those from studies conducted in democratic contexts. However, there is a major difference in the relationships between Internet use and political engagement in democracies and in Azerbaijan, in that the former are strong while the latter are non–existent. One probable reason for this is that advanced democracies have longstanding political participation traditions that the Internet can amplify, while authoritarian countries like Azerbaijan do not. As many skeptics of Internet politics have noted, adding digital tools to infertile political situations is unlikely by itself to yield activism (Bimber, 1998).

This study demonstrates that some civic activities are in fact occurring in Azerbaijan, if not in the same way as in advanced democracies. The link between these activities and Internet use would be expected in democracies but not in authoritarian countries, repudiating to some extent claims that civic engagement and authoritarianism are at odds (Jamal, 2009). In terms of their preference for civic over political behaviors, Azerbaijanis strongly resemble American youth (Bennett, 2008). But while youth in democratic countries tend to be disillusioned by a combination of a cynical and exclusionary political elite and an increasing number of consumerist distractions (Bennett, 2008), Azerbaijanis, also disillusioned by cynical and exclusionary political elite (and perhaps consumerist distractions as well), also avoid politics for reasons of personal safety and security.

Although this study has revealed an intriguing connection between Internet use and political and civic engagement, questions remain about its exact nature. The data do not directly address the question of whether the Internet "caused" the civic activity in question, but for reasons alluded to above this seems unlikely. The scholarly and popular view of the Internet as social amplifier seems more likely to be at play here: that is, it helps those who have some pre–existing interest in civic affairs to pursue them more conveniently (Aday, *et al.*, 2010; Bimber, 1998). More to the point, we still do not know whether Azerbaijanis are using the Internet for civic purposes. On the one hand, they could be engaging in forms of online civic activity such as coordinating volunteerism, club meetings, and charity donations. On the other, they may prefer to conduct such activities offline, in which case the Internet–civic link would be purely associational (and perhaps explained by one or more hidden variables not measured in this study).

Other theoretical explanations exist as well. Shirky (2011) distinguishes between the "instrumental" and "environmental" views of global Internet freedom: the former stresses the use of particular tools to access information, which will then lead to demands for democratic reform; while the latter is tool–agnostic and emphasizes the strengthening of a strong public sphere through conversation. The substantive discussions in the environmental formulation need not be explicitly political, but when opportunities for mobilization arise, the ongoing conversation can be shifted to civic and political matters. This conjecture is also roughly consistent with Zuckerman's (2008) "cute cat theory" of digital activism, which holds that the desire to consume frivolous content online (such as cute cat videos) also makes massive social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter useful for activists looking to organize and advertise. Applying these concepts to the present case, a strong interest on the part of civically engaged Azerbaijanis in accessing politically sensitive content online would support the instrumental view. On the other hand, if they turn out to be more interested in discussing and creating online content that is not necessarily political, that would support the environmental view. But even in that case, it would still be necessary to demonstrate that the cute cat culture (or its local equivalent) actually facilitates civic participation from time to time.

Limitations

We acknowledge that we are speculating about the intentions of political and civic engagement by Azerbaijani citizens. Qualitative study could certainly shed light on the motivations to engage and the Internet's role therein. Moreover, some of these models did not explain a great deal of variance; however, as this study was merely exploratory, future studies could consider other factors. As more Azerbaijanis engage in Internet activities, future analyses can consider the different activities' role in political and civic engagement.

Additionally, there may be other barriers to engagement for which we did not account in this study. Some citizens of former Soviet states simply lack the temporal or financial resources to engage (Denhardt, *et al.*, 2009; Bădescu, *et al.*, 2004), and the experience of forced political and civic engagement during Soviet times may discourage some older citizens from engaging (Babajanian, 2005; M.M. Howard, 2002). Similarly, older post–socialist citizens may lack altruism (Babajanian, 2006), be prone to apathy (Badescu and Uslaner, 2003; M.M. Howard, 2002), and hold anti–social attitudes (van der Meer, *et al.*, 2010), which may discourage civic engagement. These values may color the civic participation behaviors of post–Soviet peoples today. This study is informed in part by the asumption that forms of civic participation and how citizens perceive them are different in authoritarian states than in democracies, because citizens of authoritarian states have been socialized by the experience of living and participating in the politics of the previous regime (Lussier, 2011).

Conclusion

By focusing on the effects of the Internet on civic engagement outside of the government as well as political engagement with the government in an authoritarian state, we see that the Internet is associated with forms of public civic engagement (and some forms of private civic engagement) but not with political engagement. Future research should explore the motivations for such engagement — Internet–associated and not, as well as contextualizing engagement in the larger political landscape of Azerbaijan.

Internet optimists may find some support for their positions in our results. However, we would caution against the interpretation that the Internet is a decontextualized herald of civic engagement and democracy in authoritarian states. While we eschew both categorical Internet optimism and pessimism — we view the relationship between digital media and engagement as complicated and multifaceted — our findings offer some grounds for tentative optimism in authoritarian contexts. We hope that the Internet is providing an alternative space for civic engagement in Azerbaijan so that its citizens can have the freedom to express themselves and live without fear. FM

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Notes

1. Rasizade, 2003, p. 127.

2. Henry, 2012, p. 3.

3. Levine, 2007, p. 119.

4. Weintraub, 1997, pp. 4–5.

5. Zdravomyslova and Voronkov, 2002, p. 56.

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