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Turmanidze, Koba; Gabedava, Mariam

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Georgians in the Internet Age: The Profile

By Koba Turmanidze and Mariam Gabedava, Tbilisi

Abstract

Computer literacy and Internet usage have been increasing in Georgia for the past few years. This article looks at the profile of active Internet users based on the 2013 Caucasus Barometer. Specifically, we are interested in describing the social-economic profile of internet users and exploring similarities and differences between the users and non-users in terms of political attitudes and religiosity. We illustrate that the Internet users are more likely to be young residents of the capital, often with higher education. We also show that Internet users are more engaged citizens than non-users: they have a high appreciation for democracy, are critical of the government and display tolerance toward other ethnic groups. At the same time, the Internet users appear to be more religious: they report higher religiosity and observe religious rituals more actively compared to non-users.

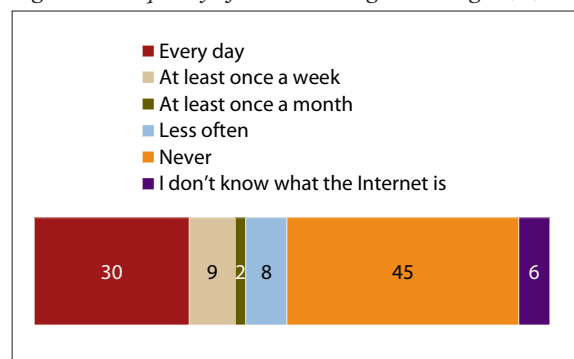
The Connected: Who Are the Users?

This article draws exclusively on the Caucasus Barometer, the annual household survey of the CRRC,¹ which demonstrates that Georgia is steadily catching up in terms of Internet usage. In the past six years, the speed of Georgians connecting to the web has been impressive. While only 13 percent of Georgian households owned a personal computer in 2008, the figure more than tripled to 42 percent in 2013, of which four out of five households are connected to the Internet. Computers are not the only medium for connecting to the web, however, and smart mobile phones are nowadays equally capable devices. Interestingly though, the share of Georgians with activated Internet access on their phones is a mere 13 percent. This low numbers suggests that Internet usage here tends to be more stationary, rather than mobile and portable.

Yet, the high Internet penetration does not mean that every member of a household is equally engaged with the technologies. In the 2013 survey wave, only 47 percent of Georgians report some knowledge of computers, about 39 percent use the Internet at least once a week and 30 percent report using the Internet daily (Figure 1). In the rest of the text we refer to the people, who access the Internet at least once a week, as the Internet users, whereas the rest will fall in the category of the non-users.

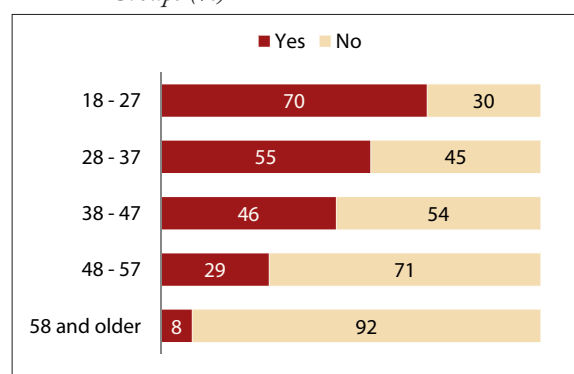
Who are these 39 percent of Georgians? The most common active Internet user in Georgia is an educated young person (18 to 27 years old), belonging to a high social class and living in Tbilisi. Perhaps not surprisingly, 64 percent of Tbilisians use the Internet at least once a week, followed by 49 percent of urban dwellers

Figure 1: Frequency of Internet Usage in Georgia (%)



and a meager 19 percent of rural residents. Moreover, as Figure 2 shows, the younger the respondents are, the higher is the share of active Internet users: 70 percent of 18–27 year olds use the Internet weekly, while the figure declines to 55 percent for those aged 28–37. The activity drops below 50 percent in the next cohort and is a mere 8 percent for those aged 58 and older.

Figure 2: Use the Internet at Least Once a Week? By Age Groups (%)



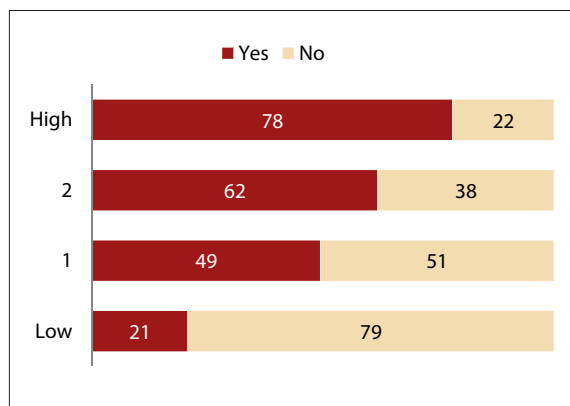
Interestingly, active Internet usage is not contingent on gender, and about 40 percent of both sexes report using

1 The Caucasus Barometer (CB) is a nationwide household survey conducted by CRRC in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia since 2006. Its 8th wave was conducted in Georgia in October–November 2013 with a sample size of 2,133. The CB data is available at <<http://caucasusbarometer.org>>

the Internet at least weekly. Yet, education is an important factor for going online—only 26 percent of those with only secondary education or lower are frequent Internet users, in contrast to 62 percent of those who have higher than secondary education.

There is another interesting trait of the frequent Internet users—they tend to belong to higher social classes. The social class indicator is a composite construct from several variables—education and occupation of the respondent, as well as education of the respondent's parents. Figure 3 indicates that people belonging to a higher social class are more likely to be active users of the Internet: while only 21 percent of the low social class members are the Internet users, among the high class members Internet usage reaches 78 percent.²

Figure 3: Use the Internet at Least Once a Week? By Social Class (%)



Of What Use Is the Internet for Georgians?

Georgians seem to view the Internet as an effective means for connecting with others, mainly with family and friends. The overwhelming majority of the Georgian Internet users are active social networkers, with 72 percent reporting using the sites like Facebook, Google+ and Odnoklassniki to connect with their networks, 33 percent using the Internet for Skype, and 20 percent for e-mail.

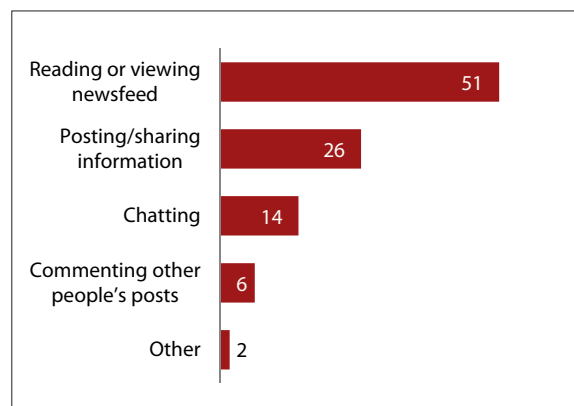
While 53 percent use the Internet to search for varied information, there seems to be little activity in terms of publicly analyzing information and news. Only 3 percent of the Internet users report blogging or being blog readers, and only 2 percent engage in various Internet

2 The social class construct does not incorporate income or any other indicator of material well-being. However, it implies that higher social class means higher material well being. Internet usage seems to be partially influenced by material well-being: out of the 45 percent of the people who never access the Internet, 31 percent mentions no access to a computer, whereas 23 percent say that they do not need the Internet. Only 2 percent reports that Internet cost is the primary the reason for not using it.

discussion fora. Interestingly, however, there seems to be some direct feedback to the information provider, with 9 percent of the Internet users saying they have made a comment on the Internet to a publication.

Georgia does not have a prolific or influential blogosphere and so far the Georgian users do not seem much impressed with twitter either. Instead, Facebook is the digital micro model of Georgia, so much so that the Facebook status updates and discussions make headlines not only in the gossip columns, but also in the mainstream, supposedly more professional media. Based on the Caucasus Barometer data, Facebook is indeed used as an information source—half of the users report that they most frequently view or read newsfeeds, whereas 26 percent of posts or shares information (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Most Frequent Facebook Activities (% of Facebook Users)



The Facebook users are thus an interesting segment of the Georgian Internet users. Their profile is largely the same as that of the frequent Internet users. The level of Facebook activity declines as people age: while 62 percent of 18–27 year olds use Facebook at least once a week, only 3 percent of those aged 58 or older do so. Slightly more females (28 percent) report being weekly Facebook users than males (25 percent), however again, education and social class considerably influence Facebook use. While only 16 percent of those with secondary or lower education are active Facebook users, their number almost triples in the group with higher than secondary education. This difference is even more noticeable when comparing the high and low social class use of Facebook—61 percent of high social class members are active, compared to only 11 percent of low class members.

Connected Citizens are Engaged Citizens

The frequent Internet users have a very interesting profile of political preferences and ideology. One clear difference between the Internet users and non-users is the degree to

which they say they do not know what to answer to various questions when asked about political attitudes. So, the Internet users are more opinionated than the non-users, which we can ascribe to having access to more information. However do their opinions significantly differ from those of the non-users? The short answer is—it depends.

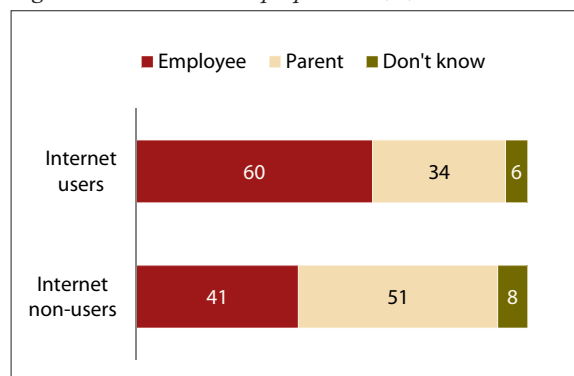
When discussing general issues that assess the current situation in the country, but cannot really be classified as ideological, the opinions of the Internet users are not much different from those of the non-users. There is no significant difference in the shares of the two group members, who think that Georgia's domestic politics is going in the right direction (38 percent of users vs. 34 percent of non-users), or that people like them are treated fairly by the government (54 percent and 49 percent respectively). There is no significant difference between the two groups when it comes to their assessment of how much of a democracy Georgia is currently. A plurality in both groups thinks that Georgia is a democracy with major problems (48 percent of users and 42 percent of non-users), with the second most popular opinion in both groups being that Georgia is a democracy, but with minor problems (29 percent and 27 percent, respectively). It is no surprise then that both groups express willingness to participate in the democratic process in the most familiar manner—they say they would go out to vote if the presidential elections were held next Sunday (72 percent and 74 percent respectively).

However, the avid Internet users are indeed different from the non-users when it comes to more ideologically charged issues. The difference stays significant when we controlled for the influence of the respondent's education and age. The Internet users seem to be considerably more liberal and open. For example, more Internet users approve a woman of their ethnicity marrying an Abkhazian (44 percent) or an Ossetian man (43 percent) than the non-users do (30 percent and 29 percent approval, respectively). Furthermore, the Internet users more often say that Russia is Georgia's main enemy compared to the non-users (48 percent vs. 41 percent). Nevertheless, the Internet users are more inclined towards endorsing marriage with Russians (49 percent vs. 37 percent).

The Internet users appear to be more critical and demanding of the government than the non-users are. They overwhelmingly support the idea that people have the right to openly say what they think (83 percent). The Internet users further believe that people should be critical towards the government (67 percent) and that people should participate in protests against the government to show that they are in charge (52 percent). Correspondingly, 21 percent of the users also believe that supporting the government on every occasion is not important, while only 14 percent of the non-users share this opinion.

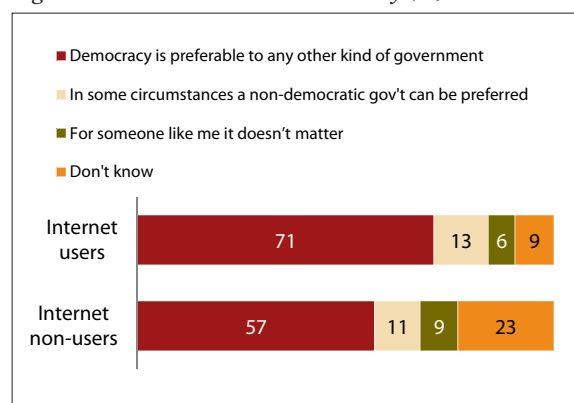
The Internet users seem to be more independent and responsible citizens and consider the government to be accountable to them: 60 percent of the Internet users view the government as their employee, and 34 percent view it as a parent that should take care of its citizens like its children, working to provide for their needs. By contrast, 51 percent of those who do not use the Internet prefer to see the government take care of most of their needs and only 41 percent consider the government as their employee (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Government is people's ... (%)



The Internet users are more loyal to the idea that democracy is the best way of governance, than the non-users are. 71 percent of the Internet users are convinced of democracy's superiority, compared to 57 percent of those who do not use the Internet (Figure 6). One would think that such preference for democracy would also manifest itself in the preferences for foreign policy orientation. While Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations are supported by the majority of the population, the support is more pronounced among the Internet users. Indeed, 67 percent of the Internet users support Georgia joining the NATO and 73 percent support Georgia joining the EU, in contrast to the 53 percent and 60 percent

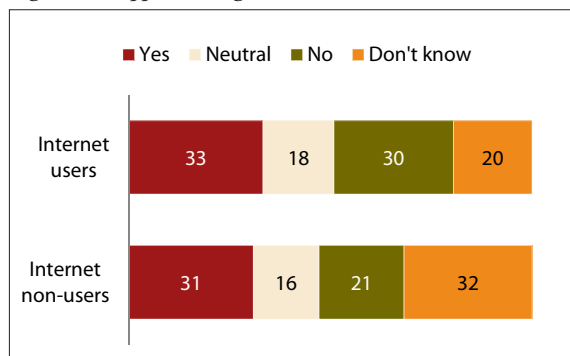
Figure 6: Attitude Towards Democracy (%)



support levels, respectively, among the non-users. Preference for the mandatory foreign language in Georgian schools is an interesting proxy for the political orientation. Here too, there is a consistent preference for English over Russian, but again, this preference is more pronounced among the Internet users.

However, apparently, the exposure to a rich source of information does not necessarily indicate deeper knowledge of the issues. The question regarding the attitude towards Georgia joining the (Russia-led and sponsored) Eurasian Union illustrates this situation. 33 percent of the Internet users report that they support such a move and 20 percent do not approve. Interestingly, a full fifth does not have an opinion, which is a rare exception for this opinionated group of Internet users. The situation is not much different among those who do not use the internet, except that an even larger portion of the group does not know what to answer to this question (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Support Georgia To Join the Eurasian Union? (%)



Is the Internet Connecting with God?

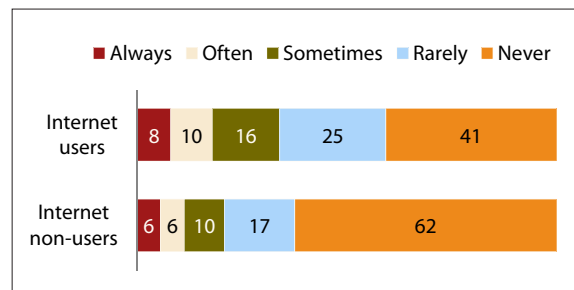
The religiosity of Georgian people should not come as a surprise, given the huge popular trust in religious institutions. The 2013 Caucasus Barometer shows that 72 percent of the population completely trust the Georgian Orthodox Church and over 90 percent state that religion is important in their daily lives. However, one would not intuitively think that a high level of religiosity were contingent with a high level of online activity. The Georgian church is often strict and indeed orthodox in its ways that do not usually espouse progressive ideas and technology. On the other hand, using the Internet and social networking are generally expected to broaden one's horizons and increase the exposure to new ideas and information, rather than just reinforcing existing opinions.

About the Authors:

Koba Turmanidze is president of CRRC-Georgia.
Mariam Gabedava is an independent researcher.

Perhaps unexpectedly, the Georgian Internet users report being considerably more religious and observant of religious rituals than the non-users do. 69 percent of the weekly users consider themselves highly religious (as opposed to just over half of those who are not active Internet users), and 31 percent of them attend religious services at least once a week. Additionally, 51 percent of the users say that religion is very important in their daily lives. 41 percent of the Internet users report that they never fast, as opposed to 62 percent of the non-users (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Frequency Of Fasting When Required By Religious Tradition (%)



So is the Internet bringing Georgians closer to God, or are those already quite religious flocking to the web? It would be misleading to argue either of these positions based on the simple analysis we employ in this article. We observe that the Internet users are more likely to report a higher level of religiosity even when controlled for the influence of education and age. Tracing the causal relations will require further analysis.

To conclude, the Georgian Internet users are more likely to be younger, more educated, and belong to a higher social class compared to the non-users. Yet, combining the seemingly incompatible in the minds of the Internet users remains puzzling: On the one hand, the Internet users have high demand for democracy, are more tolerant to other ethnic groups, perceive the state as serving its citizens, support private ownership and are critical towards the government. On the other hand, the same group shows loyalty to religion in terms of subjective assessment of religiosity and adherence to religious rituals. Considering that the Internet users, due to their exposure to diverse information, have the potential of becoming the drivers of change in the country, it remains to be seen whether democratic values will prevail over traditional norms in the future.