

Digital Authoritarianism and Activist Perceptions of Social Media in Azerbaijan

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The democratizing effect of the internet came under extensive attention on the eve of the popular revolts in Egypt and Tunisia, during which it was believed that social networks transformed the opportunity structures in favor of pro-democracy movements. Developments in these contexts emboldened cyber-optimistic arguments built on earlier theories postulating that the internet facilitates people's exposure to news on political issues and potentially mobilizes those predisposed to politics. Scholars focused on the critical role of Facebook and Twitter in substantially reducing the costs of political communication and coordination – enabling *tech-savvy* youth to connect and disseminate information more quickly – and mobilizing collective identities through shared grievances (Howard and Hussain 2011; Tufekci and Wilson 2012). However, there is a lack of scholarly consensus on the democratizing potential of social media. The prominence of the role of social media in Egypt and Tunisia was disputed by those who claimed that the pre-existing political, economic, and demographic tendencies, such as a softening of Arab regimes in the region or youth bulge, were more consequential factors driving upheavals in the Arab world (Ang et al. 2014; Khondker 2011; Miller 2017). Moreover, studies on non-democracies have increasingly drawn attention to the fact that the Internet can also be a “repression technology,” serving as a “tool to solidify autocratic survival by shaping public opinion as well as to identify dissenters” (Rød and Weidmann 2015, 348).

Social networking sites gained currency in the political arena in Azerbaijan in the early 2010s following pro-democracy mobilizations in the region, although activists had already

started to use the internet for political ends earlier. Political activists used Facebook and Twitter to organize offline assemblies, including mass protests in the capital Baku in 2012-2013 (Bedford 2014). The protests were followed by harsh repressions of organizers as well as pro-democracy activists at large. This severely restricted the activities of any independent organization or individual working on political issues. As a result, social media became the only means to engage in politics by communicating in-between and with the wider public – to the background of stringent state control over traditional media and curtailed assembly rights. At the same time, the regime started to invest in authoritarian digital innovations and significantly enhanced the techniques to dismantle anti-government political activism on social networks (Geybullayeva 2018; Pearce and Kendzior 2012).

How have the crackdown and the government's subsequent efforts to control the digital space affected online political activism in Azerbaijan? What role can and do social networking sites play in a context where authoritarianism is deeply entrenched both online and offline? We shed light on these questions by inquiring into political activist perceptions of social networks' role under digital authoritarianism. We draw on an original survey of a new generation of Azerbaijani activists who mainly entered the stage in the post-2013 period, in which activism was limited to social media platforms, and who have remained active during the period of increased government interference on the internet. As such, we highlight the changing role of social networking sites in the Azerbaijani context. We also contribute to the theoretical discussion about the democratizing potential of social media by showing that social networking sites can no longer be seen as driving collective mobilization but rather contributing to individualization and fragmentation because people use them to broadcast their opinions as low-cost activism.

Theoretical point of departure: cyber-optimism vs. cyber-

pessimism

Research on social media and political participation is largely split between *cyber-optimists*, those who see the internet as having a positive impact on processes of political change, and *cyber-pessimists*, those who believe it does not, some of them even fearing it might consolidate authoritarianism (Soriano 2013). According to mainstream cyber-optimist theories, the properties of digital networks enable personalized expressions to turn into loosely organized networks of those who share common interests – an alternative to traditional collective action or a digital upgrade to it. Extant literature on the context of Western democracies has established a straightforward convergence between online activism and offline political engagement through the mechanisms of reinforcement and mobilization (Nam 2012; Vissers and Stolle 2014). A meta-analysis of 36 studies between 2008 and 2015 demonstrated 82 percent positive coefficients between internet use and participation in political affairs, but a large majority of those studies covered countries that were already democratic (Boulianne 2015). Even “easy political behaviors” online, such as liking and commenting on political content on social media can, for certain people, be “gateway behaviors” to more significant offline political activism (Bode 2017, 7). These low-commitment participants are important for online mobilization as they spread news and information about offline protests.

In non-democratic regimes, social media makes it easier for citizens to bypass the authorities’ informational hegemony and acquire independent information. It also provides a platform for those who would usually be censored or silenced to question the status quo and hold the authorities accountable. Social networking sites and other online communication tools can support pro-democracy movements by “spreading information, reinvigorating participation, and facilitating collective action” (Tucker et al. 2017, 50). In this sense, the internet is believed to have contributed to undermining

authoritarianism during popular mass mobilization in cases like the Arab Spring (Soriano 2013), the 2017 Velvet Revolution in Armenia (Avedissian 2020) and the 2020 protest movement in Belarus (Mateo 2022).

Cyber-pessimists question social media's function as a "liberating technology" (Rød and Weidmann 2015, 338), noting it often rather works as an echo chamber where "users mostly communicate with – and are exposed to content from – like-minded others" (Terren and Borge-Bravo 2021, 101). Thus, it reinforces the ideas of those who are already engaged in political activities and might even increase the gap between the *political* and the *indifferent* (Vromen 2007). In this context, Miller critically refers to digitally mediated political expressions and communications as a part of a "phatic culture," that does not "particularly encourage meaningful conversation, dialogue or a public sphere, let alone social change" (2015, 9).

According to some cyber-pessimists, "the potential of new media to facilitate democracy will inevitably be limited by the question of 'accesses'" (Zhao 2014, 116). This is particularly true in the contexts where censoring and controlling information flows have become central to *authoritarian consolidation* (Moore-Gilbert and Abdul-Nabi 2021; Rød and Weidmann 2015; Sinpeng 2020). Some cyber-pessimists even predict the internet will end up negatively affecting the liberal nature of democratic systems, for example, by damaging critical democratic norms and accelerating the mobilization of anti-democratic forces (Soriano 2013; Hunter 2013).

To sum up, social media can be a tool that facilitates democracy or supports pro-democracy actors. However, "the effects of the Internet on political change depend on the context and the ability of actors who use it" (Soriano 2013, 332). The relationship between social media and political activism is certainly more complex under authoritarian regimes

than cyber-optimist views suggest. Since only scant knowledge exists on the activist perceptions of social networks' role in this kind of setting, bringing more clarity on this matter requires an exploration of local perceptions and practice.

Social media activism and digital authoritarianism in Azerbaijan

Access to information and freedom of expression is generally believed to be key to generating more open, aware, and empowered societies. This is why authoritarian leaders tend to perceive the supply of information that they do not control as a threat. In Azerbaijan, the regime has gradually ensured its monopoly on this arena to ensure it effectively controls all print and broadcast media, both in terms of ownership and editorial content (Geybullayeva 2021, 3).

It was against this backdrop that the internet appeared as a game-changer for Azerbaijani activists in the 2000s and became the main battlefield between alternative points of view and dominant state narratives. Social networks were still not popular, and only a small portion of the population, mainly middle-class and educated Baku residents, was on the internet. Still, a myriad of blogs appeared on the internet, filling what was called the *blogosphere* with various topics such as arts, culture, literature, and society. Interestingly, among them, the most active and popular blogs were political (Sidorenko and Geybullayeva 2010, 6). Although some political organizations had websites, even opposition leaders relied on blogging to voice their opinions.^[1] The ruling elite either ignored or tolerated the online activities of regime dissenters through the 2000s due to the low internet penetration rate (Pearce 2015).

However, the speedy dissemination of critical content and its potential to mobilize youth made the regime feel increasingly threatened. It seemingly saw the need to target online media in more decisive ways. The most notable case reflecting the

turning point in the regime's response to oppositional online activism was the imprisonment of two popular activists and bloggers in 2009. Although they were released a year later following campaigns by civil society, and Western pressure, the repression of activists contributed to political apathy among internet users (Pearce and Kendzior 2012). It was a showcase of offline repercussions for online activities.

The rise of social networking sites – Facebook and Twitter – in the early 2010s replaced blogging with microblogging and paved the way for intensified online political vibrancy, intellectual and dissenting exchange, and also political humor as an effective form of catching the public's attention and sympathy to drive change (Pearce and Hajizada 2014). Facebook was making it easier for activists to create large public and closed discussion groups, set up events, and promulgate ideas and content through popular pages, such as *Hamamtimes*, *Heydər Əliyev Adına Səhifə* [Page named for Heydar Aliyev] and *AzTVdən seçmələr* [Picks from AzTV]. Twitter hashtags allowed them to elevate their topics to trends and increase access to political information, such as #BakuProtests in early 2013. YouTube helped them visualize their activities for a wider audience.

It was the time when nascent youth movements with no political party affiliations, such as *NİDA* [Exclamation] and *Azad Gənclər* [Free Youth], and youth activists intended to translate social media activity into offline public engagement. This led to the rise and fall of the protest movement in 2013. At its peak, more than 20 thousand people on Facebook clicked to confirm their participation in one of the protests against numerous non-combat casualties of young conscripts. Although the actual level of offline participation was much lower, even online confirmation of attendance was considered consequential as a visible expression of support by citizens despite political risks. The protests subsequently succeeded in their demand for ousting the country's defense minister due to fatal mismanagement in the army – but the

protest's anti-government uproar was heavily suppressed. The authorities imprisoned the movement's leaders and intimidated their fellow activists both offline and online, including malicious trolling and meme campaigns against them (Pearce and Hajizada, 2014, 80). Under a bolstered climate of fear, participation in protests declined, and social networks did not help activists gain public support for their subsequent assemblies. On the contrary, political participation in protests after this point diminished.

Several contextual factors collided with the potential of social media for democracy activists. First, there was no tangible evidence of a connection between internet use and public political activism in Azerbaijan. An analysis of public opinion poll data from 2011-2013 did not find any association between internet use and public political engagement, although there was a relationship between the former and some forms of civic engagement (Pearce et al. 2014). Along with building a repressive state apparatus and curtailing freedoms, the ruling elite successfully sustained the population's political apathy through hegemonic discourse framing pro-democracy political assemblies in juxtaposition to the country's stability (Bedford 2014, 7). Survey results from 2013 showed that as few as 21 percent of respondents said that people should participate in protest actions, while 57 percent said people should not (Caucasus Barometer 2013). The absence of a tradition of collective political action at the onset of 2013 developments limited the mobilizing effect of social media.

Second, the authorities were also quick to leverage social media affordances and make malign use of them to hijack oppositional trend-setting activities (Goyushov and Huseynli 2019; Bedford and Vinatier, 2019). On the eve of the 2013 protests, the distribution of kompromat and personal memes targeting the key dissenting activists were among such online practices. The repertoire of such authoritarian digital practices was further enriched in the years to come, and, as a result, internet freedom, in particular, has gone from bad to

worse (IREX 2019; Freedom House 2023; Reporters Without Borders 2023). The development of digital authoritarianism is illustrated by the regime's investment in authoritarian digital innovations and significantly enhanced techniques to dismantle anti-government political activism on social networks. In 2019, a Facebook data scientist-turned-whistleblower, Sophie Zhang, flagged an Azerbaijani network of thousands of fake accounts, which "produced approximately 2.1m negative, harassing comments" targeting political activists, government critics, and independent media in a three-month period (Wong 2021). This troll network was orchestrated by the ruling New Azerbaijan Party and the Ministry of Interior (Nimmo et al. 2022; Wong and Harding 2021).

Third, the authorities hindered information flows by blocking access to oppositional news websites and social media. Increasingly many online actors have faced different types of digital attacks since 2017–18, which resulted in huge losses in terms of both deleted content and followers (Geybullayeva 2018). Another new trend is restricted access to the internet. This became especially notable during the Second Karabakh War in 2020 when internet users had little or no digital access to social media platforms and some communication apps because the state blocked them (Azernetwatch 2020; Nahmadova 2021).

In 2021, hundreds of Azerbaijani dissidents and journalists were identified as targets of Pegasus spyware – a sophisticated mass surveillance technology purchased by Azerbaijan to develop their surveillance capacity (Patrucic and Bloss 2021). These practices contributed to the increasing *digital insecurity* of activists. In 2021, before and after the feminist march in central Baku, the Facebook accounts of organizers were hacked, and their personal audio-visual contents were leaked in the same account and in large pages connected to law enforcement (Shahmarzade 2021; Giyasbayli 2021). In 2022, Facebook's report evinced that Azerbaijani security services were behind the hacking of known female activists' accounts and leaking their intimate content online

(Nimmo et al. 2022). Although using kompromat and sex tapes to manipulate public opinion and discredit activists is not new in the repertoire of authoritarian offensive methods, social media has provided “an effective and fast channel” for their public circulation (Pearce 2014, 64). This has inflicted a markedly discouraging effect on women’s political participation.

Nevertheless, political activists’ audiences have multiplied over the past decade, given the overall increase in the internet penetration rate, 85 percent of the Azerbaijani population was online in 2020 – rising from 17 percent in 2008, and social network use has increased gradually. Academics and pundits alike are increasingly referring to social networking sites as the sole place for expressing dissent in the country. Yet, whether this could translate into offline political activism is doubtful as studies on Azerbaijan and non-democracies elsewhere suggest a potentially discouraging effect of social networks on protest participation (Ang et al. 2014; Pearce and Kendzior 2012). As for now, Azerbaijan remains the least democratic country in the South Caucasus despite having the highest internet penetration rate in the region (Nahmadova 2021). Against this background, this study will contribute to a better understanding of how political activists perceive the role and perspectives of social media in the context of bolstered digital authoritarianism.

Method

A non-probability sampling technique was employed for data collection from self-identifying political activists who were initially selected based on their participation in political events such as protests and campaigns. The criteria for sampling was the new generation of activists – mostly those who began their activism after the protests and state backlash of 2013. One of the authors of this study directly distributed a web-based survey to the activists online. The snowball

method was subsequently used to reach more activists. The survey was generated in a secure platform, and no personally-identifiable information was requested from the respondents. The series of closed-ended questions concerned their motivations and activities on social networking platforms, their perceptions of the impact of social media on online and offline activism, and their experiences of online and offline consequences of social media activism.

In addition to the known difficulties of conducting political research in authoritarian contexts, a major challenge in Azerbaijan's case was the cautious treatment of the survey link due to the regularized phishing attacks against activists. The trust for the author disseminating the survey, who was known to the majority of respondents, reduced the suspicion. As a result, 44 responses were collected (68% response rate) – not an insignificant number given the small size of the activist population in Azerbaijan. Although some political organizations exist, they have no more than a handful of active members, and most known young activists pursue their activities individually – mostly online. It is important to note that due to the non-random sampling method used, the sample may not be representative of all political activists in Azerbaijan. However, the findings, as described below, provide valuable insights into the perceptions of a large number of activists and contribute to the understanding of the role of social media in political participation under digital authoritarianism in Azerbaijan.

Results and Discussion

Starting with respondent characteristics, overall, 44 activists participated in the survey: 73% male and 27% female. Although additional efforts were made to reach female and non-binary activists, the result reflects the wider gender disbalance in the political domain.^[2] All survey participants were under 35 years of age, with 45 percent of them being under the age of 25. Individual activists, as opposed to those

with an organizational affiliation, accounted for 67 percent of the respondents. As many people see political organizations as ineffective, individuality has become a common feature of activism in Azerbaijan. Activists resorted to social networks, mainly Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and Tiktok. 87 percent of the activist respondents indicated having over a thousand followers on their personal account, and 43 percent of all survey participants have more than five thousand followers, inclusive of all social networking sites they use.

Table 1. Social media usage among the surveyed activists.^[3]

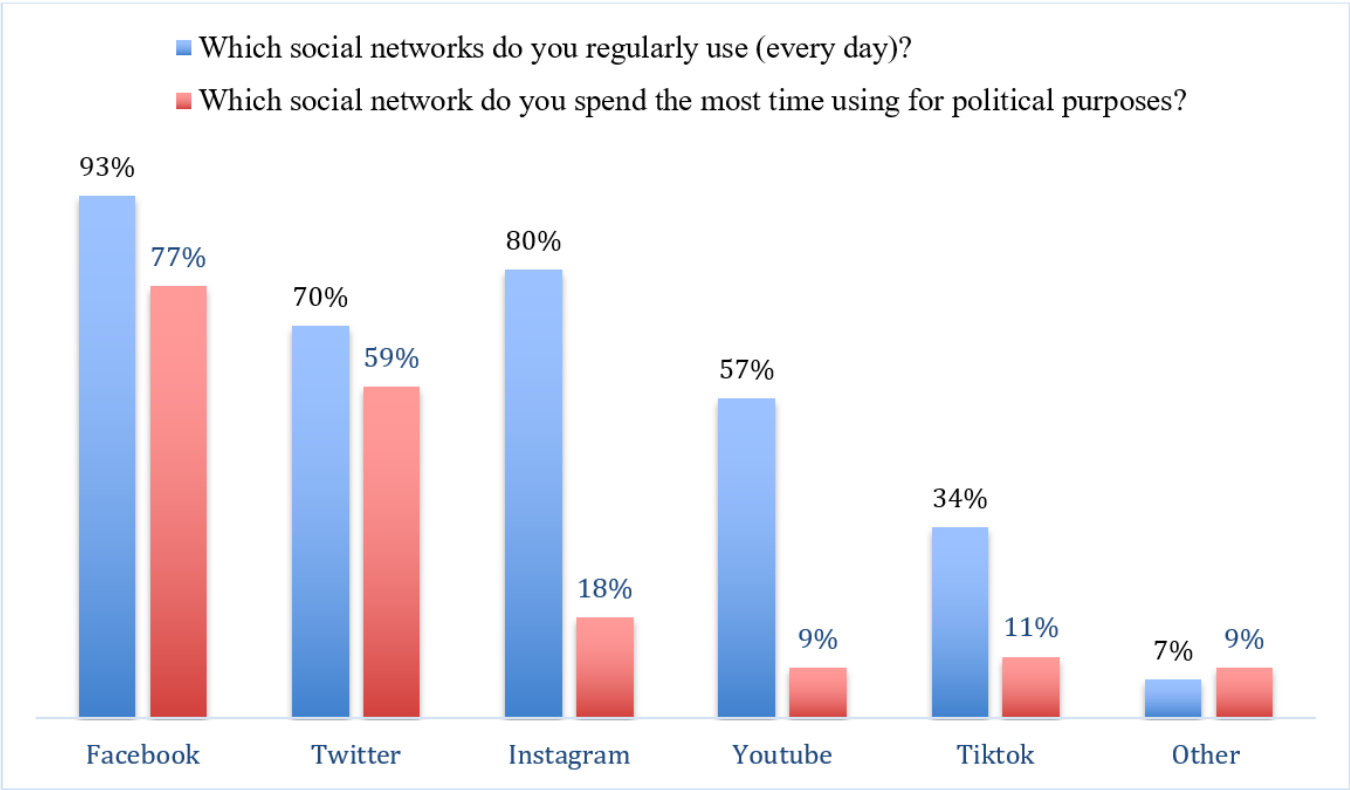
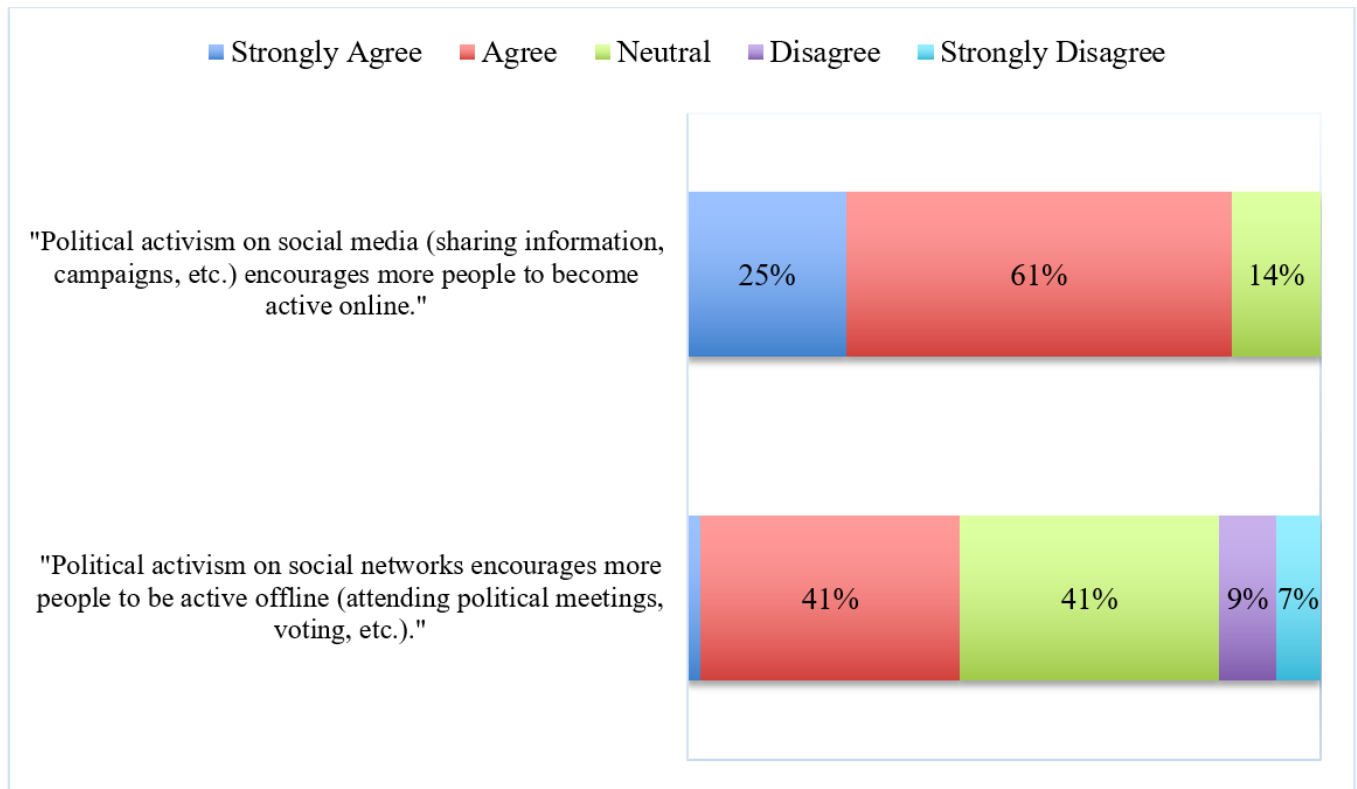


Table 1 reveals that some social networks, Facebook and Twitter, are used for political purposes more than others. Notwithstanding the rising popularity of Instagram, YouTube, and Tiktok among the population, activists did not perceive these platforms as useful for political purposes. This might imply that the affordances of social media – the practical and imagined properties of them – matter in activists’ choices of daily and political use. Facebook and Twitter allow speedy distribution of information to friends/followers, while the

others require audiovisual content production. In addition, some platforms, notably Instagram, are considered more personal than political. When asked what they use social media for, all of the respondents chose the response of “following developments and being informed,” and other commonly referred responses were “sharing my opinions” (77 percent) and “sharing news” (73 percent). Only half of the respondents, 52 percent, stated their purpose of using social media as “political coordination and campaigning.”

The survey results are indicative of three patterns in the activists’ perceptions and use of social networking platforms, and these perceptions are, to some extent, in conflict. First, cyber-optimism still prevails in the Azerbaijani new oppositional generation’s political spectrum. 86 percent of activists agreed with the statement that social media activism encourages more people to become active online (see Table 2). However, this belief is more ambivalent when it comes to the offline effects. Fewer of them, 43 percent, think that it encourages more people to become active offline, and the majority of the rest expressed a neutral stance. The latter responses are not surprising due to the marked decline of public political assemblies despite the increased number of followers of political personalities over the years.

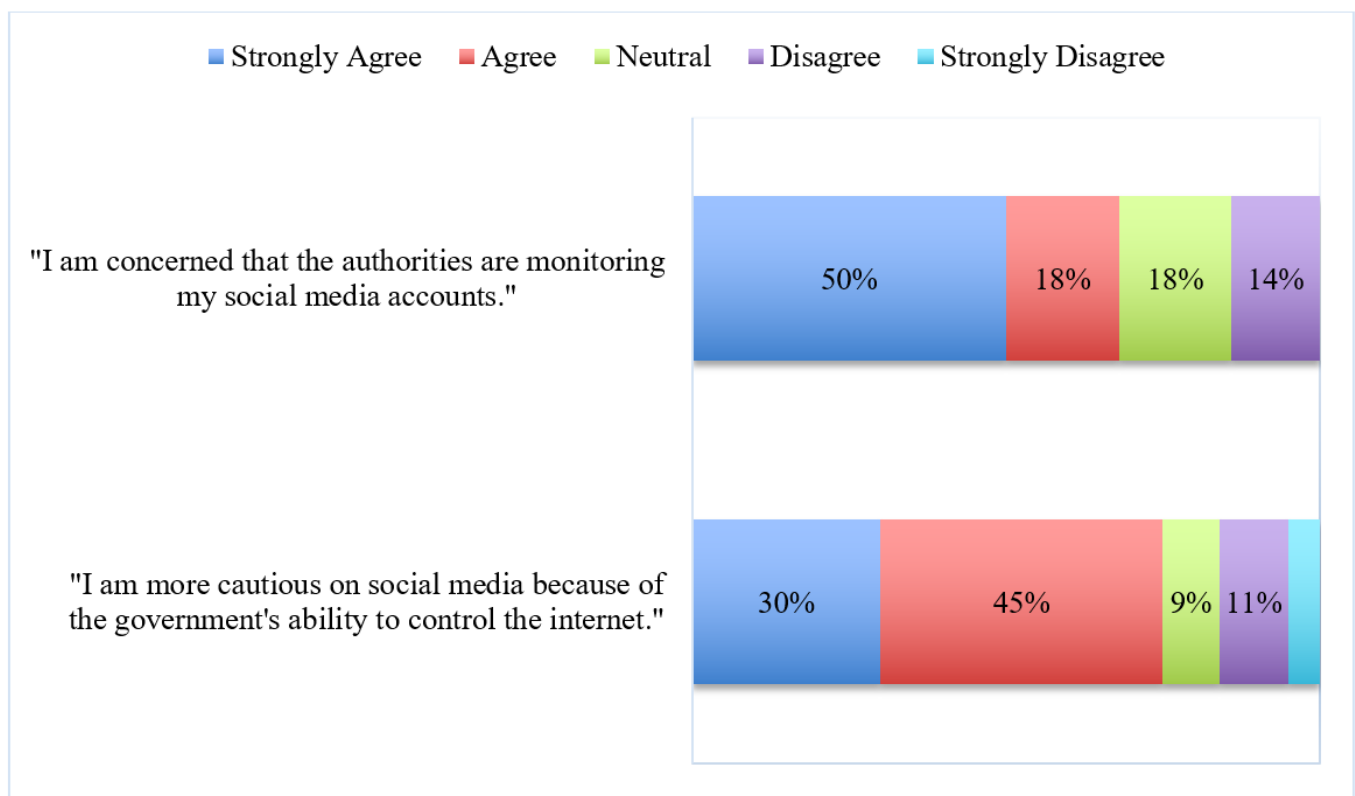
Table 2. Surveyed activists’ perceptions of the influence of social media activism on others.



Second, the new generation of activists under digital authoritarianism treats social media with caution. Over the past decade, the Azerbaijani authorities have, as discussed above, significantly invested in developing online surveillance and hacking capacities. Such practices have encouraged hesitation and caution in activists' use of social media, as reflected in the survey responses (see Table 3). When asked about their opinions on state surveillance, 68 percent noted their concern over the government's surveillance of their online accounts and activities. 75 percent confirmed that they exercise caution on social media because of the government's ability to control the internet. Another interesting finding of the survey was related to social networks' properties of direct communication, which has been particularly emphasized in the literature. Slightly more than half of the respondents (52 percent) do not use social media chat boxes for political communication. Activists sometimes preemptively avoid using online means to publicize their planned political activities, i.e., protests, so that the authorities would not be prepared to quell them. In addition, activists' online political behavior may also be affected by

the fact that their activity comes with potential risks on a personal level as well. For example, young activists interviewed in 2014 noted that socially mediated political visibility also invited abusive comments from people in their wider circles and caused them “relationship turbulence” and unfriending (Pearce et al. 2018, 1320).

Table 3: Surveyed activists’ risk perceptions of online surveillance.

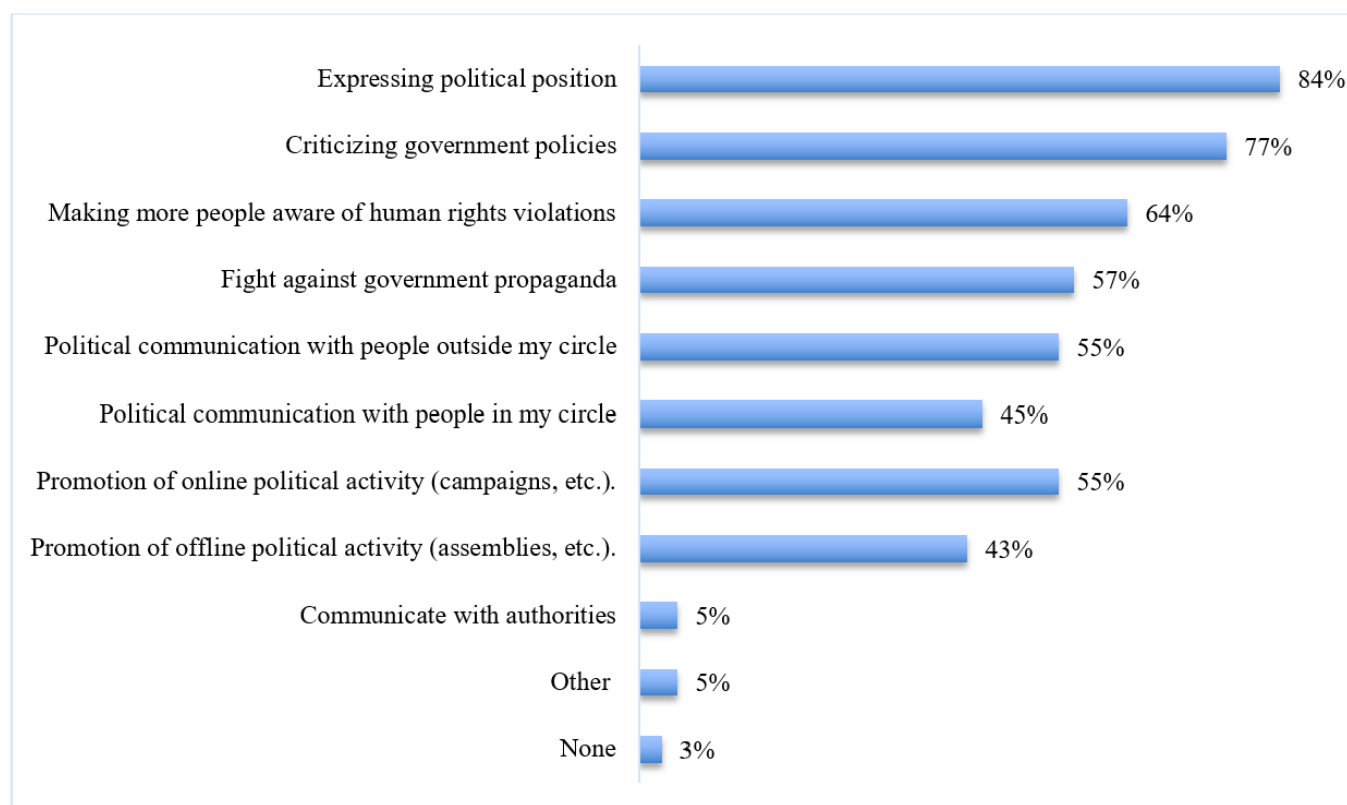


Third, perhaps as a sign of continuity in motives of using online mediums, most activists (84 percent) indicated their primary political activity on social media as expressing their positions (see Table 4). The other commonly referred motives were criticizing government policies (77 percent) and making more people aware of human rights violations (64 percent). Activists display their opinions to a large audience to gain visible and invisible support (Pearce et al. 2018). To this end, social networking sites provide activists with a sense of imaginary collectivity in the context of individualized activism and few actual youth political organizations with

little membership base. At the same time, sharing information and expressing opinions on developments are seen as one of limited tools of political action with the goal of change, rather than a means of political communication.

However, these practices come with multiple side effects, one of which is feeling the personal urge to comment on every political development, hence getting stuck in the virtual realm. Using social media mainly to express positionality might also create self-complacency for an activist. They receive a number of likes, comments, and other kinds of interactions, mainly from like-minded people, but because of the threats connected to online political actions, they believe they are in fact supported by bigger audience, who cannot openly register that support. A previous study among Azerbaijani activists suggested that such invisible support is often, in fact, imaginary without any substantiation (Pearce et al. 2018, 1322).

Table 3. Activists' use of social media for political purposes.



Another risk associated with the latter pattern of expressionist social media use is the creation of echo chambers, occurrences of inner conflicts, and deepening of cleavages within the small oppositional population – a tendency that has already been visible. Thus, instead of alleviating some of these challenges by easing public communication, social media has created a fertile ground for deeper divisions and dramas within and between traditional opposition groups and the new generation of activists. As Pearce puts it, “in fact, in authoritarian media systems, the internet and social media are even more rumor and scandal-laden than traditional media” (2015, 3).

Conclusion

Since the 2013 crackdown on pro-democracy youth groups, political activism in Azerbaijan has notably individualized. A new generation of opposition-minded activists has been pushed into an *internet trap* or virtual *ghetto* in which all political expressions are limited to social networks. Activists spend a lot of time on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Tiktok – and low-cost engagement, such as expressing dissenting opinions to a markedly large audience online, offers them a feeling of complacency. Critical literature suggests that social media platforms undoubtedly enable connectivity but not collectivity, while the latter is a vital element of political action. Our research has demonstrated that even the connectivity function is questionable in the case of Azerbaijan, as activists hesitate to use social media properties, particularly chatboxes, for political purposes. In activist perceptions, social media serves them to activate more people online but with limited impact offline.

Our study illustrates that the development of digital authoritarianism in Azerbaijan has shaped the perceptions of social media among activists. It is evident that the regime has hijacked digitally mediated avenues of political expression through strategies including mass trolling,

sophisticated surveillance, website blocking, and more. One key to authoritarian leaders' lasting power is that they successfully turn politics into a *non-issue* for large sections of the population. When people do not see how elections or politics matter, they do not care about changing the government (Bedford 2017). Subsequently, online political activists become specific targets for state repression and, as such, have to be extremely cautious when employing various visibility strategies. As a result, social media seems to have lost some of its potential and relevance for political activism and organization in Azerbaijan. It does not enable political activists to challenge the status quo of authoritarian rule.

In the absence of organizational structures to support coordinated online and offline activities, our survey results also show that activists mostly use social networks to broadcast their opinions, while there is limited evidence to suggest that such expressions generate collective identities. Instead, the reality that the social networks' role has been downgraded into platforms to express opinions for one's own audience of like-minded people has repercussions in terms of fragmentation and more individuality. This is regularly manifested among a new generation of activists during various emotive political developments, such as the Second Karabakh War, when opinions on the country's military campaign were vastly divided, and meaningful communication was absent on social networks. In fact, in response to the questions concerning online and offline consequences of digital political activism, one of the most common responses was a dissolution of acquaintanceship. Moreover, in line with the previous studies, regular dissemination of information on human rights violations, including job losses, arrests, and torture, further alienates ordinary people from activism – a key intergenerational dilemma remains for political activists.

Another trend instead seems to be that online activism in Azerbaijan is becoming depoliticized as the new segment of

civic activists, broadly, are eschewing issues seen as explicitly *political* (human rights, freedom of speech, democratization) to ensure greater room for maneuvering. This development suggests an interesting topic for further research.

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Notes:

[1] The blogs of Popular Front Party chairman Ali Karimli, former Musavat Party chairman Isa Gambar and Republican Alternative chairman İlgar Mammadov are still accessible online (<https://akarimli.wordpress.com/page/22/>; <http://isagambar.blogspot.com/>; <https://ilgarmammadov.livejournal.com/>).

[2] Moreover, the non-response rate was higher among female activists due to the reasons elaborated above regarding state harassment of women activists in particular.

[3] Although Telegram has become popular in Azerbaijan, it is mainly a messaging service, hence not considered as social media.