Internet Censorship: Access, Use, and Restriction in Azerbaijan

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The internet now has as much strategic importance as other media in Azerbaijan. Internet usage has skyrocketed in recent years, with almost 80% of the total population being Internet users in 2021 (Economist Intelligence Group 2020). Social media penetration is lower with only 42% of the internet user population, but over 600,000 people joined social media from 2020 to 2021 (DataReportal 2021). This 16% increase is partly related to the COVID-19 crisis and lockdowns as more people started changing their internet usage habits. It is thus no wonder then that the government is keen on controlling this rapidly growing source of information. Such control has also had other benefits since the beginning of the pandemic and during the 44-day war. The government leveraged social media and internet access to avoid panic or unwanted attention to specific events.

This paper aims to bring attention to the different ways the Azerbaijani government is leveraging the internet to silence any criticism. The problem is double sided. Citizens, journalists, and activists alike face an expensive and sometime inaccessible internet. At the same time, retribution for online activities is common and self-censorship is becoming the norm. Journalists in particular are under constant threat as the government's crackdown on press freedom has strengthened over the years.

Internet access

Like in most parts of the world, the internet has become a source of information for both younger and older generations. Azerbaijan has the highest penetration rate among the three

South Caucasus countries, with more than 78% of all households having access to the internet. The same goes for mobile internet access. Mobile broadband subscribers have increased over the last few years as LTE coverage has improved. AzerCell's LTE technology covered over 70% of the country as of 2019. According to Ramin Guluzade, the then Commissioner to the Republic of Azerbaijan at the International Telecommunication Union, over 97% of the territory was covered by 3G and over 90% by 4G technologies in 2020. However, this somewhat high rate should not be seen as proof of equal access. The reality is that access to the internet depends on the region, and even in the capital, connection speeds are slow and prices high. For example, according to the regional Internet governance organization, Azerbaijan Internet Forum, slower connections ranging from 5 to 6 Mbps cost up to 20 times more in Azerbaijan compared to Georgia and Russia.

The 2016 Strategic Roadmap for Telecommunication and Information Technology Development aimed to boost internet access and usage by investing in connectivity and telecommunications infrastructure. One of the goals included increasing the average fixed broadband speed to 20 Mbps by 2020. However, research from a UK telecommunications company shows that, in Azerbaijan, the mean download speed in 2020 was at only 4.89 Mbps, more than twice slower than that of Georgia (Cable 2020).

Internet providers are also restricted in their price-setting. For broadband, 40 players are on the market, but AzerTelecom and Baktelecom control all wired access to homes. Despite no specific licenses required to provide Internet, and most providers being private businesses, the price to enter the market is high. Private telecom providers must pay high tariffs to use common communication infrastructure (Strategic Roadmap 2016). These conditions reveal a lack of competition in the market.

Finally, international bandwidth is quite restricted and slow.

As of 2016, only two players shared the market: Delta Telecom LTS and AzerTelecom LLC with 90% and 10%, respectively. Moreover, as the country is landlocked and far away from regional and intercontinental fiber optic submarine cable systems, international internet capacity is low at 34 kilobits per second in 2016 compared to Turkey's 68 and neighboring Georgia's 92 kilobits per second (ADB 2020).

Discussions about fiber Internet have been taking place for a few years. The main project is that of constructing a fiber cable under the Caspian Sea connecting Europe to Asia. The first one is being jointly constructed by AzerTelecom and Kazakhstan's Transtelecom and KazTransCom. The original plans projected its construction to be finished by late 2021. Another similar joint project is under discussion between AzerTelecom and TurkmenTelecom, including Turkmenistan in this new Digital Silk Road (Trend 2021). By adding Baku to the Global Internet Map (TeleGeography Maps 2021), Azerbaijan could attract some international content providers and, in the long term, increase competition in this market.

However, fiber will not solve the speed issue. As mentioned in the Strategic Roadmap, the main challenge in increasing the average broadband speed is to replace the current copper infrastructure with fiber. Most broadband cable is made of copper, which is not the most efficient material to carry a signal. Replacing it, however, carries heavy capital expenditures. Therefore, the 2016 Strategic Roadmap prioritized mobile broadband infrastructure, especially for rural areas, as it is much easier and cheaper to deploy.

Internet usage

Internet usage rates differ highly among regions. As expected, rural areas use the internet less, be it mobile or fixed broadband. The two main reasons for this divide are the lack of coverage and the lower internet literacy rates in rural areas.

A research survey was carried out on a sample of 40 Azerbaijani citizens interviewed on their views of the local media environment (Seyidov 2020). All participants had access to the Internet and started using social media regularly. The results showed that although 35 out of 40 mentioned TV as the leading news source, 32 mentioned social media as their primary source of information. While national TV news is seen as exaggerated, the internet is a more reliable source of information. Furthermore, 20% of the interviewees stated that they use social media to confirm or negate 'suspicious' TV-relayed news. Thus, the researcher concludes that information relayed via the internet or social media was seen as a corroborative tool for TV news.

During the pandemic, the internet also became a critical tool in delivering education during lockdowns all over the country. However, most rural regions are still on an old ADSL-type connection. This divide, coupled with a lack of access to computers and low Internet literacy, makes the internet an unreliable replacement for offline education (Xeberler 2021). Furthermore, even when a student has access to a reliable and higher-speed connection to the internet, the current infrastructure is overloaded due to the increase in demand. In April 2020, country-wide reports of slow internet and disruptions in the network revealed the industry's lack of preparedness for increased demand.

Internet restrictions and the crackdown on press freedom

On November 11, 2020, the Ministry of Transport, Communications and High Technologies declared the end of internet access restrictions implemented since the beginning of the 44-day war starting September 27. According to the Open Observatory of Network Interference, an open-source project that monitors Internet censorship all over the world, many social media platforms were not accessible in Azerbaijan from September to November 2020 (Azerbaijan Internet Watch 2021a). The same had been done before during the conflict escalation

in 2016. While such measures might have made sense in the context of war, some other restrictions on the internet are not uncommon.

Digital surveillance and harassment are slowly becoming a favorite tool for instilling fear in online spaces by autocratic governments worldwide. Several independent online news websites have been DDoS-attacked over the years to restrict citizens' access to opposition sources (Geybullayeva 2018). Evidence shows that the Azerbaijani government has spent large amounts of money on acquiring equipment to restrict access to certain websites, such as the Israeli Allot Service Gateway's Deep Packet Inspection hardware worth 3 million USD (Qurium 2018). Qurium and Azerbaijan Internet Watch also linked a series of phishing attacks in early 2020 and 2021 to an IP address from the Ministry of Transport, Communications and High Technologies. The emails' objective was to install spyware and malware on the journalists' computers. The malware would enable the hacker to record from the webcam, execute Windows commands, and extract and upload files from the hacked computer (Azerbaijan Internet Watch 2021b).

The government has often used media to silence criticism of its policies. This feature was particularly present during the first few months of the COVID-19 crisis. As the crisis had large-scale impacts in all countries, President Aliyev declared in his speech on March 19, 2020, that some media was engaging in "open provocations" and working "from the very fifth column, from the enemies who are among us" (Azertag 2020). The "isolation" of these media representatives was called a "historical necessity."

From then onwards, several opposition members were arrested on different charges such as violation of quarantine or even assault. For example, Ibrahim Vazirov, a journalist for the online journal Kanal24, was arrested on April 13, 2020, for disobeying police officers, just after having written about

the challenges of COVID-19 in the city of Shirvan (OC-Media 2020). The parliament also passed a change in the definition of *prohibited information*. Like other developments in the region (e.g., Russia), this move enables the government to have more power over any critics. These actions against the safety of journalists have been reported many times in the Council of Europe (CoE). According to the data available on the CoE platform, 41 active alerts are currently unresolved in Azerbaijan. Many of these cases involve the unruly detainment of journalists or the founders of local independent online newspapers.

The Azerbaijani government uses multiple techniques to control its citizens' access to and use of the internet. There are two main ways of restricting access to a website, both of which are legal in Azerbaijan. The government blocks websites using their IP addresses, tampering with the DNS (Domain Name System), or by blocking the website URL using a proxy. These techniques are particularly useful when dealing with websites out of reach and hosted on a foreign server in, for example, the European Union. In this case, the websites are not taken off the internet. Instead, they are blocked from being accessed within the national borders. Taking down a website is a much more difficult task, primarily if it is hosted abroad. The only way for a user to access IP-blocked websites is to download a VPN. URL blocking is a technique that focuses on identifying website URLs and keywords included within the URL address. This is usually considered a more advanced technique than IP blocking and it is becoming more and more popular. Another strategy would be to completely take down a website. While this task would not be difficult for any Azerbaijani domain, the same cannot be said about foreign-hosted ones. Any attempt at crashing a website abroad is a crime in most countries.

Content restriction is widespread overall as the Azerbaijani government censors any website that allegedly poses a threat to its security. Now that Article 13.3.6 of the *Law on*

Information, Informatization, and Access to Information has been modified, the Ministry of Transport, Communications, and High Technologies can freely and legally restrict access to websites deemed problematic without any court decision required (Azerbaijan Internet Watch 2020). This makes it even easier for the government to use more advanced techniques, such as keyword analysis, to immediately block any website with its name or a description including specific words.

All these acts threaten online press freedom, but it does not stop there as other citizens are also victims of this crackdown. While the internet can act as a tool for social justice by helping get attention to issues that local police would not take seriously, it can also turn any citizen into a target for simply liking a post on Facebook. For example, several Facebook users had been brought to the police station for further questioning for their posts about COVID-19 in Azerbaijan (JAMNews 2020). The fear of getting arrested for such small things is instilled in the population and leads to widespread self-censorship.

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