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Cosmopolitanism and Suppression of Cyber-dissent in the Caucasus: Obstacles and Opportunities for Social Media and the Web

Brian J. Bowe
Western Washington University, brianj.bowe@wwu.edu

Michigan State University

Robin Blom
Michigan State University

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Brian J. Bowe, Eric Freedman and Robin Blom

Around the world, social media offer an informal virtual space for citizens who feel disenfranchised to connect socially. But for those who live in countries such as the three former Soviet republics of the Caucasus — where free expression is curtailed and official news outlets are under government censorship — information and communication technology (ICT) offers an increasingly important alternative vehicle for political expression. Recent developments in Tunisia, Egypt, and Iran demonstrate how blogging and social media tools may fulfill a crucial role for non-journalists and oppositional groups that journalism serves in more democratic societies. This article considers the use of ICT in the development of cosmopolitanism by examining recent events in the Caucasus, including a government investigation into Facebook videos in Georgia, the arrest of bloggers in Azerbaijan, and the blocking of oppositional and independent websites in Armenia. It also discusses how Western information/social network corporations may facilitate dissent, the ethical implications of them doing so when negotiating with authoritarian regimes, and the risks to citizens who are at the receiving end of the consequences of these policies.

Brian J. Bowe is a visiting assistant professor in the School of Communications at Grand Valley State University in Allendale, Michigan (boweb@gvsu.edu). **Eric Freedman** is an associate professor of journalism and is associate dean of International Studies & Programs at Michigan State University (freedma5@msu.edu). **Robin Blom** is a Ph.D. candidate in Media and Information Studies at Michigan State University (blomrobi@msu.edu).

Around the world, social media offer an informal virtual space for citizens who feel disenfranchised to connect socially. But for those who live in countries such as the three former Soviet republics of the Caucasus — where free expression is curtailed and official news outlets are under government censorship — information and communication technology (ICT) offers an increasingly important alternative vehicle for political expression (Deibert et al, 2010) and a potential tool for creating grassroots bonds of solidarity that may aid in the development of a practice-oriented cosmopolitanism. Such a cosmopolitan perspective to political alliances occurs when groups 'construct bonds of mutual commitment and reciprocity across borders through public discourse and socio-political struggle' (Kurasawa, 2004, p. 234). Such bonds are based on recognition of cultural differences in 'criss-crossing webs of affinity between multiple groups from around the world' (2004, p. 239).

The use of ICT by organizations and civic initiatives to convey information and air grievances about governments is exploding, both in countries where free expression is protected and in those where it is curtailed (Karlekar and Cook, 2009). In the latter situations, the Internet is becoming ever more important as an 'engine for protest and mobilization' and a 'crucible in which repressed civil societies can revive and develop' (Morillon and Julliard, 2010, p. 2). Such usees may allow civic movements to organize in ways that foster societal change in a bottom-up fashion, rather than relying on more formal (i.e., top-down) juridical means of achieving results.

This discussion of Internet, new media, and traditional media freedom must be understood in the context of civil society overall, including political and religious rights, transparency and public access to information, and deterrence of fraud and corruption in government. Furthermore, the substitution of a large mass audience for smaller specialized audiences made possible by ICT may require a fundamental revision of earlier theories posited to test questions about mass communication (McQuail, 2010). In this era of mass self-communication using ICT, insurgent political and social movements, as well as large mainstream corporate and political interests, have a stake; that results in a shift of the public sphere from traditional institutions to this new realm of communication (Castells, 2007).

The proliferation of information technology encourages the creation of a society in which the dominant functions and processes are structured around networks (Castells, 1997). These new networks formed by increasing access to ICT have transformed human communication and the power relationships that govern societies, turning media into a social space in which power is determined (Castells, 2007; Hachigian and Wu, 2003). These

network dynamics 'push society towards an endless escape from its own constraints and controls, towards an endless supersession and reconstruction of its values and institutions, towards a meta-social, constant rearrangement of human institutions and organizations' (Castells, 1997, p. 409).

But communication scholars have insufficiently addressed the question of whether this emerging network society fosters the development of a cosmopolitan order. Both Habermas and Kurasawa note the effectiveness of computer-mediated communication for human interaction over long distances, suggesting that such technologies may be useful in the development of cosmopolitanism. This concept of cosmopolitanism may offer researchers examining the use of social media for political organizing an overarching theoretical framework in which to situate their work. Kurasawa's (2007) vision of grassroots cosmopolitanism may provide a context to explore the extent to which advocacy groups use online communications to create bonds among groups. The growing use of social media such as Facebook and Twitter as organizing tools may offer opportunities to test Kurasawa's framework.

Recent developments in Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, Yemen, Libya, and Iran demonstrate how blogging and social media may facilitate a crucial role for non-journalists and oppositional groups — a role that journalism serves in more democratic societies. This article reviews recent events in the Caucasus, including a government investigation into Facebook videos in Georgia, the arrest of bloggers in Azerbaijan, and the blocking of oppositional and independent websites in Armenia. These countries were selected because of their location and their shared legacy of lengthy Soviet rule followed by two decades of independence. Although they have long and distinct national histories, their location puts them in proximity to two countries with highly restricted media and cyber-media systems — Russia and Iran — and to an emerging democracy struggling with questions of how restricted or unrestricted its own media environment should be — Turkey. Recent events in the Caucasus seem to bolster arguments that information and communication technology networks may hold the potential to transform societies in the way they allow citizens to circumvent official government controls on expression (Bowe and Blom, 2010).

However, while social media at times offer opportunities for citizens to evade government controls, activists do not have complete control of the situation and often must rely on Western information and social network corporations to provide the tools that facilitate dissent. Meanwhile, repressive governments do not surrender control easily, using their positions of power and financial resources to establish technological controls to prevent dissemination of information and legal controls to prosecute organizers. The ability of governments to impede such organizing by exercising control of the communication infrastructure suggests that legal frameworks, as Habermas advocated, remain necessary to protect the work toward global justice undertaken by grassroots activists. Given such

regimes' determination and resources to maintain political control, it is important not to raise unrealistic expectations about the imminent impact of ICT on democratisation. What Sambrook (2009, p. 221) writes of the citizen journalism movement in South Korea — 'We have yet to grasp just how powerful this movement is in terms of its longer-term effects on governments and politics in closed societies' — is equally applicable to the effects of ICT on government and politics in closed societies.

MEANS OF CONTROL

The relationship among technology, communication, and power is a contested and conflicted space, as governments exert their structural supremacy over social actors, and those actors resist and challenge such coercive forces in demonstrations of counter-power (Castells, 2007).

Methods employed by governments to circumvent access to specific content from within their territory include: (1) blocking servers, domains, keywords, and IP addresses; (2) compelling Internet sites to register with authorities or establishing a licensing system; (3) setting strict criteria for what content is considered acceptable and unacceptable; (4) expanding libel laws to deter and punish posting of critical material; and (5) surveillance of individual Internet accounts, including policing of cybercafés.

Another method of obstructing online communication is the use of so-called denial of service attacks, which involve forwarding a large number of communication requests to a webpage host. The fake requests subsequently overwhelm the host server, which is unable to react to legitimate requests to access the website. The attacks are an effective tool to block communication, such as happened during the 2005 elections in Kyrgyzstan (OpenNet Initiative, 2005) and when the Russian and Georgian armies squared off in a dispute about the territory of Ossetia (Swaine, 2008).

That does not mean that citizens cannot undermine censorship, as very few countries have taken extreme measures to block Internet communication permanently. Most nations need to provide web access to citizens because of the economic constraints in a globalized market. For instance, businesses need instant access to information that has implications for their financial assets, while youths need the Internet for educational purposes. Regimes take risks by allowing access (knowing that dissenters will try to organize mass movements with the communication tools that the web offers), but are convinced that censorship and self-censorship take away most political pressure. However, in the past decades, ruling elites were not always able to thwart online dissent, leading to fundamental political changes in several countries (Bowe and Blom, 2010).

MEDIA ENVIRONMENTS IN THE CAUCASUS

The three nations discussed here — Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia — are all characterized by governments that are repressitarian, 'meaning both authoritarian in governance and repressive in human rights practices' (Freedman et al, 2010, p. 95). After more than 20 years of independence, the three countries have yet to develop sustainable, pluralistic replacements for the Soviet press model, replacements that allow independent and oppositional media to operate, including access to government information. Evidence demonstrates how their longstanding hostility to traditional print and broadcast media is extending to new media. This trend threatens the potential of the Internet and social media as disseminators of alternative sources of information, analysis, and opinion in places where traditional media are restrained, lack credibility and public trust, or are unaffordable.

The U.S.-based NGO Freedom House (2011b) ranks the press systems in Armenia and Azerbaijan as 'not free' and in Georgia as 'partly free.' The International Research & Exchanges Board (IREX) *Media Sustainability Index* (2011) offers substantial reasons for continuing concern about the prospects for media environment improvements in the near future (see Table 1).

The nations' three constitutions include provisions for freedom of the press and of speech, but events frequently illustrate the chasm between paper pledges and on-the-ground realities. That is true for both traditional and new media.

In the case of Armenia, for example, the U.S. State Department (2011) detailed how the government has failed to respect those rights. Its human rights report observed, 'There continued to be incidents of violence and intimidation of the press and press self-censorship throughout the year [2010]. The media, especially television, continued to lack diversity of opinion and objective reporting.' Its report highlighted a number of incidents, including a police officer's assault on a photojournalist, the detention of two reporters for opposition newspapers, and the breaking of an independent television channel's microphone by members of the prime minister's entourage. And as indicator of the difficulties in covering public affairs, the report noted drily, 'The government's relationship with journalists, particularly those who were independent of, or regarded as hostile to, the authorities was not constructive.' The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) (2011) cited new legislation that granted sweeping new powers to award and revoke licenses for broadcast media organizations without explanation, resulting in pervasive self-censorship. On the positive side, the National Assembly decriminalized 'libel' and 'insult,' a move advocated by press rights groups, although CPJ described the move as essentially symbolic.

In neighbouring Azerbaijan, the U.S. State Department (2011) cited findings by two NGOs, International Crisis Group and Article 19, of a deterioration of free expression. It

Table #1

Press Freedom Indicators in the Caucasus

The *Media Sustainability Index* from the International Research & Exchanges Board assesses the health of national media systems, both traditional and new media. Its analysis is based principally on input from local journalists and press observers.

Country	Freedom of Speech	Professional Journalism	Plurality of News	Business Management	Supporting Institutions	Overall
Armenia	2.32	1.93	2.3	1.85	2.05	2.09
Azerbaijan	1.66	1.67	1.71	1.31	1.9	1.65
Georgia	2.07	1.8	1.85	1.47	2.07	1.85

Scoring 0=Country does not meet the indicator. 1=Country minimally meets aspects of the indicator; 2=Country has started to meet many aspects of the indicator; 3=Country meets most aspects of the indicator; 4=Country meets the aspects of the indicator.

Source: International Research & Exchanges Board. *Media Sustainability Index 2011: Development of Sustainable Independent Media in Europe and Eurasia.*

found a diversity of viewpoints but little 'objective, professional reporting' in print media, while broadcasters almost always reflected 'a pro-government line in their news coverage.' The international broadcasters Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), Voice of America, and British Broadcasting Corporation were banned from national television and FM frequencies.

In early 2011, an Azerbaijani journalist with the opposition newspaper *Azadliq* was kidnapped and beaten by masked assailants who warned him to 'be smart' (International Press Institute, March 28, 2011). Meanwhile, authorities freed six journalists and two bloggers from custody in 2010, but the editor of the shuttered Russian-language Realny Azerbaijan and Azeri-language Gündalik Azarbaycan remained in prison as of 1 December 2010 on fabricated, politically inspired charges, according to CPJ (2010); he had accused the regime of covering up the murder of another editor. As of April 2011, he had been imprisoned for four years, despite a European Court of Human Rights order for his release (International Press Institute, April 21, 2011).

The traditional press in Georgia also faces serious challenges. The U.S. State Department (2011) reported that throughout 2010, 'NGOs, independent analysts, and journalists accused high-ranking government officials and opposition politicians of influencing editorial and programming decisions through their personal connections with news directors and media executives and by directing advertising (and through it, advertising income) using their personal connections with business owners.' Press rights watchdog organizations such as CPJ, Moscow-based Centre for Journalism in Extreme Situations, IREX, International Press Institute, and Reporters sans Frontiéres also pointed to unbalanced political coverage, low levels of professionalism at regional television

statements, lack of transparency about ownership of news outlets, and physical attacks on and harassment of journalists.

With the difficulties for activists posed by the overall media environments in the Caucasus, the Internet becomes even more critical as an organizing tool. The importance of the Web as a tool for activists in the region was underscored in 2009, when Freedom House released its first report on Internet freedom, covering fifteen countries including Georgia. Its second such report, *Freedom on the Net*, appeared in 2011 and covered thirty-seven countries, including Georgia and Azerbaijan, both of which received 'partly free' ratings as to Internet freedom (Freedom House, 2011a).

In the case of Georgia, the report found no recent government restraints on access or content and said censorship does not pose a major hindrance; however, it noted that high costs and poor infrastructure create obstacles to Internet access, especially in rural and low-income areas. The report cited a weak telecommunications infrastructure that sometimes impedes access to international websites, described the blogosphere as weak as well, and attributed occasional cyberattacks to political tension between Georgia and Russia. Facebook is the country's most popular site, and entertainment is Georgians' principal use of the Internet, it said, observing that Facebook also has become an important platform for the exchange of information and discussions.

Freedom House reported that the Internet is less restricted in Azerbaijan than are traditional broadcast and print media, which remain the public's primary news sources. As with Georgia, high costs impede citizen use of the Internet, as do computer illiteracy, socio-economic conditions, reliance on dial-up technology, and gender. And the availability of blogging platforms in Azerbaijani has spurred bloggers to write about issues that traditional media don't report on.

THE INTERNET AS A COSMOPOLITAN ORGANIZING TOOL

Both Habermas and Kurasawa suggest that the struggle for human rights and social justice is best solved through the emergence of a cosmopolitan order that would be 'sensitive both to difference and to social equality' (Habermas, 1996, p. xix). This humanistic worldview would result from a 'cosmopolitan stretching of the moral imagination, to the point that distant strangers are treated as concrete and morally equal persons whose rights are being violated or incompletely realized' (Kurasawa, 2007, p. 3).

The effectiveness of social justice organizations may hinge on those groups' ability to use media to organize. Habermas asserts that nongovernmental organizations such as Greenpeace and Amnesty International play a large role 'in the creation and mobilization of transnational public spheres,' which he adds is 'at least an indication of the growing

impact on the press and media of actors who confront states from within the network of an international civil society' (p. 177). Such organizations, which usually are handcuffed by the government, may be able to use social media to bypass traditional mass media and take their messages directly to key audiences. Therefore, traditional news outlets may not report criticism of officials and may completely ignore anti-government sources that provide such accusations (Krasnoboka, 2002; Kulikova and Perlmutter, 2007).

There are examples of groups sidestepping the traditional media in the nations of the South Caucasus, although there has been only limited academic research published so far into the expanded use of social media in the region. Among them, Pearce (2011) used interviews to examine how Armenians use multimedia mobile devices for peer-to-peer sharing of content. She found that the two primary types of content are entertainment and political information, which she characterized as 'newsworthy content, although it is not necessarily mainstream news' (p. 517). Especially relevant for this article are her respondents' comments on the broadcasting of 'politically charged clips via Bluetooth' at protests and rallies (p. 519) and content-sharing about such issues as domestic abuse, abuse of military conscripts, and a teacher's abuse of a student.

In Georgia, news stations refused to air an investigative report — provided without charge by two independent journalists — about alleged fraudulent actions by government officials. Instead, the news story about the arrest of two innocent citizens who were jailed, tortured, and convicted was published on the World Wide Web (Idsvoog, 2008).

Imposition of governmental and extra-governmental pressure on new media, including creators and disseminators of information via the Internet and social media, as described in the State Department and Freedom House assessment and elsewhere, is disturbing.

For example in 2009, two bloggers in Azerbaijan were charged with 'hooliganism' for their YouTube posting of a video showing a donkey giving a mock government news conference. The arrest of Adrian Hajizade and Emin Milli drew international attention. Their defence lawyer attributed political motives to the charges, while authorities countered that it was simply a criminal case. Both men spent about a year in jail. After his release, Milli told an interviewer that he was unsure of the reasons for his arrest but assumed it for 'just for telling the truth, for free thinking, for free expression, and this video was part of it.' He described himself as a cross among social activist, blogger, and politician, said he intended to continue blogging, and added, 'I think Internet deprivation is a new form of torture for people of our generation' (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2010). Also in 2009, the editor of two independent online media outlets was the victim of a murder attempt. The same year, a state university expelled a student who wrote a blog post about corruption during exams, and the government temporarily blocked sites that lampooned the nation's president. Other incidents included a denial of access to RFE/RL's Azeri-language site, pre-election blocking of sites belonging to an independent NGO, and routine blocking of sites

in the enclave of Nakhchivan.

As for efforts to impede new media in Georgia, the government imposed restrictions on access to the Internet, and a 2010 law makes it easier for police and the security service to monitor email, chat rooms through ISPs, mail servers, Internet cafes, and other business entities. During the 2008 Georgia-Russia military conflict, access to Russian — .ru domain — sites was denied. Concerns have arisen about protection of privacy for users and their information.

There has long been an acknowledgment that increased development of online communications poses both opportunities and risks. Duve (2003) pointed out that the Internet as 'a revolutionary technical infrastructure changed not only forms of individual communication but also the way news is distributed within countries and across borders. What has not changed, however, is the principle of freedom of the press and the fact that free media are an essential part of modern democracies' (p. 9). Such an assertion of a strong relationship between free media and democracy is rooted in well-established journalism practices (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2007).

In today's environment of new media and social media, press freedom and free speech extend far beyond traditional print and broadcast media as authoritarian regimes work to block avenues for political expression, political dissent, political organization, and political advocacy. In addition, insufficient revenues from online news and inadequate technological knowledge impede the ability of traditional media to expand effectively into the Internet (Freedom House, 2011a).

GLOBAL SOLIDARITY AND COSMOPOLITANISM

The growing significance of the concept of cosmopolitism inextricably relates to the blurring of borders through economic globalization and the ability to communicate quickly and cheaply across great distances. In this increasingly globalized world, the formal sovereignty of nation-states is becoming ever more usurped by the rise of nongovernmental entities such as multinational corporations and large private banks (Habermas, 1996). The aggregate effect of this reduction of national autonomy is that individual states become unable to insulate their citizens from the consequences of decisions made by actors far beyond national borders. Simultaneously, parts of the decision-making process are disconnected from national democratic processes through international treaties and trade agreements (Habermas, 2003).

On this stage, multinational technology corporations have become powerful actors. A backlash against ICT corporations that facilitated repressitarian regimes sparked the

founding of the Global Network Initiative (GNI), by Yahoo!, Microsoft, Google, nine human rights and press freedom organizations, five investment corporations, and representatives from four universities and think tanks. Their aim is to create a 'corporate commitment to meaningfully integrate the protection of freedom of expression and privacy into both business practice and corporate culture' (Maclay, 2010, pp. 87-88).

Meanwhile, grassroots organizations use the Internet to connect with one another in networks that allow them to work together when desired, while maintaining autonomy at other times. This view of cosmopolitan connections focuses not on the legal framework but the *labour* of global justice in his vision of cosmopolitanism (Kurasawa, 2007). This labour should devise 'ways of living together that reconcile the ideals of equality and difference, by challenging the deeply entrenched assumption that a sense of togetherness and an egalitarian socio-economic order requires cultural homogeneity, or conversely, that the acknowledgement of cultural alterity necessarily erodes the social fabric and leads to uneven treatment' (Kurasawa, 2007, p. 158).

In Kurasawa's conceptualization, globalization should not primarily concern itself with corporate profits but rather with issues such as fair trade, cultural diversity, democracy, peace, and environmental sustainability in ways that embrace 'the simultaneous existence of multilayered local, national and global identities' (2004, p. 240). He posits a constellation of five modes of practice — bearing witness, forgiveness, foresight, aid, and solidarity — that taken together, 'constitute the work of global justice' by performing tasks that include recognition of pluralism, networked affinities, and creativity of action (Kurasawa, 2007, p. 16).

One example of the use of Internet communication to build solidarity among civic movements came in the aftermath of the successful protest movement that triggered the overthrow of the regime in Egypt, an event that inspired protestors in Azerbaijan to engage in a movement that attempted to connect networks of individuals to engage in creative demonstrations against their own regime. In early 2011, a Facebook group called 'March 11 — Great People's Day' was launched in an effort to spark a protest movement on the one-month anniversary of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak's resignation. One founder of that Facebook page, Elnur Majidli, appealed directly to youths to join the movement, suggesting that protests could manifest themselves in many ways. 'Dozens or hundreds of different protests may take place on that day, one person may hang a flag from his/her house, another may wear a T-shirt with the event's slogans, another may distribute leaflets, etc.' he said (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2011).

That call did not draw a great deal of support on the streets, and the demonstrators it did attract were arrested or dispersed. One reason cited for that lack of support was the fact that most of the Facebook youth movement organizers live outside of Azerbaijan (Sultanova and Champion, 2011). The one moderator of the page who lived in the country, 29-year-old

Bakhtiyar Hajiyev, was arrested (Krikorian, 2011). Hajiyev, a graduate of Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government and a former candidate for parliament, claimed to have been beaten, tortured, and threatened with rape by police while in jail. He staged a hunger strike to protest his treatment (Tharoor, 2011). However, one activist told EurasiaNet.org that the primary goal of the Facebook group organizers was to encourage Azerbaijani youths to become more politically active rather than to stage large Egyptian-style protests (Abbasov, 2011).

Even if the numbers of participants were small, indications are that the government took the movement seriously. The Interior Ministry specifically warned activists against organizing on Facebook, and students at Baku State University were threatened with expulsion if they protested. Azerbaijani attorney and human rights activist Intigam Aliyev told EurasiaNet.org that Facebook protestors 'represent a new generation of youth . . . who are able to lead people and fight for their rights... They could become a big headache for the government' (Abbasov, 2011). More than a dozen Facebook activists were arrested in the run-up to the March 11 protests; 43 activists were arrested on that day — with particular focus on members of organized opposition parties (Ismayilova, 2011).

To illustrate the potential role of new media to fill informational gaps in the region, a panel of journalists in Armenia commented that mainstream media do not cover some important stories; 'bloggers and citizen reporters, on the other hand, cover all events without hindrance' (IREX, 2011, p. xiii). The IREX report said its panelists credit citizen journalists, social networking platforms, and online publications with abetting such changes as the resignation of Yerevan's mayor over an assault incident and derailing a plan to restrict maternity welfare benefits. 'Traditional media often pick up topics from these online sources,' it said. 'Issues raised in online media, blogs, and social networking tools like Facebook or YouTube eventually seep into traditional media coverage, allowing for greater impact' (IREX, 2011, p. 131). In Azerbaijan, the blogosphere's popularity expanded in 2010, partly due to interest in parliamentary elections; citizens used such channels to share information and to comment about the campaign, 'boosted by several young parliamentary candidates who used new media heavily to reach their audiences' (IREX, 2011, p. 143).

Officials in the Caucasus have discussed imposing additional constraints and regulations, according to Freedom House (2011a). For example, the Azerbaijani minister of communications and information technology and the head of the National Television and Radio Council have advocated licensing of news websites.

Overall, the three Caucasus nations remain safer havens for Internet users and bloggers than several other independent former Soviet republics. Reporters sans Frontiéres (2011) ranks Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan among the world's top-ten enemies of the Internet, with Belarus and Russia on the press rights watchdog organization's roster of countries 'under surveillance.' Even some government leaders recognize the potential reach

Table #2
Internet use in the Caucasus, 2000 and 2010

Country	Internet users 2000	Internet users 2010	Internet penetration rate	Growth in Internet users
Armenia	30,000	208,200	7%	594%
Azerbaijan	12,000	3,699,000	44%	30,642%
Georgia	20,000	1,300,000	28.3%	6,400%

Source: Internet World Stats (2011).

of new media in distributing official information and viewpoints: The prime minister of Armenia launched a blog on Livejournal, a global blogging platform.

As IREX observes:

> The use of the Internet, social networking tools, and mobile platforms in Europe and Eurasia today may, in some cases, still have some catching up to do to approach that in neighbouring Western Europe. Nevertheless, contrasting the current situation now to 2001 [the tenth anniversary of post-Soviet independence] is stunning in how fast these technologies have become entrenched. (IREX, 2011, p. xiii)

Data on Internet penetration in the three countries highlights that change, although access to the Internet varies among them (see Table 2). Access also varied within the countries. To illustrate, the U.S. State Department (2011) noted that online media readership in Armenia 'remained limited, especially outside Yerevan,' the capital. Importantly, mere penetration rates do not indicate how the citizenry uses the Internet — for personal email? business communications? access to government, oppositional, or independent news media? games? Skype or telephone conversations? movies and music?

CONCLUSIONS

Newer methods of communicating cheaply, quickly, and broadly across borders may be used to create an engaged and organized cosmopolitan public, and Kurasawa (2007) notes that the Internet has a significant role in his cosmopolitan concept. 'If the Internet is not the democratizing panacea whose advent technological determinists have been heralding for years, it remains an important device through which activists and other citizens can communicate with one another, as well as share and spread information' (p. 108).

However, the use of computer networks to promote the development of cosmopolitanism from below faces undeniable pragmatic limitations. Although the Internet is useful for mass organizing over long distances, the infrastructure behind it is owned

variously by government and private industry, whose interests may conflict with those of organizers. The most recent U.S. Department of State country reports (2011) reflect the subjection of new media in the region to governmental constraints, as does Freedom House's *Freedom on the Net* report. This trend is of particular concern in light of the Internet's potential as an alternative supplier of a plurality of news sources — (Freedman, et al, 2010) — albeit mostly without the mediating influence of professional news judgment.

As global economies become increasingly intertwined across borders, and as the budgets of the largest multinational corporations dwarf the GDPs of some nations, boundaries between traditionally established nation-states are shrinking — at least from an economic standpoint. However, the effects of such an opening of economic frontiers on individuals within those nation-states remain in question. As cross-border economic linkages rise, one may ask whether human rights will necessarily recede as collateral damage in a war for ever-cheaper labour and more corporate-friendly tax policies? Or might a new solidarity among diverse peoples of the world arise to demand equal rights on a global scale? As recent events in the three non-democratic Caucasus countries demonstrate, online social media tools offer alternative ways to disseminate information and opinion, enabling non-journalists to assume some of the responsibilities that journalists exercise in democratic nations.

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