INFORMATION DIET OF THE SOUTH CAUCASUS: EXPLORATORY STUDY OF INFORMATION CONSUMPTION AND RESILIENCE TO DISINFORMATION
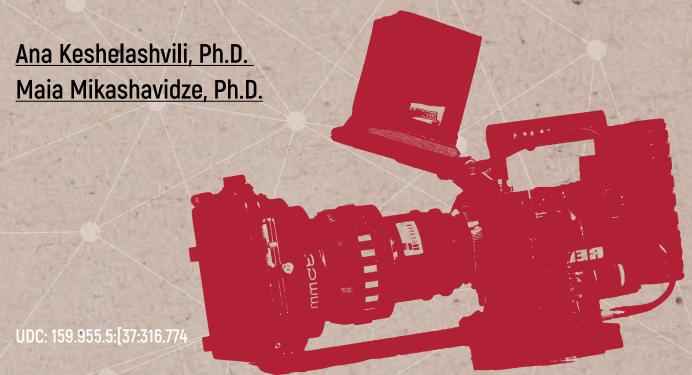
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ABSTRACT

Proliferation of disinformation online and its distribution through social media platforms is harming the democratic institutions and processes. Abundance of information flowing through all kinds of sources and channels has fueled uncertainty among societies, especially among the younger generation, whose information diet might be limited to occasional news posts suggested by the algorithm of Facebook, Instagram, or other social media platforms. Ignorance about the socio-economic and political affairs makes people more susceptible to the influence of disinformation and eventually harms the development of countries and democracies, especially in smaller, younger, or even hybrid democracies as in the case of the South Caucasus. Resilience to disinformation is a complex concept, measured on the macro- meso- and micro levels. For the purposes of this research, however, we focus on individuals, especially young adults, and explore their information diet across the three South Caucasus countries – Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan, to understand the social media use, consumption of public affairs news along with the trust in legacy media, and ways of discerning between the false and trustful news. The research uses triangulation of quantitative and qualitative secondary and primary data from the three countries. The findings contribute to better understanding of habits of the young audiences and can help improve the ways of strengthening their resilience to disinformation.

Keywords: Caucasus, media consumption, social media use, disinformation, resilience

1) INTRODUCTION

Three countries of the South Caucasus, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan, differ in terms of the institutional, legislative, economic, and political context, but there are also similarities among the publics and their information consumption.

Although Constitutions of all three countries guarantee the freedom of expression and media, the regulations differ despite the strong political and state influences on the mainstream media outlets. Legislation related to the freedom of speech and media among the three countries is the most restrictive in Azerbaijan, where majority of independent from the state budget and influence media outlets operate either in exile or need to be licensed to officially function in the country (Freedom House, 2022). Such restrictions, evidently affect the advertising market, leaving the independent media reliant on international donor funding despite the comparatively wealthy economy of Azerbaijan. In the case of Georgia and Armenia, smaller publics, and smaller advertising market also force the smaller independent media outlets dependent on the donor funding. Not being able to reach the wider audience, independent media outlets do not have the capacity to become mainstream and therefore let rather politicized and polarized television channels to dominate the information space of these two countries. Often such polarizing, state-governed and politicized content on television channels results in distrust of the legacy media and forces the audiences to seek alternative sources, for example, on social media channels, making them more susceptible to the influence of disinformation.

This exploratory research aims to better understand the younger adults of the three Caucasus countries and reveal their interest in public affairs news, trust, and sources for information, use and degree of dependence on social media as well as awareness of disinformation and the ways of dealing with it.

2) LITERATURE REVIEW

Social media has become a main source for news in many countries across the world. The audiences have become dependent on the information filtered by social media, such as Facebook and Twitter (Hermida et al., 2012) for over a decade. Researchers argue that what is concerning is that "the social media generation may not be equipped – or sufficiently interested – to understand what news is, and how it differs from other kinds of information. What their parents' generation absorbed – a 'news literacy' – is missing from their children's cultural DNA" (Richardson, 2017, p. 5). "Digital natives" are also causing concerns among researchers due to their elevated trust in digital and social sources (Walker, 2019) and a general assumption that "because young people are fluent in social media, they are equally savvy about what they find there" but the evidence showed the opposite (Wineburg, McGrew, Breakstone, and Ortega, 2016, p. 7).

These platforms are well utilized by those who have an interest in spreading manipulations, propaganda, or fake news (Faris et al., 2017). Being an environment where users primarily seek entertainment and accidentally encounter current event news (Boczkowski et al., 2018), creates a fruitful ground for spreading the disinformation easily (Allcott et al., 2019, Tandoc et al., 2020). Compared to a setting where the focus is on information consumption, emotive reactions such as commenting and sharing are more likely in this entertainment-oriented scenario (Metzger et al., 2021). This behavior creates a feedback loop where liking, sharing and commenting increase the exposure of the information for additional users because of social network algorithms. Furthermore, widespread disinformation may proliferate because it indicates popularity, or is picked up and spread by politicians or celebrities with many

followers (Pennycook et al., 2021). People may disseminate false information because it supports their personal beliefs but sharing of inaccurate news is not always linked to believing in false information, as Van Bavel et al. (2021) show.

Although social media platforms have made changes to decrease the magnitude of disinformation spread and succeeded to a certain degree (Allcott, Gentzkow and Yu, 2019), still, heavy dependence on the social media as a source of information, has been demonstrated to be one of the important contributing factors to lower the resilience to disinformation (Humprecht, et al., 2021; 2020; Boulianne, Tenove and Buffie, 2022) notwithstanding the social-structural factors also affecting the degree of resilience.

Humprecht et al. (2020) contend that the political, media, and economic environments all have a role in resilience building. In terms of politics, the authors argue that a society's degree of polarization and its level of support for populism are critical factors. In terms of media, they contend that a society's reliance on news media, the diversity of each person's primary news sources, and exposure to public media are essential. Last but not least, they view reliance on social media for political information as an essential contributing factor to the lower resilience of the society.

Citizens are likely to be more receptive to alternative news sources that might promote misinformation if they don't trust the news industry and its fact-checking (Stier et al., 2020). Furthermore, producers of misinformation regularly criticize democratic intuitions, which are typically linked to skepticism in news media (Hameleers et al., 2020). The strategic use of disinformation campaigns by political parties and candidates seeking to mobilize the public translates into establishment of alternative information networks that obstruct the mainstream media and give supporters emotionally satisfying ideas (Bennett and Livingston, 2018).

Drawing from the literature review, this article aims to explore the reliance of the young adults across the South Caucasus on news media on the one hand, and social media on the other to understand the resilience of the Georgian, Armenian, and Azerbaijani societies.

3) RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research is based on the mixed methods using the secondary quantitative data and secondary and primary qualitative focus-group and interview data. The quantitative data was drawn from Caucasus Barometer, "annual household survey about social-economic issues and political attitudes," conducted by the Caucasus Research Resource Center (CRRC) in 2021 in Georgia and Armenia.

Representative nationwide survey in Armenia was conducted during the period from December 2021 to February 2022 and during December 2021 and January 2022 in Georgia. Multi-stage cluster sampling with preliminary stratification drew data from 1648 respondents with 35% response rate in Armenia and 1540 respondents with 23% of response rate in Georgia. The presented results were weighted. Survey of Azerbaijani population has become impossible to conduct after 2013, therefore the results on the Azerbaijani publics are based on the qualitative interviews only (21 interviewees).

Qualitative interviews (28) for Georgia were conducted within the framework of an Internews Information Ecosystem Assessment project, funded by Facebook, Inc. (Internews, 2021), and additional eight interviews were conducted in April and May of 2022 with Russian-speaking respondents permanently living in Georgia. Qualitative data from Armenia was collected during April and May of 2022 by interviewing 26 respondents.

Both, quantitative and qualitative data are nationwide, focusing on the respondents of the age-group 18 to 34; surveyed and interviewed people

represent different ethnicities, especially in Georgia's case, where largest minorities are ethnic Azerbaijanis or Armenians, as well as a smaller Russian-speaking minorities.

4) FINDINGS / RESULTS

News Consumption and Trust in Legacy Media

Young adults of the South Caucasus countries share interest in daily news and all kinds of topics including politics, social, economic, conflict, health, sports, arts, education, technology, etc. However, some of the younger interviewees expressed disinterest in politics, elections, or participation in general. For example, a 27-year-old Azerbaijani female from Baku said she is willing to learn the news about "everything except for politics." Similar approach could be seen in a 19-year-old Georgian student's interview: "I'm not interested in politics [...] There's nothing I can change; hence I don't bother thinking about it." Survey data also demonstrates that Georgian young adults are not interested at all (25%) or are hardly interested (33%) in politics, while only 15% is very interested and 29% is quite interested. Among the Armenian respondents about the same percentage (16%) is very interested, and 36% are quite interested, while 22% are hardly interested and 26% are not at all interested. Despite the slight differences among the two countries, and the disinterest expressed by only few of the interviewees, this attitude is still concerning and is in line with the global concern over the increasing avoidance of news by the younger audiences.

When it comes to the source choices for the current events news, younger Azerbaijanis tend to go to independent or at least non-state media outlets, or media organizations in exile. Rarely they turn to state television or agencies for the governmental official information, but for immediate news they go to social media, Facebook mostly and sometimes to Telegram channels. Although the social media channels are an important go-to source for Georgian young adults, as revealed in the interviews, the quantitative survey demonstrates that the source choices about current affairs are almost equally distributed between Television (31%), social media (33%), and internet except social media (32%). On the other hand, television viewership among the Armenian audiences is lower (17%) and the social media dependence is higher as more than half (53%) of the surveyed people said they use social media as the main source of current affairs news. About one fifth (22%) of Armenian audiences seek for news in other than social media sources online. Quantitative results were confirmed also during the interviews with the Armenian young adults. Small percentage of Georgian and Armenian respondents named family members, friends and colleagues and newspapers as a main source of information.

Many of Azerbaijani young adults interviewed for this study do not have trust in state media – television or else but seek for news on the international media's local bureaus, such as of BBC and Radio Liberty, "because they publish more accurate and validated news, while other media outlets manipulate their audience with misleading headlines as they are under government control," as a 29-year-old man from Baku explained.

Other than international media branches, the younger interviewees also mentioned Azerbaijani sources they trust. Some of them are still based in Baku, others are working in exile. Independence from the state control, history of accountable, ethical and balanced coverage matter when it comes to choosing to trust the local sources however the youth still hold some skepticism, understanding that "It is the nature of media to frame, shape, give context they want to the stories, so I just follow them to be aware of things, but don't

trust," explained a 34-year-old woman. One of the interviewees expressed distrust to any of the media outlets, a 27-year-old female from Baku said that she trusts only certain Telegram channels, and a 28-year-old woman from one of the regions of Azerbaijan mentioned that she trusts only governmental media, which spreads the official information.

Armenian interviewees mentioned that they trust the media outlets they use "because they provide information, not opinions," as a 22-year-old woman from one of the Armenia's regions, or as another respondent, a 27-year-old woman mentioned, her trust is based on professional and ethical decisions of a particular media outlet, which is "objective and don't serve the political interests of some group." Politization of mainstream media coverage, apparently negatively affects the overall trust in the Armenian media, as the survey results show. 53% of Armenian young adults fully distrust the Armenian media and 19% rather distrusts, while only one percent fully and 9% rather trusts, and 18% neither trusts, nor distrusts the country's media.

Polarized and politicized media landscape of Georgia affects the younger adults' trust in legacy media. The interviewees frequently noted that coverage of current affairs on different TV channels is politically motivated and target to those who share their political viewpoints, rather than wider audiences seeking for balanced information. As a 29-year-old unemployed woman from one of the regions of Georgia mentioned, "I don't trust any of them very much. There is different information everywhere and I don't know which one to believe." The survey data also reflects ambivalence of the society, as a majority, 63% of surveyed said that they neither trust, nor distrust the Georgian media. Only one percent said that they fully trust, and 8% rather trust, while 17% rather distrust and 11% fully distrust. "It is very difficult to say that I trust any source and rely on it fully," said a 23-year-old male student from Tbilisi, adding: "because if you pay attention, you will notice that all the media have at least once, or several times has published unverified information."

Whether it is oppositional political party or ruling party influence on the mainstream media, audiences in all three countries share the similar need for balanced fact-based journalism, rather than opinionated interpretations of events. This drives them away from the dominant sources of information to other, mostly online independent media or more accessible social media for news. It becomes harder to keep themselves informed and fuels uncertainty and frustration, and may discourage from getting involved in democratic processes.

Social media use

Majority of the Georgian and Armenian internet users, when asked to name the three most frequent activities online, mentioned Facebook with slightly more Georgians (79%) than Armenian young adults (65%). Another commonly mentioned activity was use of instant messaging and calls, which is frequently used by 33% of Georgians and 46% of Armenians. Third most frequent activity named by the 34% of Armenians, was downloading/ listening to/ watching/ music/ videos/movies and for 42% of Georgians was searching for information (Google, Wikipedia, etc.). All interviewees in Azerbaijan also mentioned that they were using Facebook.

Among Armenian internet users, Facebook (90%), Instagram (67%) and YouTube (83%) are the most frequently used social media platforms, while 97% of Georgian young adults use Facebook, 57% use Instagram and 92% use YouTube. Interviewed Azerbaijanis have mentioned the same social media channels. Despite the frequency of use of social media, when it comes to sharing information or news content publicly, the majority of users consider themselves as "passive recipients" of content. For example, a 25-year-old man from one of the regions of Armenia explained: "I'm active while reading but when it comes to posting no, I'm more of a recipient of news" Similarly, a 28-year-old man from an Azerbaijani region said: "I am not someone who shares a lot."

Majority of the interviewees share some content on their profiles, mainly targeted at their friends. Some share mostly personal content, others also share news content, but very few of the interviewees engages in public debates, because as some of the Azerbaijani respondents said, they do not have time for "meaningless arguments" and "hearing insults, which happens so often on Facebook." A 20-year-old female student from Tbilisi explained that she is active on Facebook but only shares her thoughts when she becomes very angry about some violence: "I am active on Facebook, but I will never enter in arguments. I don't want to get into a conflict based on a different opinion. Everyone has their own opinion. [Enter debate and defend own opinion] Very rarely, when I get very angry about violence against a woman or a child." Few of the younger people across the South Caucasus said that they are "both, recipients and sharers." Restraining themselves from sharing their opinions and entering the public debate on the one hand might mean that they probably will not be sharing the disinformation further, but such self-censorship also points to the unhealthy communication and information ecosystem of social media platforms. This can be heard from a 23-year-old Armenian woman's words: "I NEVER get involved in public discussions; I prefer to live a stress-free life."

Similar activity can be noticed in Facebook groups. People join Facebook groups based on their personal or professional interests or hobbies, but the group membership is motivated by the passive consumption of information rather than sharing or participation in debates. Majority of group members said that they only comment to others' posts only when they can offer some advice to someone's question: "I only comment on posts that seek out help and the ones that fall within my area of knowledge," said a 31-year-old man from Baku.

However, more discussions take place in private spaces. 43% of Armenians and 30% of Georgian internet users use the messaging applications to get the news. They are also used for discussions of news among the friends by the young Azerbaijani adults. As an 18-year-old Armenian woman said, "I sometimes discuss news in private chats with my friends," and a 28-year-old woman from Georgia also said: "I frequently share news with my friends in closed chats."

Majority of surveyed and interviewed young adults in all three countries said that they use social media to get information about news and politics. In Georgia, 61% and in Armenia 80% of the internet users of the age of 18-34 rely on social media for news. The young adults of Azerbaijan generally tend to follow the trusted media outlets on Facebook, frequently watching live broadcasts from these media organizations and checking their social media feeds. Armenian users are also generally following the media outlets' pages, but almost none of the interviewees watched lives of the media on Facebook. Georgian users, on the other hand, much like the Azerbaijani users, consume the legacy media's content through Facebook rather than directly from television or websites. They are well aware of the media scene and follow the pages of not only their trusted media, but rather those of opposing political editorial policies. As an 18-year-old student from Tbilisi explained, they "post different information and it is also interesting to see many different opinions and listen to different variations on one news piece." Similar to this opinion, many younger adults in Azerbaijan follow the state-owned media organizations as well. As a 31-year-old man explained, "I haven't watched TV for ages, but I follow page of some [state television channels] just to get official news." Still, the majority of the interviewed internet users are accidental news consumers, most of the time stumbling upon them while scrolling social media rather than actively seeking for the news. As a 24-year-old woman from Georgian village mentioned, "I don't look for information on Facebook, it appears in the news by itself."

Checking the information from multiple sources is not that common among the younger Azerbaijani audiences, with a few exceptions. They still prefer familiar and trusted sources to learn about the local news "if the news is published by the media

I trust, I don't need to check elsewhere," one of the interviewees said. On the other hand, in Georgia and Armenia, where there is no state-owned media and restrictive media regulation policies, a politicized and polarized media environment pushes the audiences to click through different channels to get a full picture of current events. As a 27-year-old Armenian woman said, "it's better not to trust just one source and check the news on different channels." A 32-year-old bank employee from Georgian region said she usually watches several sources to get hold of a bigger picture, something she calls "arithmetic mean."

The younger adults across the South Caucasus are heavy users of social media, however, most of the times the social media is used as an access point to legacy media's content rather than an alternative source of information.

Discerning between the fake and true information

Younger adults across Caucasus are aware of the amount of disinformation online, especially in social media platforms and this shows in the survey results as well as in interviews. Majority of Georgian and Armenian internet users said that they have encountered disinformation about certain topics. For example, 88% of Armenian and 59% of Georgians have noticed fake news about their respective country's domestic politics. For Armenian users more frequently mentioned than domestic politics, was disinformation about Nagorno-Karabakh war (93%). Azerbaijani internet users during interviews mentioned that they encounter disinformation in social media often and majority of them also recalled Nagorno-Karabakh war-related disinformation as an example. Georgians most frequently recalled were Covid-19-related disinformation (72%) and elections mentioned by 70% of internet uses. A 34-year-old housewife from one of the villages of Georgia named the rumors surrounding the COVID-19 pandemics as an example of disinformation she has encountered circulating

on social media. Speaking about disinformation and rumors on Facebook another, 30-year-old Georgian housewife, summed up: "there are rumors everywhere, all rumors, for example, about actors or other topics and then when you listen carefully, you can tell this all is not true. Facebook is a gossiper."

When it comes to information verification techniques, the young adults rely on various techniques, some check with alternative media sources, some verify the information with their friends, relatives, and colleagues. Others rely on intuition, logic, and common sense. Sources of information and headlines are mentioned the most frequently as a way of detecting false information by the interviewees across the three countries.

Survey of Georgian and Armenian internet users asked about how they can tell if what they are reading on the internet, including social media, is accurate and reliable. Most of the respondents in both countries, 23% in Armenia and 32% in Georgia said that they look at the name of the publisher to see if it is a reputable source of information; 17% of Armenians and 29% of Georgians look for other signs of authentic news reporting such as writer's name and publisher; 16% of the internet users in both countries said that they ask someone who they trust if they think the news is real or fake. Similarly, the interviewees in Azerbaijan demonstrated that looking at the source and checking with more competent and reliable sources – media or human are common ways of checking the information. As a 27-year-old woman from Baku said, she checks with other sources, checks with "friends who are more interested in the news than me." A 25-year-old man, on the other hand, has a rather complex verification practice: "In my case, I look at the media which shared this news. If it doesn't look credible, if it's just a click-bait website, then I would think the information is not true. Also, if it's a big news story, and it doesn't get posted in other media that I follow, then probably it's not true."

5) DISCUSSION/ CONCLUSION

The purpose of this research was to understand the "information diet" of the young adults of the South Caucasus focusing on their interest in public affairs news, trust, and sources for information, use and degree of dependence on social media as well as awareness of disinformation and the ways of dealing with it.

Findings show that there are a lot of similarities among the young adults' habits across the three countries despite the different socio-political and media context. In line with the previous research (Allcott et al., 2019; Hermida et al., 2012), there is a heavy use of social media for news and information. Young people also tend to be more of an accidental news consumer (Boczkowski et al., 2018) rather than active seekers of information, and social media is the first place they go to for information when something important takes place. However, most of the times the social media is used as an access point to legacy media's content rather than an alternative source of information.

The young adults are well aware of news media, their political ideologies, and value more independent, fact-based coverage of events more than partisan or politicized news media. People do consume news of such media outlets and follow their social media pages, but the majority do not trust either state, government- or opposition-supportive media outlets, even if they share the media's political ideology. Therefore, the awareness of the media landscape of their countries could drive the younger internet users either to the complete distrust in the legacy media or may develop into a higher interest in the independent and more professional media, which at the moment is rather smaller, online and has weaker influence compared to dominant TV media. It seems that aware-ness of the disinformation and media criticism along with prioritized media literacy education and training, helped the younger audiences to develop news literacy skills and online independent media outlets have become a more popular and important news source for socio-political topics.

On social media, young adults from the Caucasus countries seek information on their topic-of-interest on diverse pages or public and private groups, rather than engage in public debates, or share publicly their opinions. Restraining from sharing content of political or socio-economic importance to engage with the public in discussion points to the social media's unhealthy environment for debates and brings stress rather than pleasure. Hostile attitudes online force users to become passive consumers of content or use the platform for entertainment only.

Humprecht et al. (2021) found that being a passive social media user hinders further sharing of disinformation and is an expression of resilience. The results of this study could be suggesting that the self-censorship and passivity described by the interviewees may as well impede dissemination of disinformation. However, some of the interviewees mentioned that they still share their opinions or news about events that they feel passionate or angry about. Emotional manipulation at the same time is one of the main characteristics of false information (Tandoc et al., 2020). Therefore, further research is needed to explore the specific cases and types of reactions and actions by the users.

The research also found that most of the young adults can recall the false information, and many have their strategies of verifying the information, which are also important factors for strengthening the resilience. Most frequently the interviewees check the source whether the news is coming from a reputable source, other times they turn to people they consider knowledgeable about the topic.

Previous researchers (see for example Humprecht et al., 2021) emphasized the role of politi-

cal and information environment in a country in strengthening resilience. For example, publics in the countries with a higher societal consensus were more resilient to disinformation, while those living in the polarized and radicalized political and informational environment are more vulnerable to disinformation. In the case of the South Caucasus countries, polarization is everywhere, but Azerbaijan is different from the other two with its restrictive autocratic rule. Young people striving for a democratic country turn to independent media sources frequently working in exile, but the debates on political issues only take place in closed chats or face-to-face meetings rather than on social media platforms openly. On the other hand, ruling party and oppositional parties of Georgia and Armenia have divided the society with partisan and offensive communication toward their opponents that the mainstream television channels have taken strongly political sides, and the coverage can be biased on either side most of the time.

To summarize, because of the existing political and informational factors in the three countries of the South Caucasus, distrust in the mainstream by the younger adults does not translate into the lower resilience to disinformation – quite opposite, could mean that they are not interested in hearing the one-sided information. Such media environment pushes the young people to alternative sources, which are independent and can provide important, fact-based, and accurate news. This finding suggests that the model of resilience could be complicated even further and consider different operationalization of alternative sources and dominant media as well as trust in these different sources.

6) LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTION FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The research is not without limitations mainly due to the incomplete quantitative data for Azerbaijan, which did not allow for triangulation of survey and qualitative interview data. Sampling of the interviewees in Armenia and Azerbaijan was not representative and could carry a selection bias, which may have affected the results. This exploratory study has created a solid foundation for further research, which could improve the data collection process and present a more reliable, complete picture of the information diet of the whole population. Future research could also focus on the peculiarities of sharing habits to better understand the potential of spread of disinformation through larger-scale quazi- or controlled experimental method and reveal whether restraining from sharing content online indeed translates into resilience to disinformation as suggested by Humprecht et al. (2021). This research looked at the information consumption and social media use of young adults of ages 18 to 34, as the quantitative data would not allow for further control of the age variable; however, the age range is quite extensive and covers both the "digital natives," and previous generation as well, which may alter the final results and do not describe the habits of the younger audiences accurately. Therefore, it would be preferable for the future research to focus on the younger segment of the society and present more precise description of the younger generation.

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