



GEORGIA

An Information Ecosystem Assessment

Part Two: Production, Distribution, and Consumption of Information



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About This Report

Internews' Information Ecosystem Assessment (IEA) methodology is designed to help understand how information moves and flows through communities. Information ecosystems are more than infrastructure or networks of formal news media and other information channels. Informal networks, personal connections, digital and face-to-face channels, and trust-based information flows that are influenced to varying degrees by news or media are all parts of an information ecosystem. To make sense of these dynamic systems a broad view is needed. Internews' IEA model goes beyond the traditional 'supply side' view of media landscape and media capacity (information infrastructure, tools, media, producers, consumer data, curators, and sharers), to encompass a 'demand side' perspective, where the human factor is critical for a full understanding of any Information Ecosystem.

This IEA is a detailed examination of the information ecosystem in Georgia, analyzing the various means of information exchange for the population. The report is intended as a practical tool to help inform programming priorities and policy approaches. The Georgia IEA, which was completed with support from Facebook, includes an in-depth examination of social media. In Georgia, as around the world, social platforms have a rapidly changing role in the production, distribution, and consumption of information. Online behavior cannot be viewed as independent from the wider information ecosystem, and this report seeks to explore this intertwining.

Over the final six months of 2020, five researchers based in Georgia, conducted more than 60 field interviews, undertook ethnographic observation and desk research, and conducted focus group discussions and a national survey in partnership with research company CRRC, to collect the findings in this report. This is the first study of its kind to ever be conducted in Georgia.

Part Two covers production, distribution, and consumption of information, and can be found below. Parts One and Three are published in separate documents. Part One of the IEA covers context, infrastructure, regulation, and revenue, while Part Three covers engagement, trust, and behaviour, and draws more on qualitative research.

Part Two

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Demographics

Culture and Ethnicity

Georgia has a population of around 3.7 million. Almost 60% of the population reside in urban areas,¹ with 52% of those urban residents living in the capital city, Tbilisi.²

Georgia's transition from a conservative, closed culture to an open society has been steady but not without roadblocks. On a continuum of liberal and conservative values, a large portion of Georgians remain on the conservative side of the spectrum.³ According to the 2018 survey by the CRRC,⁴ 37% of people believe in strong leadership, without the public's participation in decision-making.

In general, Georgians display both a high awareness and a positive attitude towards the European Union (EU), according to the 2020 public opinion survey commissioned by the EU.⁵ The poll shows 69% of people in Georgia trust the EU, while 77% feel the relations with the EU are good.

Recent years have also seen a rise in far-right movements in Georgia.⁶ These movements spread anti-Western sentiments and employ hate speech and nationalist discourses. Despite only a few of these groups being openly pro-Russian, their claims often reflect Russia's anti-Western narratives.⁷

¹ <https://www.geostat.ge/media/30991/Number-of-Population-2020.01.01.pdf>

² https://georgia.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/3.%20Population%20Dynamics_ENGL%20_print_F.pdf

³ <https://crrc.ge/uploads/tinyMCE/documents/PolicyBriefs/Polarization%20brief%206Oct2020.pdf>

⁴ <https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/rs2018ge/codebook/>

⁵ <https://eu4georgia.ge/2020-opinion-polls-show-strong-support-for-eu-in-georgia/>

⁶ <http://gip.ge/defining-the-far-right-in-georgia-from-neo-fascists-to-populist-parties/>

⁷ <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2018/10/04/nativists-versus-global-liberalism-in-georgia-pub-77376>

⁸ Based on the 2014 Census, which did not cover self-proclaimed/occupied territories of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali http://census.ge/files/results/Census_release_ENG.pdf

⁹ <https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb-ge/BUSINARG/>

¹⁰ http://census.ge/files/results/Census_release_ENG.pdf

¹¹ <https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/time-series/>

¹² <https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb-ge/TRURELI/>

¹³ <https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb2009ge/TRURELI-by-RELGION/>

¹⁴ <https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb2019ge/TRURELI-by-RELGION/>

¹⁵ <https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/rs2018ge/CHRPOL/>

Ethnic groups

Georgia is a multiethnic state, where ethnic Georgians constitute 86.8% of the population. The next nine largest ethnic groups are: Azeris, Armenians, Russians, Ossetians, Ukrainians, Assyrians, Yezidis, Greeks and Kists. The Azeri and Armenian population are the largest minority groups, with Azeris making 6.3% and Armenians 4.5% of the total population.⁸ Despite Georgia's ethnic diversity, acceptance of others among one third of ethnic Georgians is still low, according to the CRRC Caucasus Barometer 2019 study.⁹

Religion

Religion plays an important role in the lives of Georgians. According to the 2014 national census¹⁰ results, 83.4% of the population in Georgia is Orthodox Christian, 10.7% is Muslim, and 2.9% belong to the Armenian Apostolic Church.

According to the Caucasus Barometer, 90% of Georgians in 2019¹¹ said that religion was important in making decisions in their daily lives. Time-series analysis shows that trust in religious institutions has been decreasing slowly. In 2009, 86% of Georgians fully or partially trusted religious institutions, while in 2019 only 71% said the same.¹² The number of respondents who fully trusted the Georgian Orthodox Church has dropped from 67% in 2009¹³ to 33% in 2019¹⁴. Still, in 2018, almost 70% of Georgians said politicians should consider the position of the Georgian Orthodox Church when making political decisions, according to the survey by the CRRC.¹⁵

Television

Based on the taxonomy of media systems, Georgia clearly falls into the 'television-centric' category. The country has a vibrant television landscape. In 2019, there were 100 television stations broadcasting.¹⁶ TV leads as a source of information and opinions. Although highly politicized and polarized, television remains Georgia's most used source of information on political issues and current affairs. The survey conducted for this report found an overwhelming majority of the population (87.9%) use TV as a source of information.

Main sources of information on public affairs and politics (%)

Source of Information	Yes	No	Don't know/ Refuse to answer
Television	87.9	11.9	0.2
Family members	84.7	14.5	0.8
Neighbours, friends	83.8	13.7	2.5
Social media	69.0	30.8	0.2
News websites	36.2	63.5	0.3
Newspapers, magazines	14.0	85.9	0.1
Radio	13.0	86.8	0.2
Other	0.5	89.5	10

¹⁶ The Communications Commission annual report, 2019.
<https://comcom.ge/uploads/other/5/5875.pdf>

For comparison, a December 2019 poll by NDI found that 85% of Georgians rely on TV as either their primary or secondary source of information on public affairs, with 69% listing TV as their primary source, and 16% putting it as the second source.¹⁷

Most original reporting, especially investigative and unfolding breaking news content, is produced for and by national TV stations. News is an important part of the TV ecosystem and typically, big stations offer seven to nine news segments per day. Smaller stations in the regions offer evening broadcasts only. Often, big TV stations outsource content production. For instance, *Georgian Public Broadcaster* buys content based on the set programmatic criteria, set forth by its Board, and procures programming through open tenders. The television market in Georgia is dominated by three stations *Imedi TV*, *Rustavi 2*, *Mtavari TV*.

Channel	18+	
	AMR %	SHR %
January - December 2020		
Imedi TV	5.06	22.66
Mtavari TV	2.73	12.24
Rustavi 2	2.35	10.52
TV Pirveli	1.28	5.72
GPB	1.07	4.80
Formula	0.49	2.21
Maestro TV	0.49	2.18
Palitra TV	0.47	2.09
Ajara TV	0.32	1.41
Kavkasia TV	0.22	0.99

Source: TVMRGE, Nielsen Television Audience Measurement's official licensee

Imedi TV is owned by *Georgian Media Production Group*, which unites three stations: *Imedi TV*, *Maestro TV* and *Georgian Dream Studio (GDS)*.

Georgian Media Production Group acquired *GDS* in 2017. In the same year, *Imedi TV* merged with a smaller station, *Maestro TV*, to share newsroom and content.¹⁸ The merger of these three stations steered criticism over monopolization of resources on the market.¹⁹ In 2020, *Imedi TV* led other TV stations with the average audience share of 22.66%.

Imedi TV and its affiliate stations are viewed as pro-government in their editorial line. The long-standing monitoring of election coverage by Georgian watchdogs, supported by the European Union (EU) and the UN Development Program (UNDP)²⁰ revealed that *Imedi TV* was more likely to assign airtime and positive coverage to the candidates supported by the ruling Georgian Dream party.

In 2020, *Mtavari TV* had the second highest audience share, with 12.24% of viewers. The station is a staunch critic of the government. Media monitoring²¹ of TV stations' coverage of the elections in 2020 revealed that *Mtavari TV* was more likely to give airtime and positive coverage to the opposition.

Rustavi 2 has an audience share of 10.52%. The channel has been a flagship of independent media for many years, but the recent takeover of the station by one of the earlier owners cast doubt on the editorial independence of the station, with the station now viewed as leaning toward pro-government positions.

Following the takeover of *Rustavi 2* in July 2019, some journalists and managers left the station to launch new channels, *Mtavari TV* and *Formula TV*. Both stations are critical in their coverage of the government. Viewership habits and TV personalities have helped *Rustavi 2* keep part of its former audience in the face of competition.

¹⁷ <https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/nn2019ge/INFSOUF1/> | <https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/nn2019ge/INFSOUF2/>

¹⁸ <https://www.transparency.ge/en/post/who-owns-georgias-media>

¹⁹ <https://www.irex.org/sites/default/files/pdf/media-sustainability-index-europe-eurasia-2019-georgia.pdf>

²⁰ https://www.ge.undp.org/content/georgia/en/home/library/democratic_governance/elections-media-monitoring.html

²¹ <http://www.mediamonitor.ge/>

Focus group and interview participants expressed attitudes towards lead stations of *Imedi TV*, *Mtavari TV* and *Rustavi 2* and their editorial positions. A 65-year-old woman from Telavi said she still followed *Rustavi 2* as it “must be a habit, from the times of watching *Rustavi 2*”, adding “*Mtavari* is making me anxious, so *Formula* is the best for me.”

A young man from Tbilisi said: “I am very subjective; I don’t trust *Imedi* and I trust *Radio Free Europe*.”

While *Imedi TV*, *Mtavari TV* and *Rustavi 2* are the most popular television stations, with 22.66%, 12.24% and 10.52%, respectively, according to the **January-December 2020 data** by TV MR GE, Nielsen Television Audience Measurement's official licensee. *TV Pirveli* and *the Georgian Public Broadcaster* follow with a share of 5.72% and 4.80%, respectively.

The television landscape includes a broad spectrum of regional TV stations. TV stations are the main source of information in regions, where access to the Internet is uneven. According to Tri Media Intelligence, a TV audience measuring company, local channels have a total of 1.293% of national audience share when combined. However, this figure does not reflect the role these media play in their locales, as within these communities, regional TV stations’ audience share is likely to be high.

The role of local television in providing information to regional audiences is substantial. Among regional stations providing audiences with critically important information are:

- *Borjomi TV* and *9th Channel* in Samtskhe-Javakheti region,
- *Guria TV* in Guria region,
- *Gurjaani TV* and *Tanamgzavri* in the Kakheti region,
- *Odishi*, *9th Wave* and *Egrisi* in the Samegrelo-Zemo Svaneti region,
- *TV Rioni* and *Mega TV* in the Imereti region,

- *Trialeti TV* and *Dia TV* in Shida Kartli region,
- Russian-language *TOK TV* and Armenian-language *ATV12* and *Parvana TV* broadcast in the Samtskhe-Javakheti region,
- *Marneuli TV* and *Kvemo Kartli TV* Company in the Kvemo Kartli region.

The content of regional broadcasts differs from what national broadcasters offer to their audiences. Regional broadcasters are focused on covering local events, but lack resources to produce original content. They have a large share of content produced by outside companies, including feature films and TV series.

Most regional TV stations broadcast in the Georgian language. There are a handful of stations, which either broadcast full content in minority languages, such as Armenian, *ATV 12* and *Parvana TV*, and Russian, *TOK TV*, or produce a portion of content in minority languages, such as *TV9* or *Marneuli TV*.

TV Viewership – From Broadcast to Facebook Live

In 2019, viewers watched live TV broadcast on average for about 387 minutes a day²². Compared to 2017, the time spent on watching news programs increased from 27 minutes in 2017 to 33 minutes in 2019, and average daily watching time for talk shows increased by 6 minutes, to 24 minutes. The majority of interview respondents mentioned that television was their main source of information, especially the viewers in the age group 55 and older.

“Television provides more accurate information about what is happening in the world, or in our country,” said a participant in the focus group held in the Guria region.

²² ComCom annual report, 2019, <https://comcom.ge/uploads/other/5/5875.pdf>

However, modes of consumption vary by age, with older people more likely to gather around TV sets, while younger users watch TV on the web and in social media. Interviewees and focus group participants under 35 said that, while they did not watch much TV in general, they often consumed TV content on Facebook. Many of them mentioned following pages of TV channels and watching TV lives.

One interviewee, a 20-year-old male, said: **“I scroll my Facebook feed and click on most interesting items, mostly, TV lives,”**

– that is, television programming being streamed using Facebook Live. Interviews and focus group results show that although younger people do not habitually sit in front of TV sets, TV-generated content flows to them through social platforms.

“In essence, I look for TV on Facebook, and I watch TV on Facebook” said a 32-year-old female from Rustavi.

TV stations have massive followership on Facebook. All TV stations operate websites, with some of these websites, notably, *1TV.ge* (a website of *the Georgian Public Broadcaster*) and *Imedineews.ge* (affiliated with *Imedi TV*), reaching sizable audiences.

Public Broadcasting

Georgian Public Broadcaster and *Ajara TV* are public broadcasters funded by public funds. GPB has been regularly criticized for its pro-government bias. The most recent pre-election news monitoring commissioned by the EU and the UNDP (2020)²³ showed that the editorial stance of the channel was loyal towards the government. The station has also been criticized for diverting attention towards entertainment and mega shows. Some of its shows, most notable, a popular culinary show, *MasterChef*, attracted younger audiences.

The *Ajara Public Broadcaster* was developing at a fast pace between 2017-2019. The station was praised for its unbiased and quality content by local and international monitors. However, in 2019, following the impeachment of the station’s reformist director, the station faced criticism from many local and international media monitors. The pre-election monitoring report by the EU/ UNDP and Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics²⁴ revealed that ahead of the 2020 Parliamentary Election period *Ajara Public Broadcaster*’s main news program largely maintained the diversity of parties and opinions – however, in many cases the tone of coverage towards the government team and the ruling party was positive.²⁵

²³ https://www.ge.undp.org/content/georgia/en/home/library/democratic_governance/elections-media-monitoring.html

²⁴ https://www.ge.undp.org/content/georgia/en/home/library/democratic_governance/elections-media-monitoring.html

²⁵ https://www.ge.undp.org/content/georgia/en/home/library/democratic_governance/elections-media-monitoring.html

Web-Only Media

Web-only media in Georgia have massively expanded news and public affairs coverage. From the end of 2000s, a steady increase in Internet and mobile penetration in Georgia has given rise to digital media outlets. These outlets offer a range of content, from broadly targeted news coverage to niche reporting, focused either on local, national or international audiences. Some websites, mostly, news agencies, report in traditional, text-based formats, while others offer multimedia, interactive content, complex, non-linear storytelling, and ample opportunities for user engagement, from crowdfunding to arts exhibits and special events.

Web-only outlets are often less politicized, polarized, and biased, than TV. Many web outlets set the standard for ethical, fact-based reporting.

- **On.ge** offers a mix of serious, fact-based content and general-interest stories, following closely user feedback and web analytics in editorial and marketing decisions.
- **Publika.ge** was founded in 2019 by a team of journalists, who left online magazine **Liberali.ge**, which later ceased operations. **Publika.ge** offers in-depth analysis of issues, such as education, health care, social protection.
- **Indigo.com.ge** offers in-depth, engaging storytelling on public affairs, literature and arts, expressed in complex formats of long-form video and non-linear micro-sites.
- **Batumelebi.ge**, an impactful local investigative outlet in Batumi, started **Netgazeti.ge** to cover national affairs.
- **Netgazeti.ge** has impactful reporting on public affairs and is available in Georgian, with limited content translated into Russian for Russian-speaking communities.
- **Gurianews.com**, which catered to local audiences, grew nationally and captured new audiences.
- **Sknews.ge** offers high-quality, impactful reporting in Samtskhe-Javakheti region.
- **RegInfo.ge**, a local outlet in the town of Gurjaani, launched **Mtisambebi.ge**, a niche publication about life in Georgia's mountains. **Mtisambebi.ge**'s human stories and top-quality video from remote mountainous settlements, gained a national following. In addition to reporting, **Mtisambebi.ge** is engaged in community mobilizing and charity to benefit protagonists of its stories.
- **Qartli.ge** is a small media outlet in the city of Gori, targets local communities in the Shida Kartli region. Its content also serves the conflict-affected communities of the occupied Tskhinvali region. It produces the content in Georgian, Ossetian and Russian.
- **Livepress.ge** in Samegrelo-Zemo Svaneti region serves local audiences and conflict-affected communities in Abkhazia reporting in Abkhaz, Russian and Georgian languages.
- **Kutaisipost.ge** has attracted users in Georgia's second biggest city, Kutaisi.
- **Speqtri.ge** and **Knews.ge** serve communities in the Kakheti region.
- **JNews.ge** is an Armenian-, Russian- and Georgian-language source of information for multi-ethnic communities in Samtskhe-Javakheti region.

Web-only media is an impactful source of information for local audiences. Many local newspapers transformed into websites as they were unable to cover rising costs of printing and distribution. Local websites, which employ between three to ten journalists, cover big cities outside Tbilisi, small towns and villages. These outlets often trigger follow-up stories in larger national and regional media, and elevate local concerns to reach national audiences.

Georgia's award-winning investigative broadcast studio *Monitori*, started *Monitori.ge* to share content on the web. *Monitori*'s investigations have been shared by a number of TV stations too. *iFact.ge* produces impactful data-driven investigations, while *ForSet.ge* is best known for data journalism and data visualization. Niche media in Georgia includes business publications, such as *BM.ge*, part of *Business Media Georgia*, which attracts followers for its insightful coverage of economics and finance. *Tabula.ge* is focused on politics and international affairs.

There is also a group of websites that are based in Georgia but target regional and international audiences. These outlets employ local and international journalists:

- **Jam-News.net** is a multilingual (Georgian, Azerbaijani, Armenian, Russian, English) website by *GoGroup Media*, which covers affairs in the three countries of the South Caucasus, including in its disputed territories.
- **Chai-Khana.org** is available in Georgian, Azerbaijani, Armenian, Russian and English, and offers in-depth reporting from the countries of the Caucasus.
- **OC-media.org** caters to the diverse audiences in and outside the region.
- **Sova.news** targets Russian-speaking audiences with quality reporting about Georgia and the region.
- **Civil.ge** is one of the oldest quality online news outlets, which was founded in 2001. It covers affairs in Georgia for English-speaking audiences.

- **Codastory.com** has an uncontested niche among Georgian-based media as an internationally renowned outlet, which covers global affairs and focuses on transnational, global stories, reporting from around the world.

News agencies, such as *Interpressnews.ge* and *Newposts.ge*, top the list of web-only media by audience size. These outlets offer news 24/7 and are preferred sources of news for urban professionals. *Interpressnews.ge* and *Ambebi.ge* are publications of the influential *Palitra Media Holding*. Both publications are available in Georgian and English. *Interpressnews.ge* is also available in English.

Web is a medium of choice for news startups.

- **At.ge** is an online magazine about culture.
- **Marketer.ge** is a successful niche startup covering news in the world of marketing, business and advertising.
- **Movement.tv** offers excellent video on a range of issues, profiles and international reporting.

Not all web-only media adhere to standards of quality journalism. There are websites that produce content of dubious quality, and bet on sensational, clickbait stories. On a negative extreme are the websites that share disinformation and hate speech, and have links with malign foreign actors. For years, specific media publications have been spreading disinformation and anti-Western propaganda:

- Online outlets *Sakartvelo da Msoplio* and news agency *Sakinformi*, both of which have repeatedly shared Kremlin-sponsored content.

TOP.ge is an online platform ranking websites and the source for the following table:

Name	Ranking among media sites On 15.12.20	Ranking among all websites On 15.12.20	Hits On 15.12.20	N of Unique Users On 15.12.20	N of Unique Users per month	Daily average visitor
Myvideo.ge	1	2	762,018	111,438	3,113,062	145,326
Ambebi.ge	2	5	331,973	121,874	2,262,491	144,604
Palitravideo.ge	3	6	219,073	87,837	1,137,026	66,666
InterpressNews.ge	4	8	306,188	76,317	1,249,213	76,746
Intermedia.ge	5	10	183,133	75,008	2,252,361	85,220
Primetime.ge	6	11	171,591	76,312	1,681,438	82,458
Mtavari.tv	7	12	138,849	89,877	1,314,958	66,446
On.ge	8	14	134,194	62,026	1,456,824	69,561
KvirisPalitra.ge	9	17	101,405	56,171	739,473	51,023
Imedinews.ge	10	18	100,110	10,447	1,250,751	68,885
Pia.ge	11	21	80,439	42,493	1,057,025	51,404
Newposts.ge	12	28	66,875	34,499	984,549	49,778
Netgazeti.ge	13	27	57,683	38,305	787,397	40,194
Resonancedaily.com	14	33	61,641	31,838	827,624	45,171
Inforustavi.ge	15	40	40,020	27,438	376,944	26,382
Alia.ge	16	38	91,686	22,931	261,292	21,111
Fortuna.ge	17	43	37,783	27,936	974,573	45,772
Imedi.ge	18	29	63,148	24,086	566,207	28,939
Bm.ge	19	45	38,387	27,104	639,170	21,546
DailyInfo.Ge	20	48	34,027	24,672	124,163	13,290

Most media from the Top.ge list of 20 top media websites by audiences also appeared in Alexa.com rankings²⁶ among the 20 media websites with the highest combination of visitors and pageviews. For example, in December 2020, myvideo.ge, ambebi.ge, interpressnews.ge, on.ge, palitravideo.ge and intermedia.ge occupied the 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th and 6th places. With Alexa.com, [the Georgian Public Broadcaster](http://thegeorgianpublicbroadcaster.com) ranks the 1st among the media. It is also the 3rd among all other websites used in Georgia, and follows Google and YouTube. On the list of 20 most visited media pages [Radiotavisupleba.ge](http://radiotavisupleba.ge)/[Radio Free Europe/Georgian Service](http://radiofreeeurope.com) is also included.

²⁶ This is based on Alexa.com rankings from December 2020.

Radio

Radio is the least preferred traditional medium in Georgia for consuming public affairs content. Very few participants (13%), most of them in the age group of 50 years, mentioned in the survey conducted for this report that they used the radio as a source of information.

According to the 2019 annual report of the Communications Commission, there were 55 radio stations in Georgia in the last quarter of the year. While most content on radio is music and entertainment, a few stations do supply current news. However, news coverage on most radio stations is usually shallow, lacking facts, sources and depth of the reporting, as was demonstrated by the most recent monitoring report of the radio content in the lead up to the 2020 parliamentary elections.²⁷ Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, which offers in-depth coverage of public affairs, is among the most popular outlets in Georgia. The largest and most popular national radio stations in the country are:

- **Radio Fortuna/ Radio Fortuna Plus**
- **Radio Imedi**
- **Dardimandi**
- **Radio Dardimandi**
- **Radio Kviris Palitra**
- **Radio Tbilisi**

Local radio stations have been more successful in generating high interest content, and there has been a trend towards strengthening local radio broadcasting:

- **Dzveli Kalaki** in Kutaisi
- **Trialeti** in Gori
- **Hereti** in Lagodekhi
- **Harmonia, Atinati** and **Odishi** in Samegrelo
- **Samkhretis Karibche** in Samtskhe-Javakheti, | was recently launched by local news website.

²⁷ <https://www.ipm.ge/index.php/en/%E1%83%A1%E1%83%98%E1%83%90%E1%83%A-E%E1%83%9A%E1%83%94%E1%83%94%E1%83%91%E1%83%98/186-radio-listeners-mostly-turn-on-the-radio-at-9-10am>

There are a handful of community radio stations in Georgia. These stations started as small entities targeting hyper-local communities, mostly, in ethnic minority-populated areas, but have grown audiences and programming and become impactful sources of news and opinions:

- **Radio Nor FM** broadcasts in Armenian to the ethnic Armenian population in Javakheti.
- **Radio Marneuli FM** targets ethnic Azerbaijani community in Marneuli. It broadcasts mostly in Georgian and Azerbaijani languages, but offers digests in Armenian as well.
- **FM Radio Way** broadcasts in Georgian and Kist languages for the Vainakh and Georgian communities in the Pankisi Gorge.
- **Radio Mozaika** operates in Gori in Georgian language.
- **Radio Ivrisi** targets Azerbaijani-language community in Iormughanlo village and operates over the web, pending approval of its licensing request.
- **Radio Life** in Svaneti, started recently online by a group of local community youth and are pursuing license approval with the Communication Commission. It shares content in Georgian language and in Svan language (a subgroup of Georgian languages).

Radio One of the Georgian Public Broadcaster is the descendant of the first radio, started by the Soviets in 1925. It became the first broadcaster in the South Caucasus region. *Radio One* is known for diverse programming, including talk shows, literary, art, and music reviews, theatrical performances, profiles of prominent Georgians, and many other talk formats. The programming of the radio follows programmatic priorities set forth by the Board of *the Georgian Public Broadcaster*. *The GPB Radio Two* boasts of a unique archive of audio recordings of theatrical performances, known as the Golden Fund. These audio recordings offer a rich history of radio broadcasting in Georgia.

Radio ratings are hard to obtain, as radio operators cannot afford commissioning the measurement from established companies.



According to the latest research (2019) on radio use, carried out by the Institute for Polling and Marketing, 44% of the residents in seven Georgian cities listen to the radio.²⁸ There are all age groups among the listeners, although the largest age group is between 25 and 44 years old. In the CRR/NDI public opinion poll, only 1% of Georgians mentioned radio as their second main source of information. None mentioned radio as their first choice for receiving information. The survey carried out for this study revealed 13% of Georgians use radio as a source of information on current affairs.

Since 2013, there has been a tendency for radio operators to launch and develop web and mobile channels. Most of Georgia's radio stations both broadcast content and stream it on the web. The best radio websites, such as Dzvelikalaki.ge, MarneuliFM.ge, Nor.ge, RadioWay.ge, Hereti.ge have considerable amount of original content on the web, including multimedia stories and video. Some radios are also available on mobile apps, among them *Georgian Public Broadcaster* and *RFE/RL*. Over a dozen of the Georgian radios are available on the apps - *Georgian Radio Live* and *Georgian Radio Online*, downloadable from Google Play and App Store.

²⁸ <https://www.ipm.ge/index.php/en/%E1%83%A1%E1%83%98%E1%83%90%E1%83%AE%E1%83%9A%E1%83%94%E1%83%94%E1%83%91%E1%83%98/186-radio-listeners-mostly-turn-on-the-radio-at-9-10am>

Print Media

Print media publishing has been declining rapidly in Georgia. According to the available figures from Geostat.ge²⁹, between 2016 and 2019 the number of newspapers published almost halved from 317 to 177. Of those 177, seven are dailies, 24 weeklies and 35 monthlies.³⁰ The annual circulation, counted as the number of copies printed, was 60.4 million for all newspapers and 27.8 million for magazines in 2016. The figures are not available since then.

Kviris Palitra is by far the largest weekly newspaper on the Georgian newspaper market with a circulation of approximately 30,000 copies.³¹ *Kviris Palitra* is distributed nationally and carries a mixture of politics, economics, society, and entertainment. The newspaper is published by *Palitra Holding*, which is the largest publishing company in the country. Today, *Palitra Holding* runs three weekly newspapers and fourteen periodical magazines. It also has *Palitra FM radio*, *Palitra TV*, a number of websites, a publishing house, and a chain of bookshops.

Other newspapers with a national focus are:

- ***Resonance***, carries public affairs content and on the market for almost 30 years
- ***Asaval Dasavali***
- ***Akhali Taoba***
- ***Prime Time***
- ***Alia***
- ***Qronika+***

A number of newspapers such as *Asaval Dasavali*, *Sakartvelo da Msoplio*, *Sakartvelos Respublika*, and *Alia*, have followed questionable ethical standards and shared disinformation. *Asaval Dasavali* and *Sakartvelo da Msoplio* are particularly notable in offering hateful, xenophobic and discriminatory content.

²⁹ <https://www.geostat.ge/en/modules/categories/615/culture>

³⁰ National Statistics Office of Georgia: Publishing of books, magazines and newspapers. <https://www.geostat.ge/en/modules/categories/615/culture>

³¹ Information by the newspaper.

Local newspapers have played a role in informing local communities on public affairs in their regions and the nation. In general, these newspapers have strongly adhered to standards of ethical and fact-based journalism in sharp contrast with most central newspapers, which have produced sensational, reckless reporting. Award-winning newspapers *Batumelebi* and *Guria News* have set the standard of quality reporting on local affairs and have maintained loyal readership for over 20 years of existence. *Batumelebi* was launched in 2001 in Georgia's third largest city, Batumi. The newspaper stopped publishing in 2017 and is now available online. *Guria News* appears both in print and online. *Chemi Kharagauli* is a smaller newspaper, which continued distributing print copies to the residents of the Imereti region despite shrinking margins and logistical hurdles introduced by the COVID-19 pandemic. *Kakhetis Khma* has a loyal audience in the Kakheti region.

While newspaper readership is declining, innovators are looking for ways to revive the genre. A group of investigative journalists, who run an online investigative platform *ifact.ge*, started publishing *iFact Kutaisi*, a newspaper to carry investigative reporting in the Imereti region.

Some 30 newspapers, generally monthly publications in the regions, receive funding from the local authorities.³² Two newspapers, Armenian-language *Vrastan*, published since 1920, and Azerbaijani-language *Gurjistan*, published since 1921, are funded from the state budget.³³ Georgian newspapers subsidized by the state budget are frequently criticized for inability to produce quality public affairs journalism and are viewed as serving the government's interests.

The figures from the National Statistics Office of Georgia show magazine publishing has been on the rise.³⁴ Between 2006 and 2011, annual circulation rate of magazines has increased approximately eight-fold (from 3.4 million in 2006 to 27.8 million in 2011) and remained at the same level until 2017.

These range from the high-quality *Indigo* magazine carrying analytical content to a number of licensed magazine brands and magazines focusing on celebrity and gossip.

Newspapers and magazines are available at newsstands, retail shops and in special press kiosks. The survey carried out for this study showed that some 14 % of the respondents read newspapers and magazines to learn about current affairs and politics.

“Comparing the figures of newspaper readership in the past decade demonstrates that print media are no longer the preferred choice for information on public affairs and politics for the majority.”

In a 2009 survey by the CRRC,³⁵ 25% of the respondents said magazines and newspapers were the second most preferred sources of information on current affairs, but in a 2019 survey by NDI/CRRC,³⁶ only 4% mentioned newspapers and magazines as their second most preferred source of information. The dramatic fall in interest towards print media has been mostly conditioned by a sharp rise in Internet use in the country as more and more Georgians read news digitally.

All newspapers and magazines have set up webpages. While, at the early stage of digital transformation, newspapers mostly posted PDF versions of their print copies on the web, and, later, text-based articles, today, newspapers produce sophisticated multimedia and interactive content, and engage with audiences. Newspapers with more resources update content more regularly. In line with the digital transition many notable publications have abandoned printing and now appear only as websites. These include high-quality nationally reaching news magazine *Tabula*, as well as local newspapers *Batumelebi*, *Samkhretis Karibche*, and *Speqtri*, which discontinued publishing between 2015 and 2017. English language newspaper *The Messenger* has also migrated to the web.

³² “Results of the media monitoring by the Georgian National Communications Commission (22.10.2017–12.11.2017).” <https://comcom.ge/uploads/other/2/2832.pdf>

³³ <https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/5071216?publication=0> | <https://medialandscapes.org/country/georgia>

³⁴ National Statistics Office of Georgia: Information and Communication Technologies Usage in Households. <https://www.geostat.ge/en/modules/categories/106/information-and-communication-technologies-usage-in-households>

³⁵ <https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/cb2009ge/INFSOU2/>

³⁶ <https://caucasusbarometer.org/en/nn2019ge/INFSOU2/>

Language and Access

Most media in Georgia share content in Georgian.

This renders ethnic minority citizens largely unable to engage with the national press in their native languages. These communities have access to a handful of minority media shared in Armenian, Azerbaijani and Russian.

The Georgian Public Broadcaster - which is required by law to provide programming to diverse ethnic, cultural, linguistic, religious, age and gender groups - airs newscasts in ethnic languages. These newscasts, which are translations of the Georgian language news programs rather than content specifically targeting ethnic minorities, are often inadequate for satisfying the information needs of ethnic communities.

“In our house... we don’t get any of the Georgian channels, but, honestly, even before... we didn’t watch them much,” said 30-year-old ethnic Armenian from Akhalkalaki.

“I rarely watch TV... if I do, it is mostly the 1st Channel of Armenia [Armenian Public television]. I watch Armenian channels, Georgian and Russian ones as well,” said 18-year-old ethnic Armenian male from the Samtskhe-Javakheti region.

“Those who live in the capital and big cities are interested more in the news that the TV delivers to us, because regional news and events are almost never covered,” he added.

The GPB is also required to air relevant proportions of programs prepared by minority groups in their languages and does broadcast some programming. It runs the project “Diverse Georgia”, which offers online television and radio broadcasts in Armenian and Azerbaijani languages. *The GPB* added multi-language translation services to the news program *Matsne*. However, *the GPB* is still frequently criticized for failing to fulfill its mission and produce diverse programming that would serve the interests of minorities.

Minority users are dissatisfied with the programming offered by the national TV and radio.

“Central channels rarely broadcast about regions and cover very little about our region, we are very much interested in the local news. We learn about our region and local affairs from the local [TV] broadcasters or radio.” said 54-years-old Armenian male from the Samtskhe-Javakheti region.

Minority users who mentioned using *GPB* in our study were young ethnic minority youth with a knowledge of Georgian language. The niche is filled by ethnic minority-run media, which grow audiences and impact in the community. *FM Radio Marneuli*, available in Azerbaijani, with Georgian and Armenian-language content on marneulifm.ge website, and *FM Radio Nor*, available in Armenian, with Russian language content offered on the website, are two community radios with the most users in their respective communities. *JNews.ge* is a successful newspaper, which offers content in Armenian, Russian, and Georgian out of the small town of Akhalkalaki, on the border with Armenia. *ATV 12* and *Parvana TV* are Armenian-language TV stations; *RadioWay*, available in Georgia, targets the Vainakh community of the Pankisi Gorge. A Russian-language *TOK TV* started broadcasting in 2017, focusing on the needs of local ethnic communities.

“I use mostly *Jnews* and *Akhalkalaki News*...they report mostly on local issues, sometimes about the [wider] region.” - Armenian male, 18.

“My children mostly visit *Javakheti Information page*, *Jnews*, and share with me what happens and how, and I learn this way.” - Armenian female, 53.

Some local Georgian-language publications have also started offering content in ethnic languages. The best content is by *TV 9* and *Samkhretis Karibche/Sknews.ge* in the town of Akhaltsikhe, Samtskhe-Javakheti region. *Speqtri.ge* started a hyper-local Internet radio *Ivrisi*, for the Azerbaijani-populated village of Iormughanlo in the Kakheti region. *Radio Ivrisi* shares content in Georgian and Azerbaijani languages and employs local youth. *Netgazeti.ge* started publishing Russian-language content in 2020 in the frame of the *BBC Action* supported project. From 2020, *Mtisambebi* will start publishing its stories in English with the support from the same project. *TV Marneuli* offers limited content in Azerbaijani language for the residents of the Marneuli region, as does *Radio Bolneli*. The Armenian-language community can also tune to *Vrastan FM*. Online *Livepress.ge* started reporting in Abkhaz and Russian languages in addition to core content in Georgian. An online news portal *Qartli.ge* started reporting in 2015 in Ossetian and Russian languages.

Vecherni Tbilisi, *Tbilisskaya Nedelya*, *Argumenty i Fakty*, *Komsomolskaya Pravda v Gruzii*. are limited circulation Russian-language newspapers in Georgia.

Social Media Platforms

Social media platforms have a major role in facilitating the flow of information on public affairs in Georgia. The platforms benefit from users' free and uncensored access to the Internet in the country. The right to the Internet is enshrined in the Georgian Constitution.

Among the population aged 15 years and older who used the Internet in the past three months before July 2020, the main reasons for Internet use were participating in social networks (95.2%) and making calls over the Internet (86.1%).³⁷

Distribution of population aged 15 and older by purposes of internet use (%)

	Total	15-29 years	30-59 years	60 years and older
Participating in social networks	95.2	98.6	96.2	83.6
Reading online news sites/newspapers/news magazines	54.9	61.2	52.9	50.4
Sending/receiving e-mails	47.6	61.3	45.4	28.7
Telephoning over the internet/video calls (via webcam) over the internet	86.1	89.7	85.6	80.8
Seeking health-related information	51.4	47.7	52.2	55.4
Finding information about goods or services	38.5	51.6	36.6	19.7
Looking for a job or sending a job application	14.2	23.3	12.9	1.5
Internet Banking	34.7	40.3	35.3	20.8
Downloading software (other than games software)	17.9	29.1	15.1	7.0

Source: Geostat.ge

By March 31 2020, there were 2,524,000³⁸ Facebook accounts in Georgia. Other popular platforms are YouTube and Instagram. Messaging programs, such as Facebook Messenger, Viber and WhatsApp, are also relevant to news and public affairs engagements in Georgia.

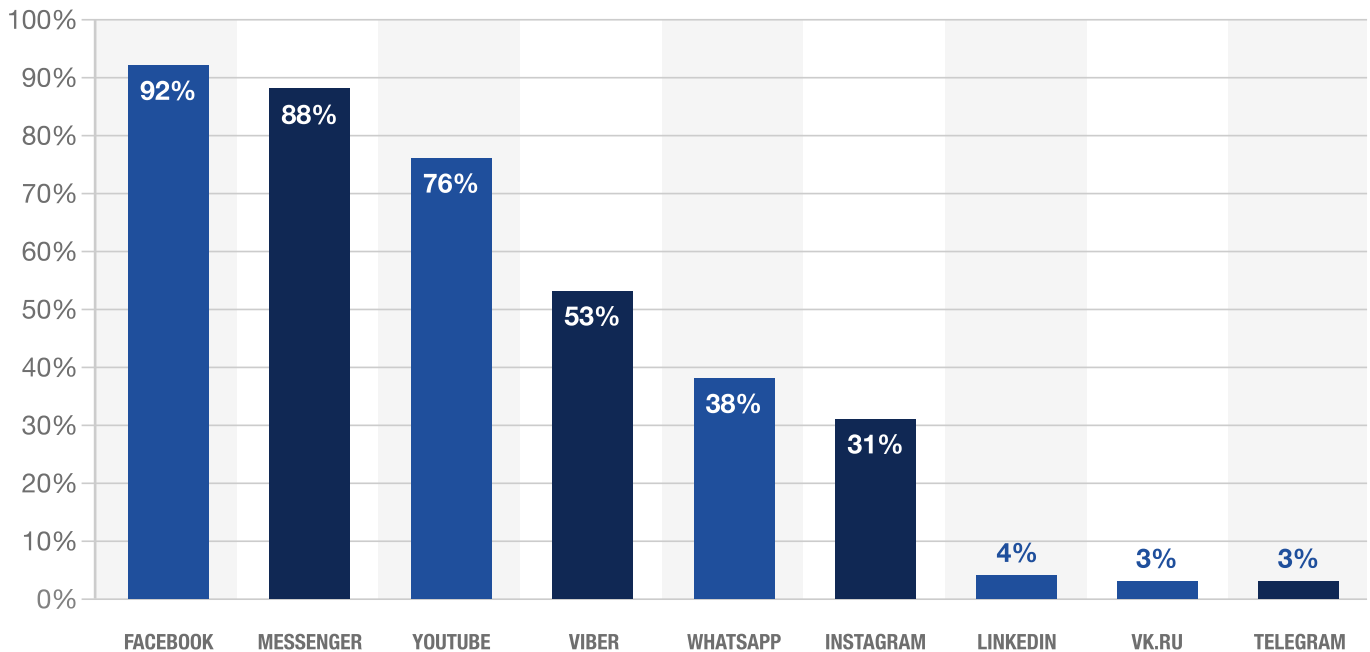
³⁷ National Statistics Office of Georgia, 2020.

<https://www.geostat.ge/en/modules/categories/106/information-and-communication-technologies-usage-in-households>

³⁸ <https://www.internetworldstats.com/asia.htm#ge>

As per research conducted for this study, the most popular social network among Georgians is Facebook. Significant differences are evident in the use of Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp and Odnoklassniki with respect to gender. Women use Facebook more than men (94% of women, 89% of men). Instagram is also more popular among women (35% of women, 26% of men). Men are more likely than women to use WhatsApp (42% of men, 34% of women). Odnoklassniki.ru is also relatively more popular among men (14% of men, 5% of women).

Social media platform usage among Georgian Internet users



Internews, 2021

Significant differences are observed in terms of use of social networks in different age groups. In general, almost all social networks are more popular among young people than among other citizens. The vast majority of young Internet users, 97%, use Facebook, while 93% in the 36-55 age group use Facebook, and only 79% of those over 55 use this social network.

The use of YouTube also varies across age groups. This network is consumed by 88% of Internet users aged 18-35, 73% of users aged 36-55, and 61% of the older generation.

WhatsApp is the fifth largest social network in the 35-55 age group and in the population over the age of 55. Instagram ranks fifth with 49% of young people. The level of Instagram use in other age groups is low (36-55 - 23%, 55+ - 9%).

While Facebook and Messenger usage is similar in almost all types of settlements, statistically significant geographic differences are observed in the use of several social networks, namely YouTube, Instagram and Viber. YouTube has more users in the capital and other cities than in the countryside (Tbilisi - 82%, city - 81%, village - 67%). Instagram has more users in the capital (42%) than in other cities (35%), and in rural areas (17%). Viber is used by 65% in Tbilisi compared to 42% in rural areas.

We asked each social network user how often they use the different platforms. 62% of Facebook users say they always use it, 18% - often, 12% - sometimes, and 7% - rarely. As research shows, the frequency of Facebook consumption is higher compared to the consumption of other social networks. 50% of Messenger users say they always use this social network, while LinkedIn ranks third in frequency of use, with 36% of users saying they always use it (although with a much smaller user base).

The lowest activity is observed among users of Russian social networks. In the case of ok.ru as well as in the case of vk.ru the frequency of consumption is very low. Only 3% of Ok.ru users and 6% of vk.ru users use these social networks regularly.

Social Media Use for Information

The survey conducted by this study shows that most Georgians (69%) consider social media as a source they use for news and information.

Use of social media for information is different across urban and rural areas. In the capital city of Tbilisi, 78% of the population gets information from social media, and 74% in other big cities and smaller towns. However, in rural settlements only 60% use social media to get news. The use of social media also differs significantly across generations. Survey results show that social media use for information is the highest (94%) among the youth aged 18-35. As outlined above, in this demographic, even the consumption of traditional media sources, such as TV, is often mediated through social platforms, including streaming and Facebook Live.

A 20-year-old female from Kvemo Kartli region provided a typical response when saying she gets “80% of news” from social media.

Social media is a significant source of information for 75% of the population in the age group 36-55, however, only 40% in the age group over 55 use social media for news and information.

As the importance of social platforms has rapidly grown, media outlets have acquired and significantly developed their social media presence. Just a few years ago many smaller outlets used Facebook profiles to share content largely as it originally appeared in broadcast or print forms, or shared links to the websites.

Now most media have a multichannel social media presence and share content that is either being created for specific social platforms, such as Facebook, or edited to fit network formats and target audiences.



The medium of choice for media outlets is Facebook, as this platform has most users among Georgians. Media outlets also operate Instagram, YouTube and Twitter accounts to reach audiences that are un-represented or inactive on Facebook.

22-year-old young female user from Tbilisi said she used Instagram to get news and tried to "avoid Facebook, because there is so much useless information, some fake information, or accounts..."

Most Georgians who use social media as an information source do so primarily through 'passive' engagement, or scrolling their feeds, rather than 'active' browsing for topics they are interested in. The survey showed that two thirds of Internet and social media users (72%) mostly get news because they "happen to come across it", and only a quarter (24%) gets information that they are "looking for".

"I don't search for information, I usually look at what shows up in my feed on Facebook and then follow the links, if I'm interested," was a typical comment from a 43-year-old male from Tbilisi. Passive engagement with information on social platforms means that Georgians typically see content from publishers and information providers mixed in with non-news content.

As social media becomes a main source of information for more people, passive engagement means that the news and information seen by Georgians is increasingly shaped by the ranking and recommendation algorithms or platforms such as Facebook and YouTube.

Television on Social Media

Georgia's main television channels are leading sources of information in social media and operate pages with the largest number of followers. Television stations offer their audiences different media formats in line with various platforms, such as Facebook Lives and Instagram Stories, short and long-form video, quizzes, polls, and other interactives, as well as highlights and announcements of news programs, full program recordings, and links to their websites.

Over half (58.8%) of TV-viewers on social media are aged 18-35, over a quarter of users (26.5%) is 36-55 years old, and about one sixth (14.7%) is the adults over 55. Nearly a half (47.1%) of those who watch TV on social media live in Tbilisi, followed by the population living in cities and towns outside the capital (38.2%) and in rural areas (14.6%). While a significant portion of the population consumes TV content on social media, the share of those who access TV exclusively via social media remains very small – just 3.7%.

Streaming video has been assisted by the affordability of high-speed Internet. However, the cost of data means that viewing video online is still a luxury for many Georgians. TV Lives, for example, which generate much interest among users, are often inaccessible and unaffordable for rural users. As one of the interviewees, a 34-year-old unemployed female from the Adjara region said:

"I have come across TV Lives, but I haven't opened them, since we have to buy megabytes to use the Internet, and it is not affordable for us." She said she was saving data for her children's online lessons.

Typically, big nationally reaching TV stations have company pages or channels, and multiple other linked pages, channels and groups for their newscasts, talk-shows, tv-series, talent shows, or comedy programs. In some cases, the audiences of these affiliate pages are even bigger than those of main pages. The followers of nationally-reaching TV stations' Facebook pages range from 30,000 to over 900,000.

Media	Facebook	Followers
Rustavi 2	https://www.facebook.com/rustavi2	985,155
Mtavari TV	https://www.facebook.com/TvMtavari/	847,410
Imedi TV	https://www.facebook.com/tvimesdi/	813,708
TV Pirveli	https://www.facebook.com/tvpirveli/	623,480
Georgian Public Broadcaster (GPB)	https://www.facebook.com/1stchannel/	448,279
Maestro	https://www.facebook.com/MaestroTVOfficial/	220,642
PosTV	https://www.facebook.com/POSTV.Main/	199,058
Ertsulovneba	https://www.facebook.com/ertsulovnebatv/	124,910
Formula	https://www.facebook.com/formulanews.ge	102,370
Obiektivi	https://www.facebook.com/obieqti/	73,850
Kavkasia	https://www.facebook.com/kavkasiatv/	33,252

Table: Televisions on Facebook (January 15, 2021) - Internews, 2021

Big TV stations have Instagram accounts, and some of these accounts offer platform-specific content, such as Instagram Stories, as well as interactive features aimed to increase engagement. Often, these pages link to affiliate Instagram pages for TV Stations' shows and series. Other types of Instagram content are backstage photos and videos and light entertainment content.

The followers of TV Instagram pages range from 1,200 to over 70,000.

TV stations appear to prioritize platforms. For example, those who are leading on Facebook, have fewer Instagram followers, and vice versa. The exceptions are *Mtavari TV* and *Imedi TV*, which are clear leaders on both Facebook and Instagram.

Media	Instagram	Followers
Mtavari TV	https://www.instagram.com/mtavaritv/	74,400
Imedi TV	https://www.instagram.com/tv.imesdi/	72,100
Formula	https://www.instagram.com/formulaoriginals/	42,500
GPB	https://www.instagram.com/1tv.ge/	28,300
PosTV	https://www.instagram.com/postv.official/	27,300
Rustavi 2	https://www.instagram.com/rustavi2official/	20,000
Maestro	https://www.instagram.com/tvmaestro/	2,426
TV Pirveli	https://www.instagram.com/tvpirveli/	2,197
Ertsulovneba	https://www.instagram.com/sstv.ge/	1,242

Table: Televisions on Instagram (January 15, 2021) - Internews, 2021

The majority television stations also have YouTube channels and Twitter accounts, and only one station - *PosTV* has a telegram channel.

Media	YouTube	Followers
Imedi TV	https://www.youtube.com/user/teleimedi2012	352,000
GPB	https://www.youtube.com/user/GeorgianPB	197,000
Mtavari TV	https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC-Xcne5H7h188Aihrc_jt0w	123,000
Rustavi 2	https://www.youtube.com/user/rustavi2ps	83,100
TV Pirveli	https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCTpk5vglhnmh8Q_sk41UsNA	34,100
Formula	https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCKG71vWzNwVt7RTXTYy-oow	27,000

Table: Televisions on YouTube (January 15, 2021) - Internews, 2021

Local TV on Social Media

Local televisions are well-represented in social media. Many of them actively maintain Facebook pages, and, to a lesser extent, Instagram accounts. Many have groups and communities created around their media outlets and engage with their followers in multiple ways.

Regional TV stations have fewer followers than national stations, but their numbers are still high relative to the population in respective regions. For example, *TV 25*, which primarily targets the population of the Ajara region, has over 112,841 followers, which is roughly a third of the population

of the region (349,000), while *Guria TV*, with its 39,618 followers, reaches roughly one third of the population of the Guria region (113,000).

The content offered by local TV stations, mostly, news stories, is attuned to the platform preferences and shares as Facebook video, Lives, Stories and posts. The leader among regional TV stations is *Ajara Public TV (APB)*, which is a publicly funded TV station with larger resources and a dedicated digital platform development unit. Unlike *APB*, smaller television stations have fewer staff and limited financial resources to develop digital platforms. Most Facebook Pages have not been 'verified' by the platform.

Media	Facebook	Followers
Ajara Public Broadcaster	https://www.facebook.com/AjaraTV	124,828
TV 25	https://www.facebook.com/TV25ge/	112,841
Trialeti TV	https://www.facebook.com/trialeti.org/	84,100
Mega TV	https://www.facebook.com/MEGATVgeOfficial/	79,084
Guria TV	https://www.facebook.com/guriatv/	39,618
TV Dia	https://www.facebook.com/www.dia.ge/	35,386
Odishi TV	https://www.facebook.com/TVODISHIOFFICIAL	32,089
Imervizia	https://www.facebook.com/imerpost.news	27,319
Marneuli TV	https://www.facebook.com/MARNEULITV/	25,795
TV9	https://www.facebook.com/tv9news.ge	24,536
TV Borjomi	https://www.facebook.com/tvborjomi/	24,141

Table: Local televisions on Facebook (January 15, 2021) - Internews, 2021

Social media platforms are great equalizers, allowing small minority-language broadcast media reach and serve audiences.

Parvana TV and *ATV 12*, small Armenian-language TV stations in the Samtskhe-Javakheti region, lack resources to offer competitive broadcast programming, but are very active on social media, specifically, Instagram. *Parvana TV* is among top ten stations by the number of Instagram followers. *Marneuli TV*, which offers Georgian and Azerbaijani language content and operates in ethnic Azerbaijani-populated Kvemo Kartli region, is also active on Instagram. Instagram appears to be especially popular in ethnic minority-populated areas.

A 28-year-old woman from Akhalkalaki village said she does not watch television, but instead gets her information from social networks:

"I actively use Instagram, because I can get a sense of news in just two minutes, very quickly and have an idea of what's going on."

For her, Instagram was an entry point for news, followed by visits to YouTube for extended coverage.



Media	Instagram	Followers
TV 25	https://www.instagram.com/tv25.ge/	6,611
Parvana TV	https://www.instagram.com/parvanatv.ge/	6,164
Ajara Public Broadcaster	https://www.instagram.com/ajaratv/	3,093
Marneuli TV	https://www.instagram.com/marneulitvmarneuli/	1,274
TV9	https://www.instagram.com/tv9news_ge/	920
Guria TV	https://www.instagram.com/guria_tv/	842
TV Borjomi	https://www.instagram.com/borjomi.tv/	819
Mega TV	https://www.instagram.com/megatv.ge/	700
ATV 12	https://www.instagram.com/atv12_akhalkalaki/	524
Odishi TV	https://www.instagram.com/tv.odishi.official/	440

Table: Local televisions on Instagram (January 15, 2021) - Internews, 2021

Newspapers and Magazines on Social Media

Among those who get news from newspapers and magazines (14% of total population), only 6.2% access newspapers and magazines on social media platforms. Urban populations outside the capital are more likely to access newspapers and magazines on social media (15.7%) than people living in the capital (2.8%) or rural settlements (0.5%). Age-wise, the majority (55.6%) of those users who access newspapers or magazines on social networks, are 36-55 years old.

Main national newspapers are all represented on Facebook. Just two newspaper accounts were identified on Instagram, and few more on YouTube and Twitter, however, their largest audiences are still on Facebook. Some newspapers are more active than others, producing over 100 posts per day on average. Others, among them several popular newspapers, may only have one post on an average day. The audience of main newspapers on Facebook ranges from 4,000 to up to 500,000.

Media	Facebook page	Followers	Avg. posts per day (last 30 days) ³⁹	Instagram	Followers
PrimeTime	https://www.facebook.com/PrimeTimeMagazine/	499,207	109.57	https://www.instagram.com/primetime.ge/	9,142
Asaval-Dasavali	https://www.facebook.com/asavali.ge/	132,174	0,1	N/A	
Kviris Palitra	https://www.facebook.com/KVIRIS.PALITRA/	120,962	36	https://www.instagram.com/kvirispalitra/	6,792
Alia	https://www.facebook.com/alianews.Ge/	36,180	50.4	N/A	
Resonance	https://www.facebook.com/TheResonanceDaily	24,182	16.97	N/A	
Qronika Plus	https://www.facebook.com/%E1%83%A5%E1%83%A0%E1%83%9D%E1%83%9C%E1%83%98%E1%83%99	20,841	4.23	N/A	
Akhali Taoba	https://www.facebook.com/akhalitaoba.ge	5,939	9.57	N/A	
Versia	https://www.facebook.com/GAZETIVERSIA/	4,686	15.9	N/A	

Table: Newspapers on Social Media (January 15, 2021) - Internews, 2021

As evident from content analysis, newspapers have not embraced the possibilities and features of Facebook. Most of the content on Facebook pages are short introductions and links to articles on their websites. The exceptions are the two newspapers, *PrimeTime* and *Kviris Palitra*, which also operate Instagram accounts and post content created specifically for these platforms.

³⁹ Source: CrowdTangle, a public insights tool owned and operated by Facebook, January 15, 2020 [Newspapers and Magazines]

A handful of magazines are present and active in social media. Their updates are often tied to the periodicity of publication and average posts per day is low. Since many of these magazines are geared towards specific target audiences, their content online is also diverse, ranging from basic posts with links to websites to more sophisticated content created for platforms.

Media	Facebook page	Followers	Avg. posts per day (last 30 days) ⁴⁰	Instagram	Followers
Ok magazine	https://www.facebook.com/okmagazinege	127,095	18,2	https://instagram.com/okmagazinegeorgia/	19,800
Liberali ⁴¹	https://www.facebook.com/liberalimagazine	90,522	N/A	https://www.instagram.com/liberalimagazine/	1,555
Indigo	https://www.facebook.com/Indigo.com.ge/	81,803	1,5	https://www.instagram.com/indigo_magazine/	6,588
Forbes Georgia	https://www.facebook.com/forbesgeo	66,490	9,7	https://www.instagram.com/forbesgeorgia/	2,313
Sarke	https://www.facebook.com/jurnalisarke/	35,276	4,6	N/A	
Nargis magazine	https://www.facebook.com/NargisGeorgia	31,966	2,17	https://www.instagram.com/nargis_georgia/	22,800

Table: Magazines on Social Media (January 15, 2021) - Internews, 2021



⁴⁰ Source: CrowdTangle, a public insights tool owned and operated by Facebook, January 15, 2020 [Newspaperes and Magazines]

⁴¹ This magazine has closed down.

Radio on Social Media

Radio is consumed for news and information by 13% of the population, and only 1.6% of radio listeners access radio content through social media, according to the survey conducted for this study. Some radio stations have sizable followings on Facebook and other social media channels.

Radio Tavisupleba, which is *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* in Georgia, has a well-developed web and social media presence. It creates content for social media, and regularly updates its Facebook and Instagram pages as well as YouTube and Twitter.

It leads the list of top ten radios on Facebook and Instagram and has as many followers on Facebook page (370,611) and Instagram (44,900) as some national TV stations. *Radio Tavisupleba*'s Facebook page and Instagram profile were singled out by several users interviewed for this study as one of their main sources of information.

Content on radio stations' Facebook pages is most often short story introductions with links to their websites, video recordings of radio shows, and multimedia news stories designed specifically for the platform.

Media	Facebook page	Followers	Avg. posts per day (last 30 days) ⁴²	Instagram	Followers
Radio Tavisupleba (RFE/RL)	https://www.facebook.com/radiotavisupleba	370,611	47.87	https://www.instagram.com/tavisupleba/	44,900
Voice of Abkhazia	https://www.facebook.com/voiceofabkhazia	158,493	0.37	https://www.instagram.com/fmabkhazia/	262
Radio Fortuna	https://www.facebook.com/fortuna106.9	156,499	63.5	https://www.instagram.com/radio_fortuna_plus/	115
Radio Dardimandi	https://www.facebook.com/radiodardimandi/	155,820	0.53	https://www.instagram.com/dardimandi_fm97.1/	1,960
Radio Ar Daidardo	https://www.facebook.com/ardaidardo/	140,499	4.27	https://www.instagram.com/radio_ardaidardo/	2,354
Radio Imedi	https://www.facebook.com/radioimedi	60,564	14.8	https://www.instagram.com/radioimedi/	2,472
Radio Maestro	https://www.facebook.com/Radio-Maestro-947-	44,784	2.4	https://www.instagram.com/	63
Pirveli Radio	https://www.facebook.com/pirveliradio1064/	27,616	30.5	https://www.instagram.com/radio106.4/	43
Radio Georgian Times	https://www.facebook.com/radiogeorgiantimes/	24,626	8.57	https://www.instagram.com/thegeorgiantimes/	78
Radio Palitra	https://www.facebook.com/radio.palitra/	20,898	5.7	N/A	
Radio Channel I	https://www.facebook.com/Georgianradio	10,059	4.07	N/A	

Table: Radio in social media (January 15, 2021) - Internews, 2021

⁴² Source: CrowdTangle, a public insights tool owned and operated by Facebook, January 15, 2020 [Radio]

Local community radio stations have built their presence on platforms in the past few years and gained audiences. Some stations are more active than others, with *Radio Marneuli* and *Radio Nor*, for example, posting on average 33 and 41 times per day, respectively. These community radio stations operate in ethnic minority-populated regions and are key sources of information for ethnic communities. Both *Marneuli FM* and *Radio Nor* are active on Instagram too. *Radio Nor* lists among most followed media on Instagram, competing with national media outlets. In general, local radio stations are strong competition to local TV on Facebook and Instagram.

Media	Facebook page	Followers	Avg. posts per day (last 30 days) ⁴³	Instagram	Followers
Radio Atinati	https://www.facebook.com/Radio.ATINATI/	39,194	10.67	https://www.instagram.com/radioatinati1059fm/	627
Radio Hereti	https://www.facebook.com/radiohereti	29,740	15.8	https://www.instagram.com/radiohereti/	223
Radio Marneuli	https://www.facebook.com/marneulifm	22,074	33.67	https://www.instagram.com/marneulifm/	2,048
Radio NOR	https://www.facebook.com/radiotvnr	15,639	41.33	https://www.instagram.com/radionor/	13,500
Radio Way	https://www.facebook.com/radioway.ge/	13,998	1.1	N/A	
Mosaic Fm	https://www.facebook.com/FM97.8	12,423	5.77	N/A	
Radio Dzveli Kalaki	https://www.facebook.com/	10,645	2.3	https://www.instagram.com/radiozvelikalaki/	96
Samkhretis Karibche Radio	https://www.facebook.com/SKradioFm97.5	5,596	N/A	N/A	
Radio Ivrisi	https://www.facebook.com/IVRISI	1,157	4.	https://www.instagram.com/ivrisi/	55

Table: Local Radio on social media (January 15, 2021) - Internews, 2021

⁴³ Source: CrowdTangle, a public insights tool owned and operated by Facebook, January 15, 2020 [Local Radio]

Digital Outlets on Social Media

Among digital media with the largest audiences on Facebook, there are outlets that offer quality news and content as well as those that abide by less stringent professional and ethical standards. By their size of audience, top digital outlets on Facebook compete for audiences with nationally reaching TV stations.

Media	Facebook	Followers
Newposts.ge	https://www.facebook.com/newpostsgeorgia/	706,097
Ambebi.ge	https://www.facebook.com/ambebi.ge/	363,922
Tabula.ge	https://www.facebook.com/tabula.ge	226,830
Presa.ge	https://www.facebook.com/www.presa.ge/	216,878
On.ge	https://www.facebook.com/hey.on.ge	174,396
BM.ge	https://www.facebook.com/www.bm.ge	148,978
News.ge	https://www.facebook.com/news.ge/	148,173
Interpressnews.ge	https://www.facebook.com/interpressnews.ge	124,064
Netgazeti.ge	https://facebook.com/netgazeti/	118,372
Movement.com.ge	https://www.facebook.com/MOVEMENT.storytelling	78,492

Table: Digital media on Facebook (January 15, 2021) - Internews, 2021

Most news websites do not have sizable audiences on Instagram; however, they do have a presence on the platform.

Media	Instagram	Followers
Ambebi.ge	https://www.instagram.com/ambebige/	15,000
At.ge	https://www.instagram.com/atge/	6,914
Newposts.ge	https://www.instagram.com/newposts.ge/	6,910
BM.ge	https://www.instagram.com/businessmediageorgia/	5,905
Movement.com.ge	https://www.instagram.com/movement.com.ge/	5,904
Tabula.ge	https://www.instagram.com/tabula.ge/	4,257
Netgazeti.ge	https://www.instagram.com/netgazeti/	3,998
On.ge	https://www.instagram.com/on.ge/	2,615
Interpressnews.ge	https://www.instagram.com/interpressnews/	2,172
Codastory.com	https://www.instagram.com/codastory/	1,318

Table: Digital media on Instagram (January 15, 2021) - Internews, 2021

Digital media organizations are more active on Twitter compared to the majority of television stations and traditional media outlets, although their audiences on the platform are still not very large. Twitter’s user base in Georgia is comparatively small. News media presence in Twitter in Georgia is generally limited to outlets that intend to reach international audiences.

Media	Twitter	Followers
Civil.ge	https://twitter.com/CivilGe	15,000
Codastory.com	https://twitter.com/CodaStory	13,900
Tabula.ge	https://twitter.com/Tabula_Media	11,100
Rustavi 2	https://twitter.com/Rustavi2tv	9,716
Netgazeti.ge	https://twitter.com/netgazeti	8,551
Radio Tavisupleba	https://twitter.com/Rtavisupleba	8,445
Oc-media.org	https://twitter.com/OCMediaorg	7,494
Imedi TV	https://twitter.com/tv_imesi	6,985
Forbes.ge	https://twitter.com/forbesgeorgian	6,589
Radio Imedi	https://twitter.com/radioimesi	3,994

Table: Media on Twitter (January 15, 2021) - Internews, 2021

Local news websites have been fast developing their social media presence, with Facebook being their medium of choice. In some cases, local digital media outlets have substantially more social media followers than website visitors. For example, [Mtisambebi.ge](https://www.facebook.com/mtisambebi), which creates original content and tells stories from Georgia's mountainous regions, tops the list of the regional media by number of Facebook followers, but its website is not among the top Georgian websites. On Facebook, [Mtisambebi.ge](https://www.facebook.com/mtisambebi) has more followers than most national websites. [Mtisambebi.ge](https://www.facebook.com/mtisambebi) has been mentioned by individuals residing in mountainous regions, such as Ambrolauri, interviewed by this study as a trustworthy source of information.

Media	Facebook	Followers
Mtisambebi.ge	https://www.facebook.com/mtisambebi	225,224
Inforustavi.ge	https://www.facebook.com/inforustavi	129,241
Batumelebi.netgazeti.ge	https://www.facebook.com/batumelebi	96,335
Reginfo.ge	https://www.facebook.com/www.Reginfo.ge	52,019
Qartli.ge	https://www.facebook.com/Qartli.ge/	47,589
Sknews.ge	https://www.facebook.com/sknewsge	41,608
Livepress.ge	https://www.facebook.com/livepressge	34,900
Kutaisipost.ge	https://www.facebook.com/kutaisipost/	30,610
Gurianews.com	https://www.facebook.com/gurianews	25,081
Aliq.ge	https://www.facebook.com/aliQmedia	14,642

Table: Local Digital media on Facebook (January 15, 2021) - Internews, 2021

Local websites have smaller audiences and activity on Instagram, as is the general trend among media outlets.

Media	Instagram	Followers
Jnews.ge	https://www.instagram.com/jnewsge/	9,466
Inforustavi.ge	https://www.instagram.com/info.rustavi/	8,756
Mtisambebi.ge	https://www.instagram.com/mtisambebi/	5,557
Sknews.ge	https://www.instagram.com/sknews.ge/	3,735
Batumelebi.netgazeti.ge	https://www.instagram.com/batumelebi.ge/	2,477
Aktual.ge	https://www.instagram.com/aktual.ge/	1,464
Livepress.ge	https://www.instagram.com/livepress.ge/	641
Qartli.ge	https://www.instagram.com/qartli.media/	565
Aliq.ge	https://www.instagram.com/aliq_media/	523
Kutaisipost.ge	https://www.instagram.com/kutaisipost/	447

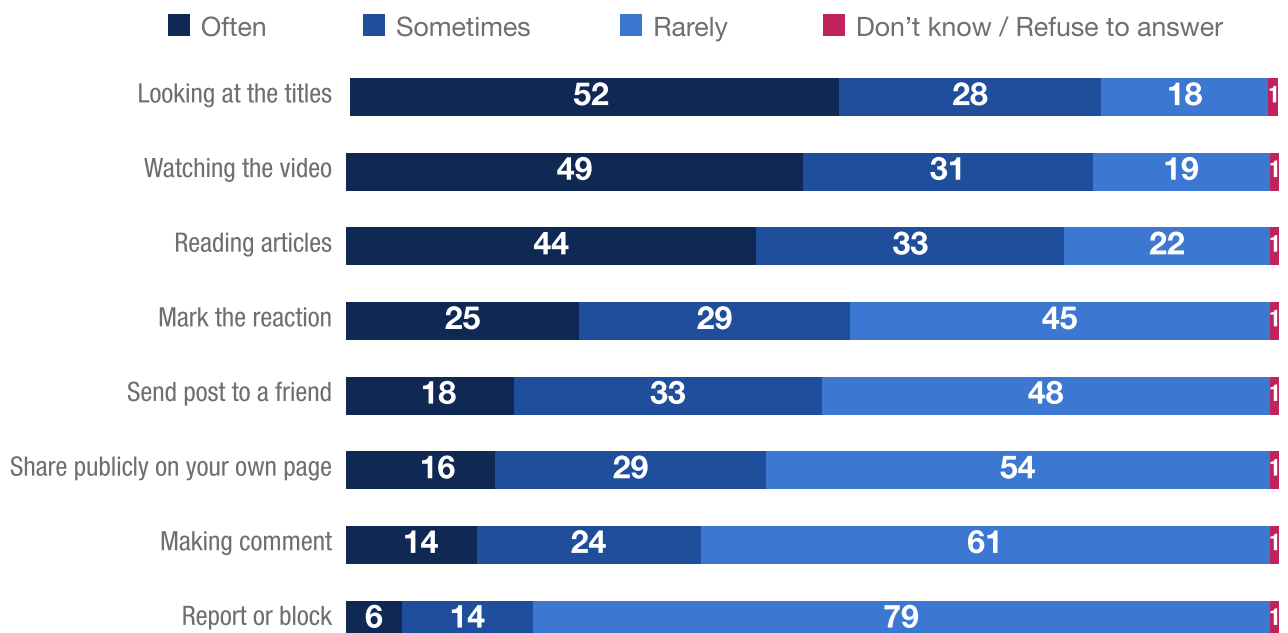
Table: Local Digital media on Instagram (January 15, 2021) - Internews, 2021

Social Media Behavior

The survey conducted for this research also examined the habits of Georgian social media users. 61% of all respondents use the Internet on a daily basis, and another 14% say they are online less frequently.

Of those who use the Internet, only 24% say they search for news by themselves, while 72% say they consume mainly information that they “came across”. People are more likely to “scroll” than “browse” for information. The study found that users most often read the headlines (52%) or watch the video (49%), with just 44% saying they often read articles they see online.

How often do you do the following in social networks? (Out of 75%, who uses Internet)



Among interactive activities, users most frequently like or react to information (25%), less frequently, they share information to friends (18%), or share publicly on their profiles (16%), and comment (14%). News messages are often blocked or reported by only 6% of Internet users.

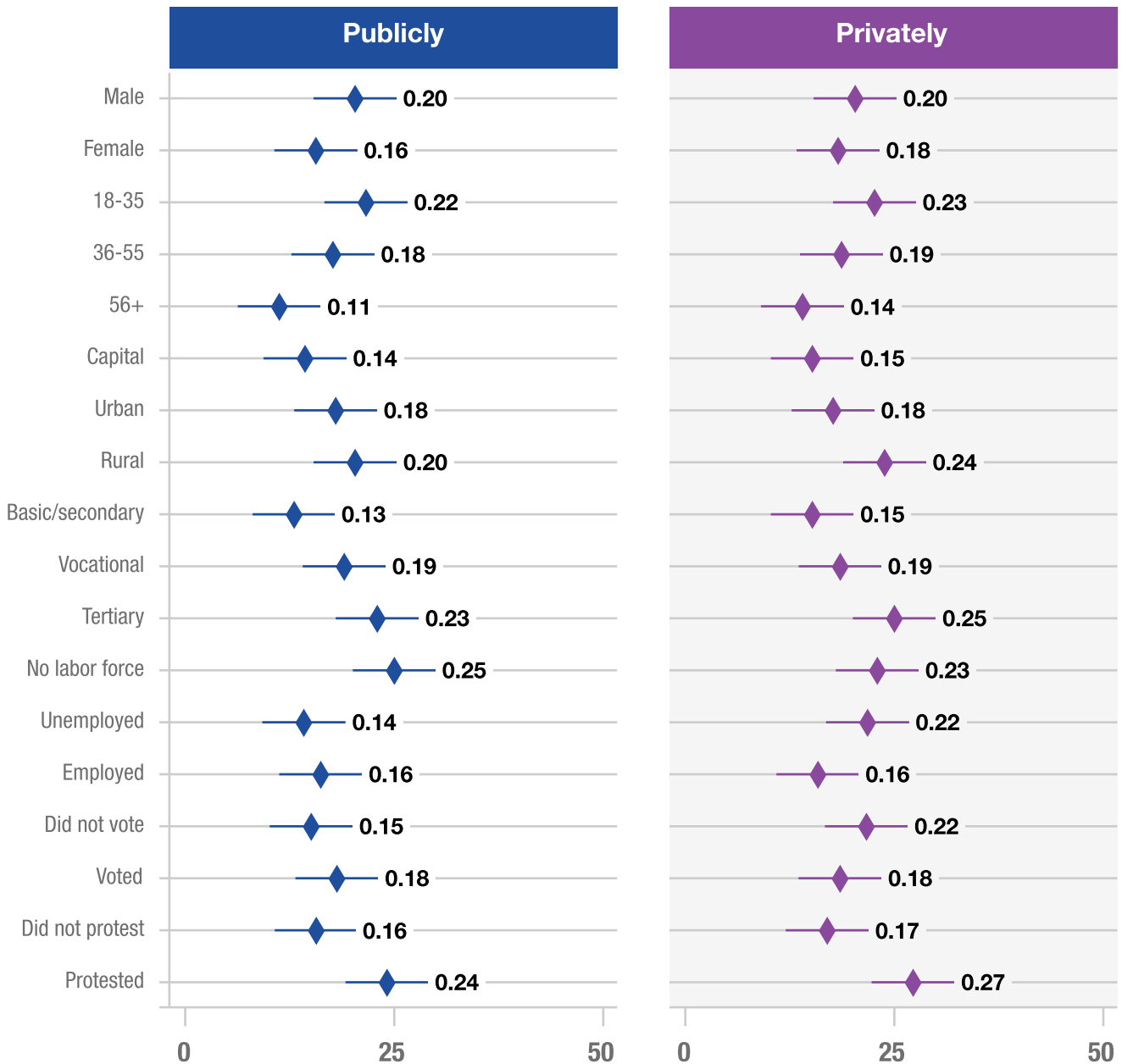
The study shows that activities such as reacting to news/updates, commenting on them, sharing them and sending them to friends in personal messages is more frequent among women users than men.

37% of women say that they always (4%) or often (33%) react to news in social networks, while only 29% of men do the same. Also, 36% of women always or often publicly share posts on their timeline and 25% of men do the same.

Older people are less likely to share information publicly, compared to younger people. Users with higher levels of education and political engagement are more likely to share information publicly.

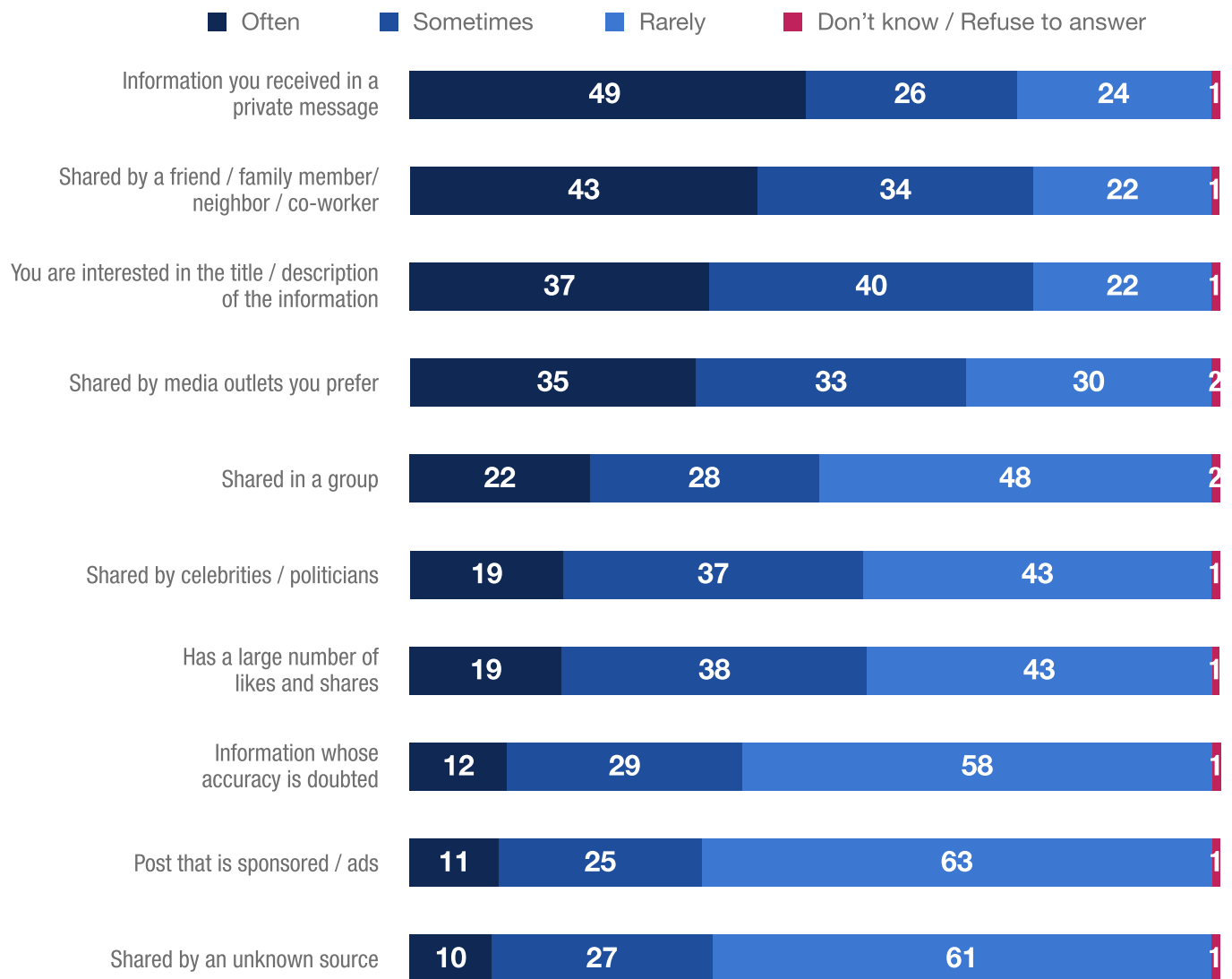
Social media activity: Sharing

Predicted probabilities of logit estimates, 95% CIs



The study was interested in whether the source of information or who shares the news, affects information consumption. When asked how often they would read an article that they were exposed to by different sources, 49% said that they would read news they get in private messages and 43% say they read information shared publicly by people they know, a family member, friend, neighbor or other. 35% said they read information shared by the media outlets they trust. Users were least likely to read an article from an unknown source or advertising or sponsored content. 63% say they are rarely or almost never interested in paid posts. 61% rarely read information shared by an unknown source, and 58% of Internet users also rarely read information the accuracy of which they doubt.

How often or rarely do you read the following in social networks? (Out of 75%, who uses Internet)



Public Pages and Profiles

Creating pages has become a common practice for individuals, public and private entities in Georgia. Government ministries, agencies and departments, big and small businesses, political organizations, non-profit organizations and individuals - all have pages in Facebook. For many small organizations and initiatives, Facebook Pages have replaced websites as their primary online platform.

As a 40-year-old male interviewee from Ambrolauri mentioned, “if I don’t know a specific page, I want to look up some information on it, I search for it on Facebook, everyone has their own pages nowadays.”

One of the reasons for the abundance of pages is the ease of targeted communication on Facebook. Facebook allows public and private organizations and individuals to reach their audiences with sponsored content more easily and cost-efficiently than other forms of advertising.

Facebook pages in Georgia can be categorized into broad groups: general and niche interest pages, organizational pages - including pages of government, pages of political parties and groups, business and non-profit organization pages, and influencer pages. Because there is overlap between influencer pages and influencers’ verified profiles, the analysis of influencer verified profiles is also included here.

While not all public figures fit the idea of a traditional information provider, Georgian Facebook users do get news and information from public figures, whom they follow on social media. The respondents in the national survey conducted by this study were more likely to consume a post on Facebook by a public figure (56%) than not (43%).

A 22-year-old woman from Tbilisi said she did not follow public figures, but visited their pages and skimmed through the discussions on their “walls”: “if something important is happening, I check their [influencers’] wall; I’m interested if they are going to write something about [what has happened]”.

At the same time, most people could not recall names of influencers they follow.

“Can't tell, but sometimes I do check out their walls, cannot recall the names, I check politicians' and some other people's posts,” said a 57-year-old woman from Telavi.

Users also have hard time telling the difference between pages and groups, or even recalling the nomenclature of platform features. They do not have a nuanced enough understanding of the platform to differentiate. A 62-year-old male doctor from Kutaisi, when asked about the pages and groups he followed, said this: “I don't really know this terminology, I may get it wrong”.

Generally, individuals cannot differentiate well between Facebook pages, groups, verified profiles or personal accounts. When asked about influencers, or people whose pages they follow, focus group participants and interviewees typically refer to personal unverified profiles as pages.

Buying and Selling of Pages

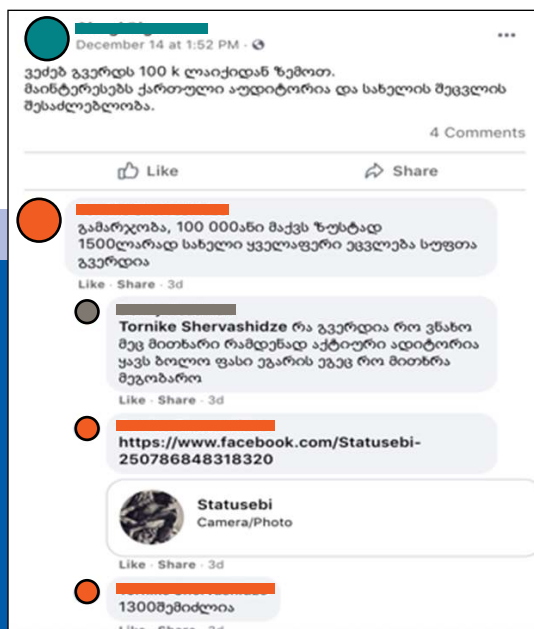
Pages serve multiple purposes, and in some cases have become for-profit enterprises for their owners. Pages are bought and sold on the market – in apparent violation of Facebook’s rules - with buyers interested in acquiring the existing audiences attached to pages. Some general or niche interest pages are also created to generate “likes” and be sold at a good price to buyers who want to quickly attract large audiences. Trading in pages and “likes” goes on in public and closed groups. The group “Buy/Sell Pages” (გვერდების ყიდვა-გაყიდვა) trades in pages.

One listing, shown here, offers that “148k page is for sale, with the Georgian audience, for 1500 Lari”.

In another post, also shown here, the buyer is “looking for a page with 100k plus likes. Interested in Georgian audiences and possibility to change the name”.

Comments from sellers read: “Hi, I have exactly 100,000 for 1500 Lari, name and everything can be changed, it's a clean page”;

In response to the comment, another user asks: “What's the page? I want to see, tell me as well how active is the audience, and if it is the final price, my friend”.



General Interest Pages

Individuals interviewed for this study were largely unable to recall general interest pages they use. Notably Georgia’s largest pages were rarely mentioned when people were asked which pages they followed, despite their huge audience. These large pages have been included in the analysis to demonstrate the type of content the wider public is exposed to or interested in.

Page	Facebook Link	Likes
Advert.ge	https://www.facebook.com/advert.ge	1,630,199
Good Films Make Your Life Better	https://www.facebook.com/thegoodfilms/	1,237,130
Elegant	https://www.facebook.com/Elegant1337/	1,068,047
Relaxing Mood	https://www.facebook.com/relaxingmood99/	759,840
Simplicité	https://www.facebook.com/SimpliciteMagic/	588,678
•Silence•	https://www.facebook.com/silencegeorgia/	554,255

Table: General interest Facebook pages (January 25, 2021) - Internews, 2021

The general interest public pages with over 500,000 likes mostly carry entertainment content. The audience size of some pages is over one million, which is remarkably high for a country of just 3.7 million citizens. For instance, a page operated by a travel agency attracts an audience with high quality photos and visuals. The largest pages are: *Advert.ge*, which shares best international video adverts, *Elegant*, which shares music videos, while *Relaxing Mood* and *Silence* (the latter operated by the travel agency) share photos of spectacular scenery; *Simplicité* has random memes, cartoons and "some cool stuff," in the words of the page description. While interviewees and focus group participants did not mention any of these top pages specifically, they mentioned following pages covering arts, history, literature, sport, cars, and beauty.

Individuals interviewed by this study discussed how public pages attract audiences. A 24-year-old male from Kaspi is following humorous content, memes, and posts just about anything.

"Sometimes I question myself, why am I following this group? Maybe, because at some point, some of my friends asked me to check it out and I started following it and then forgot [...] I may unfollow it at some point."

Government Pages

Almost every government entity is active on Facebook and operates a page or pages. In addition to ministries, structural entities, such as agencies and departments, have their own pages. These pages are used to promote information on government programs and activities, and are typically dominated by one-way communication, with page administrators moderating commentary from users. Typically, the government agencies engage with individual users via direct communication through the Messenger app rather than publicly on page "walls".

The International Society for Free and Fair Elections and Democracy's (ISFED) social media monitoring report⁴⁴ identified 127 official Facebook pages of local self-government agencies. Ahead of the 2020 Parliamentary Elections, pages of self-governance bodies of large to mid-size towns across Georgia were involved in indirect campaigning in favor of the ruling party, a phenomenon, the ISFED report mentions, that was new for the 2020 elections. This strategy did not go unnoticed by some of the focus group participants in this study, who said they were familiar with pages of their municipal bodies but were not very satisfied with the information.

"City hall pages...only advertise their activities," said a 33-year-old male from Telavi, adding that the town hall's page was sharing content that applauded the deeds by the ruling party: "there is no alternative viewpoint, just advertising of what they [government agencies] do."

Political Pages

Political pages are a subset of interest and organizational pages. These can be pages representing a position or a political ideology, such as "*Liberalism kills*" or pages representing political parties and movements, or of supporters of parties and politicians. The International Society for Free and Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED) has conducted social media monitoring ahead of the 2020 parliamentary elections and found "309 pages of political parties, 117 pages of majoritarian candidates and 26 pages of political leaders."⁴⁵

ISFED reported that the political parties were actively using social media platforms for pre-election campaigns, especially Facebook. 17 parties had each operated more than one official pages during the campaign. For example, the main opposition party, *United National Movement*, had 85 pages, the ruling *Georgian Dream party* - 59 pages, while newly established opposition party *Lelo* had 39 pages. Other opposition parties, such as *European Georgia - Movement for Freedom* had 30 pages, *Tribuna* - 13 pages, and the remaining 12 parties had pages ranging from 2 to 9. These included main party pages, pages for regional and city district branches, as well as pages for youth branches. In addition, individual candidates of major parties running in the elections had their own pages. Some participants in the focus groups organized by this study recalled the names of local candidates, having memorized their names through Facebook.

Participating in the election campaign were multiple unofficial satellite pages of political parties, including satellites of the ruling party and the main opposition parties. These pages were used for discrediting opponents, as ISFED monitoring showed. Most of the content on these pages was visual - videos with verbal mockery, insulting comments, memes, and photo manipulations.

⁴⁴ ISFED. Social Media Monitoring – First Interim Report (1 October 2020, p. 3). <https://isfed.ge/eng/sotsialuri-mediis-monitoring-i-sotsialuri-mediis-monitoring-i-shualeduri-angarisshi-2020-tslis-saparlamento-archevnebi>

⁴⁵ Ibid., p.3

Corporate Pages

The pages of the two biggest banks in Georgia, *TBC Bank* and *Bank of Georgia*, are among the most followed pages, with over 600,000 likes for each. In general, corporate pages are mostly followed by customers, employees, and partner businesses. For example, a 40-year-old male from Ambrolauri, said he follows pages of big wine producing companies and wine clubs, together with the tourism department page, as he himself is in hospitality and wine business.

COVID-19 and resultant lockdowns prompted retail and service companies streamline corporate pages and social media channels to boost business and online sales.

Influencer Pages

Page	Facebook Link	Likes	Followers
BERA	https://www.facebook.com/beraofficial/	761,598	785,844
Giorgi Vashadze გიორგი ვაშაძე	https://www.facebook.com/G.Vashadze/	464,112	507,013
Kakha Kaladze კახა კალაძე	https://www.facebook.com/kakhakaladzeofficial/	452,146	493,163
გახარია	https://www.facebook.com/GakhariaGiorgi/	331,709	364,704
Nika Melia ნიკა მელია	https://www.facebook.com/Nika.Melia5/	166,951	174,894
Nino Surguladze	https://www.facebook.com/NinoSurguladzeOfficial/	164,367	190,200
Guram Sherozia's Blog	https://www.facebook.com/guram.sherozia.blog/	158,750	175,612
Giorgi Kekelidze გიორგი კეკელიძე	https://www.facebook.com/GiKekelidze/	155,710	173,355
Shorena Begashvili	https://www.facebook.com/ShorenaBegashviliPage/	148,797	148,797
Shalva Ramishvili	https://www.facebook.com/ShalvaRamishviliOfficial/	136,858	146,015

Table: Top ten influencer pages (January 25, 2021) - Internews, 2021

Influencers, who are mostly politicians, journalists, and celebrities, engage with followers either through pages or personal accounts.

The 2020 Parliamentary Elections attracted followers to the pages of the leaders of ruling and opposition parties, as the graph shows. Pages of influential politicians do not differ much except for the ideologies of their owners. The content of these pages consists mostly of the politicians' programmatic statements and comments on current affairs, as well as articles and videos of their news media appearances.

One of the most followed pages is the page of the Mayor of Tbilisi, Kakha Kaladze. The page is known for utilizing various interactive tools for engagement, such as Facebook Lives and stories, to engage audiences. Many individuals interviewed for this study said they follow Kaladze's page.

One focus group participant in Telavi mocked local politicians for awkward attempts to make their pages more engaging: "Recently, some politicians in Telavi tried to become Facebook personalities, following the example of Kakha Kaladze and Aleksandre Elisashvili, but humiliated themselves. That didn't work, so to say. Turns out, they didn't have the talent."

Kaladze's official Facebook page has earned 452,146 "likes" and 1.58 million total interactions in the past 12 months⁴⁶. In addition to the page, Mayor Kaladze operates a verified profile, with 83,516 followers. He posts occasionally on the verified profile, but the Facebook page is more active.

The list of influencer pages is topped by *BERA*. The page belongs to Bera Ivanishvili, a musician and a son of the founder of the Georgian Dream party, tycoon Bidzina Ivanishvili. Bera has the biggest number of followers, but he posts less frequently than other influencers.

In one of his posts, dated April 16th, 2020, Bera explained that he and his family are now more active on TikTok and use Facebook only for important news.

On the list of influencers, we see singers, bloggers, and writers. The most active among these pages is *Guram Sherozia's* Blog, which shares a diverse content, ranging from public affairs to memes, humor, Sherozia's own music videos and calls for charitable giving. The page is managed not only by Sherozia himself, but also by other administrators. The page is very active, with 6.37 posts a day on average during the past 12 months⁴⁷, and over 100 comments below each post. *Giorgi Kekelidze*, a writer, and director of National Library shares excerpts from his books and other texts, calls for charitable giving and comments on political or social events in the country to the sizable audience of followers.



⁴⁶ Source: CrowdTangle, a public insights tool owned and operated by Facebook, January 15, 2020

⁴⁷ Source: CrowdTangle, a public insights tool owned and operated by Facebook, January 15, 2020

Influencer Verified Profiles

A search for verified Georgian Facebook profiles in CrowdTangle, a public insights tool owned and operated by Facebook, returned only a handful of results. Apparently, influencers themselves do not deem it necessary to create public figure profiles for themselves, and instead use their private profiles to engage with large audiences. Among those who have verified public profiles are politicians, journalists and media pundits, and celebrities.

Page	Facebook Link	Likes	Followers
Mikheil Saakashvili	https://www.facebook.com/SaakashviliMikheil/	1,129,998	1,276,547
Nanuka Zhorzholiani	https://www.facebook.com/nanuka.zhorzholiani	261,354	261,354
Nika Gvaramia	https://www.facebook.com/nika.gvaramia.129	171,745	171,745
Shorena Begashvili	https://www.facebook.com/begashvili.shorena	148,797	148,797
David Sakvarelidze	https://www.facebook.com/davit.sakvarelidze	139,186	139,186
Ia Parulava	https://www.facebook.com/ia.parulava.7	108,516	108,516
Kakha Kaladze	https://www.facebook.com/kala.kaladze	83,516	83,516
Khatia Dekanoidze	https://www.facebook.com/khatia.dekanoidze.7	48,769	48,769
მამუკა ხაზარაძე Mamuka Khazaradze	https://www.facebook.com/mamuka.khazaradze	20,682	20,682
Natalia Antelava	https://www.facebook.com/natalia.antelava	1,933	1,933

Table: Top ten Verified Profiles (January 25, 2021) - Internews, 2021

Ex-president Mikheil Saakashvili has the largest audience, with over one million followers. Nanuka Zhorzholiani, a TV host on *Mtavari TV* and a candidate in the recent 2020 Parliamentary Elections, has a sizable audience of 261,354 followers. Many of the posts on her profile are videos from her TV show, charities she supports, statements about political, economic, and social matters. A political content on the page expanded since Zhorzholiani decided to run in the 2020 Parliamentary Elections.

Director and talk-show host on *Mtavari TV*, Nika Gvaramia, is the most active among verified profile owners, with an average of 3.43 posts per day over past 12 months. With 171,745 followers, Gvaramia's posts generate more interactions than postings on any other verified accounts, except for the account of Mikheil Saakashvili, an ex-president of Georgia.

Shorena Begashvili and Ia Parulava, Georgian actresses and celebrity TV hosts, have over 100,000 followers each. The celebrities post advertisements, personal opinions, calls for charitable donation to benefit needy individuals, etc.

Natalia Antelava is a former *BBC* reporter and founder of media outlet *Coda Story*. She is followed by some 1,933 individuals. Unlike Antelava, most Georgian journalists do not have verified accounts.

Overall, individuals interviewed for this study mentioned they followed people who were not on the list of top influencers but had expert knowledge, strong opinions and influence in the community. People tend to follow those whom they believe, and who can explain complex topics in simple ways.

23-year-old male from Tbilisi explained that he “befriended” people on Facebook whom he did not know personally but whose opinions he valued and followed their posts: “there are some public figures, with whom I have some ideological or other connection and because of that I'm interested in their opinions about specific issues.”

Disinformation in Pages

The popularity of Facebook pages in Georgia makes them targets for disinformation campaigns. As ties with the EU and NATO become stronger, Russian-led disinformation campaigns have also expanded in scope, aimed at manipulating public attitudes and undermining Georgia’s democratic development.⁴⁸

While international threats have generated significant concern, political disinformation from domestic political actors is also becoming pervasive. Local and international organizations, such as International Society for Free and Fair Elections, Media Development Foundation, FactCheck by GRASS, MediaChecker and the Atlantic Council’s Digital Forensic Research Lab identify sources of disinformation and false narratives on Facebook. Facebook reviews suspect content and periodically takes down pages, groups and accounts from the platform.

In December 2019, Facebook removed 39 Facebook accounts, 344 pages, 13 groups and 22 Instagram accounts associated with *Panda*, an advertising agency in Georgia, and the Georgian Dream-led government for engaging in ‘coordinated inauthentic behaviour’ (CIB).⁴⁹ In April 2020, Facebook named another media firm, *EsPersona*, linked to the ruling party as part of a CIB network, also implicating the ruling party itself and the main opposition party.

Facebook removed 511 pages, 101 Facebook accounts, 122 groups, and 56 Instagram accounts in one network, as well as a separate network of 23 Facebook accounts, 80 pages, 41 Groups, and 9 Instagram accounts linked to the United National Movement.⁵⁰

Two more networks were taken down for politically linked Georgian Facebook assets for CIB in October 2020, once again associated with a media agency working with political parties; 50 Facebook accounts, 49 pages, four groups, eight events and 19 Instagram accounts were linked to *Alt-Info*, and 54 Facebook accounts, 14 Pages, two Groups and 21 Instagram accounts linked to two political parties, Alliance of Patriots and Georgian Choice.⁵¹

While Facebook’s actions in removing these networks of accounts are positive, the large numbers of pages and parties involved demonstrate that this behavior is widespread and persistent in Georgian politics. Notably, each of the networks publicly removed by Facebook for CIB between December 2019 and October 2020 was initially identified through local reporting from Georgian media and civil society, including ISFED. This points to the key role played by local actors in performing vital monitoring and content moderation for global platforms.

⁴⁸ Kintsurashvili, Tamar. (2018) “Anti-Western Propaganda.” Media Development Foundation. <http://mdfgeorgia.ge/uploads/library/89/file/eng/AntiWest-2017-ENG.pdf>

⁴⁹ <https://about.fb.com/news/2019/12/removing-coordinated-inauthentic-behavior-from-georgia-vietnam-and-the-us/>

⁵⁰ <https://about.fb.com/news/2020/05/april-cib-report/>

⁵¹ <https://about.fb.com/news/2020/11/october-2020-cib-report/>

Groups on Social Media

In Georgia, 58% of Internet users say they are members of Facebook groups, 37% are members of Messenger groups, 18% are in groups on Viber, and 13% are in groups on WhatsApp. 2% of users belong to groups on other social networks, such as ok.ru, vk.ru or others. It should be noted that 33% are not members of any group in social networks.

There are differences in platform preferences by age groups. 70% of the population aged 18-35 say they are members of Facebook groups, while only 58% in the 36-55 age group and 37% in the age group over 55 are joining Facebook groups.

44% of Internet users aged 18-35 are members of Messenger groups, and 23% are members of Viber groups, while only 8% of adults over 55 are in Viber groups, and 23% are in Messenger groups. 38% of the population aged 36-55 are members of Messenger groups and 17% are in Viber groups.

Women are more likely to join groups as 40% of men and only 27% of women report they do not belong to any groups in social media platforms. 62% of women and 54% of men are members of Facebook groups.

There are several types of groups, with which Georgian users engage. Large public groups on Facebook with over 500,000 users offer a mix of politics, entertainment, health, religion and human-interest stories. These groups are administered by various Facebook pages rather than individuals. Often, several groups are owned and managed by the same page or a group of pages. The owners cross-post content in groups they own.

Other types of Facebook groups are interest-based groups, such as groups dedicated to parenting, beauty, health, farming, and other interests. These groups are smaller, and mostly closed, however, easy to join.

Public Groups

The biggest Georgian public groups have between 500,000 and one million members. The groups were created between 2014 and 2018 (as per table below). Up until 2019, members of open Facebook groups could add any user with an account to the group without that user's explicit permission. This was a common practice in Georgia, which explains sizable membership of public groups created before 2019. Nowadays, adding people without their permission is not possible on Facebook, and building large groups is more difficult.

Large public groups serve multiple goals. Many of these groups operate as for-profit enterprises and provide income to their owners. Public groups are actively used to promote political actors and business interests. For example, at least one of the groups with over 500k members can be seen offering space for advertising. These groups are also commodities, sold and bought on the market, with trading happening in closed groups. For example, the Facebook page *IM-ინტერნეტ მარკეტინგი (IM - Internet Marketing)* invites interested parties to join its closed group, entitled *"Sale and Purchase of groups: Internet Marketing"*. The latter group, created in January 2017 and uniting 2.800 members, states in its "about" section that it is to *"Buy or sell: pages, groups, profiles, etc., everything related to social network"*.

As social media content monitoring ahead of the 2020 Parliamentary Elections showed⁵², various anonymous actors utilize Facebook groups for hidden political advertising to avoid the disclosure of political advertising, required by Facebook. The monitoring showed that posts discrediting political parties and their members appeared in large public and interest-based groups. These posts were frequently shared by fake accounts.

This practice of posting in or buying access to large public groups, is used as an alternative to post boosting and other forms of targeting wider audiences by political actors. ISFED concludes that large Facebook groups *"may become an important tool for quick dissemination of disinformation and propaganda and may create a new challenge for attempts to protect the information space."*⁵³

One of the posts on the page reads: *"93,000-member group for sale for 150 Georgian Lari."* As with the buying and selling of pages, this practice is conducted openly on the platform, despite apparently violating Facebook's own terms of service.

Managing large groups can have clear benefits, which creates an incentive to boost membership. One of the deceptive practices to increase the size of a public group on Facebook is to create a group on a "hot" topic, such as COVID-19, and later change the group's name and focus. One such example is mentioned in the report by the DFRLab.

⁵² ISFED. Social Media Monitoring – First Interim Report (1 October 2020, p. 5). <https://isfed.ge/eng/sotsialuri-mediis-monitorin-gi/sotsialuri-mediis-monitoringis-l-shualeduri-angarishi-2020-tslis-saparlamento-archevnebi>

⁵³ ISFED. Social Media Monitoring – First Interim Report (1 October 2020, p. 5). <https://isfed.ge/eng/sotsialuri-mediis-monitorin-gi/sotsialuri-mediis-monitoringis-l-shualeduri-angarishi-2020-tslis-saparlamento-archevnebi>

It states that the group “*Stop COVID-19 Georgia*”, created in March 2020 and operated by the network of Georgian far-right and pro-government groups, was renamed to “*საქართველო — GEORGIA*” (*Georgia — GEORGIA*) on October 29, a day prior to the 2020 Parliamentary Elections.⁵⁴ The reverse practice is also common, whereby groups changed their names to incorporate the word “COVID-19” to attract more members while continuing to offer content unrelated to the pandemic. For example, a group named “*საბიჟეთი დაბურჯი*” (*Madness bets*), created in 2016, was renamed into “*კორონავირუსი/COVID-19 ფორუმი*” (*Coronavirus COVID-19 Forum*) on March 21, 2020, which earned the Group around 7.000 more likes.

The focus groups and interviews conducted for this project show that individual users rarely access large public groups proactively. The respondents had hard time naming a single group of which they were a member.

“I cannot recall the names, but there are many groups, I also belong in many of them,” said 18-year-old male from Akhalkalaki.

Rather, these individuals consume content shared by these groups in their feeds, without paying attention to the source of the content.

“Sometimes you don't even need to join the group, they enroll you themselves,” said another participant, 46-year-old female from Gori.

This explains why individuals interviewed by this study in person or in focus groups could rarely recall public groups they had joined, or when exactly they joined the groups. Technologically savvy users, mostly young users, said they were routinely removing themselves from public groups as soon as they would notice they had been added to the group. Some older people do that too.

For example, a 62-year-old female from Telavi, said: “I always try to remove myself from these groups; they are often very aggressive towards each other and there's a lot of hate speech there too.”

Interviewees have diverse experiences with Facebook groups. In some cases, people purposefully follow certain groups, as a 23-year-old male student from Tbilisi said: “I follow public groups to observe how media outlets use social media to increase the number of viewers.”

On the other hand, for a 34-year-old male from Pasanauri, the exposure to too many ideas and communication in groups or chats is something he avoids: “I already have subscription to what I'm interested in, don't need these groups, they tire me.”

Public affairs constitute a big share of content in both public and closed groups on Facebook. Large public groups are more likely to feature political content prominently and promote political points of view. These groups typically apply bias in selecting political content, siding either with the government and the ruling party or with the opposition. The group membership too appears more homogenous in its support of either the government or the opposition.

Media are actively using public and closed groups for promoting stories and earning audience attention. The distribution of media stories across groups is selective, with pro-government media content shared in government leaning public groups, and pro-opposition media stories found in the groups favoring the opposition. As Sopo Gelava, Atlantic Council's DFRLab Research Associate asserts, traditional and online media often take advantage of paid promotion to increase engagement with their content in large public groups.

The search in CrowdTangle, a public insights tool owned and operated by Facebook, for groups posting in Georgian language for the past 12 months, retrieved over 500 public groups, of which the most sizable groups have been studied for this report. Notably, the group admins for a number of these groups heavily overlap or are in some cases identical, which suggests that the groups are being run for profit or influence.

⁵⁴ DFRLab: Georgian far-right and pro-government actors collaborate in inauthentic Facebook network

Name	Link	Group Members	Avg Posts per day (12 months)
1.000.000 ქართველი (1.000.000 Georgians) Created <i>March 18, 2015</i>	https://www.facebook.com/601637823314617	861,616	5.5
ჯანმრთელობა/ექიმები (Health/Doctors) Created on <i>January 29, 2018</i> with the name "Facebook group <3". Name last changed on <i>February 9, 2018</i> .	https://www.facebook.com/groups/846459012198895	827,290	2.6
ქართველები (Georgians) Created <i>Jul 24, 2015</i>	https://www.facebook.com/groups/414646828741148	623,995	14.9
(აქ სიყვარულია) Love is here Created <i>Feb 9, 2018</i>	https://www.facebook.com/groups/2030645307210827	595,152	1.5
Best of the Best Created <i>Jan 18, 2014</i>	https://www.facebook.com/groups/2030645307210827	585,946	13
მილიონი ქართველი (Million Georgians) Created <i>Jul 31, 2015</i> Changed name to მილიონი ქართველი <i>Mar 10, 2018</i>	https://www.facebook.com/groups/1605345439732136	549,613	88.9
ფაქტები • Facts Created <i>Jul 1, 2015</i> Changed name to ფაქტები • Facts <i>Oct 21, 2017</i>	https://www.facebook.com/groups/1450557775246741	548,223	45.9
საგიჟეთი (Looney-bin) Created <i>Mar 21, 2016</i> Changed name to საგიჟეთი <i>Nov 29, 2016</i> Changed name to საგიჟეთი /// Nika Samnidze <i>Nov 19, 2016</i> Changed name to საგიჟეთი 😊 <i>Nov 1, 2016</i>	https://www.facebook.com/1573257719659253	502,156	55.8

Table: The list of public groups with membership over 500,000 (January 25, 2021) - Internews, 2021

1.000.000 Georgians is the largest group in Georgia, with over 861k members. As its name suggests, the group aims to eventually reach 1 million members. It has 21 administrators and moderators. The average number of posts per day in this group during the past year has been 5.5 posts per day, which is lower than the posting frequency in other sizable public groups. The total interaction over past 12 months is among the highest with 2.74 million.

Interestingly, the group is administered by 20 individuals and several pages, among them:

- [“Internet News”](#)
- [“Latest News”](#)
- [“Georgians”](#)
- [“Anuki Kavtaradze”](#)
- [“ჯგმ ტაქსი • GeoTaxi.Ge”](#)
- [“Travel”](#)
- [“Gvantsa Labauri”](#)
- [“Database of cell phone numbers”](#)

All these pages are interconnected and linked not only to [1.000.000 Georgians](#), but also to numerous other groups as well. Most of the groups are affiliated with [Nomrebi.com](#), a website.

Posts and comments in this group display a positive bias towards the government. However, comments also feature criticism of the government and the ruling party.

Ethnography of [1.000.000 Georgians](#) illuminates how large public groups operate. The ethnographic observation occurred over 7 days prior and after the 2020 Parliamentary elections. To examine the interaction between group members, the study analyzed posts and comments shared on October 18-20, and on November 4-7.

The observation showed that the group mostly posted photos or videos, with fewer links to external websites and status updates. The content of posts is diverse, lacks purpose or context, and

is therefore difficult to categorize. Some of the posts are funny videos, while others are stories of prominent people, photos and videos of beautiful women, and entertaining posts. One common feature of these posts is that they are broadly aimed and rather positive in nature.

People do not always actively respond to these general interest and “feel-good” posts, at least not in the form of comments. When they do, they usually do not interact with each other by commenting in the commentary thread, but, rather, respond to the content itself. For example, users post compliments and approving emojis, gifs or stickers underneath images of historic figures, sportsmen, or models.

Politics seems to be a force that stimulates people to comment and interact with each other. Political news and events are much more tangible, relevant, and current than, for example, a love story of Erich Maria Remarque and Marlene Dietrich, described in one of the general-interest posts. Public affairs prompt members to comment and engage with information, even if it is to deride or oppose political actors featured in these posts. Correspondingly, those posts which allow people to speak 'directly' to the politicians and express their grievances and discontent seemed to be especially popular.

In the days following the 2020 Parliamentary Elections, election-related content, including news articles, was shared in the group, and the members became much more active, and the comments sections became more dynamic. The majority of the comments have accumulated around three posts, all of which were news articles featuring photos of politicians and their statements. Most of the comments were overwhelmingly negative and aimed at the people highlighted in the articles. However, members interacted with the content, and in some cases with each other, much more passionately than in other cases, discussing various issues, recalling stories and rumors.

Million Georgians, which bears the strikingly similar name as 1.000.000 Georgians, has 549,613 members. It has the highest number of posts per day at 88.9 post per day. The group was created under a different name, not specified in its history, on July 31, 2015, and changed its name to the current one on March 10, 2018.

Most of the news media content comes from liberal and opposition-leaning media outlets. For example, the group shares news stories by:

- [On.ge](#)
- [Netgazeti.ge](#)
- [Tabula.ge](#)
- [Formulanews.ge](#)
- [Radiotavisupleba.ge](#)
- [TV9news.ge](#)
- [Jam-news.net](#)
- [Inforustavi.ge](#)
- [BM.ge](#)
- [Interpressnews.ge](#)
- [Formula TV](#)
- [TV Pirveli](#)
- [Mtavari TV](#)

Despite liberal-leaning news media content, the comments display greater variety in political positions.

Ethnographic analysis of *Million Georgians* analyzed posts and comments over 7 days prior and after the 2020 Parliamentary elections on October 18-20, and on November 4-7.

The analysis showed that the news stories shared in the group are diverse and touch upon everything that may be happening in Georgia at present. People actively react to the news stories and discuss them. Often, they respond directly to the headline of the article or a remark made by the original poster accompanying the news article. Thus, the comment sections are very dynamic.



There is a substantial user to user communication in this group. People not only react to posts, but also to comments posted by other users. It is clear that people not only read posts and news articles, or videos shared, but they also actively read comments sections and interact with each other.

Regardless of the content of the post, the discussion almost always turns to politics, and the information is discussed from a political standpoint.

Comments show a clear rift between the two political camps – the ruling Georgian Dream party and the supporters of the main opposition party, the United National Movement. People often argue with each other, criticizing and even ridiculing political parties they disagree with and supporting parties with which they align. Such comments are often very emotional and angry. Users do not shy away from sharing speculations, rumors, and conjectures. To support their points of view, users share supportive information in comments. There are users who wish to distance themselves from polarized political viewpoints by beginning their comments with statements that they are apolitical or do not support either side.

Health/Doctors (created on January 29, 2018 under the name - "[Facebook group <3](#)"; and renamed last on February 9, 2018) has amassed a large membership (827,290) amidst COVID-19 pandemic, however, the content of this page is not limited or particularly focused on health issues. The group discusses religious, political, and human-interest stories. It too, frequently posts news stories, mostly, by online news media. It is worth noting that among the group's 16 administrators and moderators there are several service and marketing companies and a news outlet, [Radio Georgian Times](#). News about politics is less frequent, while engagement with these posts is mostly a negative commentary. Some content concerning elections and politics in general is removed by moderators.

Love is Here has the same team of administrators and moderators as the one operating [Health/Doctors group](#). The group was created on February 9, 2018, on the same day as [Health/Doctors](#). Much of the content in [Love is Here](#) and [Health/Doctors](#) group is cross posted. The content of this group is diverse, with posts about religion/faith, charity, COVID-19 and entertainment as well as frequent posts of political nature. The group posts stories from news media outlets [Resonance Daily](#) and [Georgian Times](#). It is possible to trace political bias in the wording of posts and commentary. Most users favor the ruling Georgian Dream party and its leader, Bidzina Ivanishvili. Posts about the GD and Ivanishvili earn positive comments, while posts about the political opposition generate mostly negative reactions.

The monitoring of social media content, conducted by the International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED) ahead of the 2020 Parliamentary Elections, demonstrated that posts on pages used to discredit the oppositional United National Movement and European Georgia parties, appeared in Facebook groups too and were "[possibly sponsored or shared in groups with thousands of members using fake accounts, as suggested by an unusually high level of post interactions.](#)"⁵⁵

Best of the Best (Created Jan 18, 2014) – has the same administrators as the top group [1.000.000 Georgians](#). These administrators also run a separate group named [Georgians](#). The content of the group is entertainment, religion and politics. In most cases, political posts are shared by the same Facebook profile, who posts news stories from [Imedinews.ge](#), [1tv.ge](#), and [Interpressnews.ge](#). Comments under political posts are usually negative towards the opposition. For example, the protests against irregularities in the recent 2020 Parliamentary Elections earn mostly negative comments. There are negative comments underneath the posts about the western partner nations of Georgia.

Public group **Georgians** (created Jul 24, 2015) has the same administrators as the group [1.000.000 Georgians](#) and [Best of the Best](#). The content is largely overlapping between the groups. Political posts in this group are often identical to the posts in the group [Best of the Best](#), and even shared by the same individual. Commentary under political posts is also active. In terms of political bias, the posts about the ruling party earn mostly negative commentary. Other than public affairs content, the group posts cover religion, art, charity, and other general interest topics.

Facts is a group administered by page [Facts](#) and four other pages -- all associated with page [Cheap air-tickets](#). Its content relies on beautiful imagery and videos, such as videos of Georgian scenery and cultural heritage. The group shares posts about charitable causes and needy people, religious content, such as images of saints and religious figures. This group almost never carries any political content. The big part of the content is not original but rather shared from other pages or personal accounts.

The other top groups provide a similar mix of public affairs, news, entertainment, travel, useful tips, products and services, among others.

⁵⁵ ISFED. Social Media Monitoring – First Interim Report (1 October 2020, p. 5). <https://isfed.ge/eng/sotsialuri-mediis-monitoring-i-shualeduri-angarishi-2020-tslis-saparlamanto-archevnebi>

Interest-Based Groups

Interest-based groups dedicated to all kinds of topics, such as parenting, beauty, health, renovations, cooking, and other interests, are smaller, and mostly closed, however, easy to join. These groups are generally much less likely to discuss public affairs - although cases of members posting political stories and discussing election outcomes in health or gardening groups are easy to find. Political bias and selective promotion of political content is less likely to occur in interest-based groups, which have members with more diverse political views. Moderators in interest groups are also more likely to delete political posts.

Individual users have more conscious engagement with interest-based public groups, such as groups devoted to parenting or health. While interviewees were generally unable to remember being part of any open, general interest groups, many mentioned they were part of interest-based closed groups on Facebook.

For example, 27-year-old female participant from Kutaisi said: “I’m a member of groups about flowers, cooking, and very good information from there [...] in a women’s group, they share women’s stories, their life, families. Also, there are recommendations about healthcare, which doctors they go to and such stuff.”

A similar experience is shared by 40-year-old male from Ambrolauri, who said, “I am in groups about winery, we share information about the topics we are interested in, about agriculture, advice on different things, or ask questions and get answers from others, or I may share something others don’t know.”

Many interest-based groups also feature profit-oriented activities, such as sales, advertising, and promotion. However, some groups, such as *Georgian Moms*, explicitly ban advertising and sales, and remove promotional content.

Engagement in such groups can be related to a specific cause. For instance, some of the interviewees were members of closed activists’ groups, such as Shame Movement’s closed group *Society of Freedom Evangelists* (over 12k members), or *No to Oni Cascade!* group (over 6k members), which opposes a hydroelectric power plant construction in the Racha region. Sometimes engagement could be quite temporary, based on the interests of individuals at the moment – for example, an 18-year-old male student from Akhalkalaki said, he “is in one group where the youth write about education programs and I’m also quite active there.”

Although the political content is not necessarily part of most interest-based groups, these groups serve as community places for many Facebook users, among them political activists.

Geographically Based Groups

These Facebook Groups target geographically based communities and bear the names of big and small towns of Georgia. For many residents these local groups form a key part of the information ecosystem, providing hyperlocal news that may not be available through formal channels. Interviewees recalled more easily these groups, bearing the names of towns and regions in which they live. The participants were able to name these groups, albeit, often mistakenly citing their names, and were able to give examples of types of news shared in these groups.

Participants noted that these groups serve as a source of information about local politics and public and cultural events, crimes and accidents, and products and services sold and bought locally.

“There are several groups, about Telavi, created by people from Telavi and they write interesting posts [...]; these groups are one of the most important sources of information about local affairs,”
- said a 65-year-old woman from Telavi.

Often, small local businesses advertise in these groups.

For example, 27-year-old unemployed male engineer from Lanchkhuti, said that he found information in these community groups about “what’s for sale, who’s got what, who needs what, who’s lost what, who’s looking for what; don’t know, a lot of information is shared, what happened in Lanchkhuti, what accidents, what do we need...if something’s done in infrastructure or else is shared there as well.”

Local media outlets are the creators or administrators of some of these local community groups. Media share stories, place advertisements, and use groups as the space for people to engage with their content.

For example, a 31-year-old man from Akhalkalaki, shared he is in “[Akhaltsikhe’s TV9 group and gets their information instantly.](#)”

Local media also actively use these groups to reach new users, elicit engagement, and bring traffic to their pages.

Closed Chat Groups

This study found that most user-to-user interaction and information sharing happens in closed chat groups in Messenger, WhatsApp and Viber. There, users actively engage with each other, share information and express opinions.

“We talk about everything, current affairs, politics, COVID, what not; we talk about topics we would discuss in real life,” said 49-year-old female from Kutaisi.

Almost all social media users interviewed for this study mentioned they used closed chat groups in Messenger, Viber and WhatsApp. These small, closed groups are generally populated by people who know and trust each other, such as family, friends or co-workers.

While closed group chats have been associated with the spread of misinformation and disinformation in other parts of the world, particularly due to the ease of forwarding messages, research conducted for this report found that Georgians generally felt these spaces to be more trustworthy than open groups or communication channels. In these trusted settings, Georgians felt more protected to share information and express opinions without inviting aggressive arguments.

Individuals are less likely to share news and discuss public affairs publicly, but, rather, with co-workers, close friends, relatives, and classmates. For some interviewees, only closed chat apps are useful, or used as a trusted source of information – as a 22-year-old female said, she does not use Facebook, but uses Messenger for communication and has a friend who shares important public affairs information with her.

Facebook Group Netnography

Case Study 1

Netnography of Public Groups “My support to Gakharia” and “With Mikheil Saakashvili - Headed home 🇧🇪🇧🇪”

(18.10.2020 – 20.10.2020)

The Georgian Dream – the party Prime Minister Gakharia represents - is Georgia’s ruling party, while the United National Movement (UNM) is the main opposition party. After a lengthy run as the ruling party, UNM was succeeded by the Georgian Dream following the 2012 elections. Both parties have avid supporters and are in direct opposition to each other. On Facebook, there are two major groups dedicated to supporting the leaders or representatives of these parties, and by extension, the parties themselves.

My Support to Gakharia (ჩემი მხარდაჭერა გახარიას) is a public group available at URL: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/902128526814141>

It is a political interest group, which unites supporters of the Prime Minister Gakharia and the Georgian Dream party.

My Support to Gakharia was created on June 24th, 2019 and is dedicated solely to the Prime Minister of Georgia. The group counts over 63 000 members, one administrator, and one moderator. This study analyzed 24 posts and 4, 829 comments (out of total of 167 posts) shared from October 18th to October 20th. The group is home to thousands upon thousands of like-minded people who are not just enthusiastic about Mr. Gakharia or merely admire his work but are fully-fledged devotees.

While a precursory glance may suggest that there is no diversity of topics in the group, in reality there is a mixture of various types of posts. Among them, user-generated posts that include either text, photos, or both, news articles about social or political issues, updates and information about COVID-19, statements from other politicians and government officials, as well as videos reposted from the Facebook pages of TV channels. The sources include *Channel One of the Georgian Public Broadcaster*, *Imedi*, and *Rustavi 2*, as well as *Marshalpress*, *Business Media*, *Interpressnews*, *Commersant*, and others.

With Mikheil Saakashvili - headed home 🇧🇪🇧🇪 (მიხეილ სააკაშვილთან ერთად-სახლში 🇧🇪🇧🇪), available at URL: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/730256324085695>, is a group of supporters of the former president, Mikheil Saakashvili, and the main opposition party, United National Movement. It has since changed the name, but the purpose stays the same.⁵⁶

The group was created on August 28th, 2019, and has over 59 000 members, twelve administrators, and five moderators. Most of the active users are supporters of the UNM and mainly disseminate the information in support of the party and its leaders. This study has analyzed 15 posts and 2,923 comments (out of total of 111 posts) shared from October 18th to October 20th in the group. These include text posts and photos, a lot of videos reposted from other Facebook pages, mainly *Mtavari TV*, and almost no links to news articles.

⁵⁶ The group has since changed the name four times. Now it bears the name “We will not let arrest Nika Melia! Get out!” (ნიკა მელიას არ დაჭერინებთ! გამოდი გარეთ 🇧🇪🇧🇪)

The group has various rules, including a ban on video and group advertisements, trading, and holding contests. Additionally, the group cannot be joined as easily as Gakharia's group - potential members are first required to answer if they would like to see Mikheil Saakashvili as their Prime Minister.

There are some similarities as well as differences in what posts are most popular in both groups. In Gakharia's group, the most popular posts generally fall into two categories: a photo of or an article about the Prime Minister, praising him and expressing support, or a post featuring the leaders of the opposition who are then derided by the members. Additionally, news articles that highlight positive changes that the government enacts and text posts that mock the opposition, praise the Prime Minister, and by extension, the Georgian Dream, are also popular. In Saakashvili's group, the most popular posts contain photos of the UNM leaders and political candidates with their children, posts calling for the support of the UNM, and posts that serve to criticize and discredit the government or insult its leaders.

In both groups, the comments underneath of most positive and favorable posts often include or entirely consist of numbers assigned to the parties in the elections. In the case of Saakashvili's group, it is number five, that is, the number assigned to the UNM in the electoral list; In the case of Gakharia's group, it is number 41, which is the Georgian Dream's number in the electoral list. These types of comments demonstrate the members' political preferences and call on others to participate in the coming elections and vote for their chosen political parties.

In the group of Gakharia's supporters, despite the flow of favorable posts and comments, unforeseen incidents and trolling happens. One such incident involved a favorable and popular post, which contained a photo of the Prime Minister and asserted he was "a legend," prompting the members to agree by liking the post. Unexpectedly, the post was later discreetly modified by the original poster and the favorable photo was replaced by one which insults the man.

"Our Prime Minister, thanks for being patient, now you can go away [followed by swearing]," was the caption on the new photo.

The comments on the post were shut off. The picture of the updated post now displayed all "likes" and positive engagement, which was attached to the previous photo, giving the impression that the group members agreed with the insult to the Prime Minister.

The study contacted the person responsible for the post, who shall remain anonymous, but was eager to explain the prank. The person joined the group together with a friend with the intention of playing a prank, then created, and submitted the post that seemed in line with the group's interests. The poster noticed that similar posts were often shared in the group and that "*such silly posts get a lot of responses from bots,*" and while they assumed that many members who commented and liked their post were genuine supporters of the Prime Minister, according to the poster, many of them were bots who interacted with the post only to "*create hype.*" This incident raised several interesting questions: firstly, are there indeed the so-called bots populating the groups? The original poster did come to this conclusion after exploring various posts in the group. Secondly, how should members of the group, if they are indeed genuine, be protected from such occurrences? While the original poster did not intend any harm, he still misled the members.

Generally, the posts featuring the Prime Minister (Gakharia's group) and photos of the UNM leaders with their children (Saakashvili's group) get the majority of comments, and whether genuine or not, most of them express support and affection. In both groups, the person in the photo or the article is often spoken to directly. In the case of Gakharia's group, the Prime Minister is addressed respectfully as "*Mr. Giorgi*" or "*Mr. Prime Minister,*" while derogatory nicknames are reserved for the leaders of the opposition. In Saakashvili's group, in some of the comments, the leaders of the UNM are idealized, and the users refer to them in superior and admirable terms, for example - "*Our Savior.*"

It is difficult to say if the commenters truly believe that the politicians whom they are addressing read their comments and are reachable in these groups, but at least some of the comments suggest this might indeed be the case.

For example, in the posts featuring the Prime Minister people make direct requests for help and assistance. While under the post where the leader of the opposition is discussed, some commenters wonder aloud: **“Poor man, don’t you read what they write about you?”**

In Saakashvili’s group, the posts that serve to criticize the ruling party include photos and videos that intend to illustrate the inefficiency of the government. For example, a user tries to demonstrate in a video that a person with COVID-19 is not receiving timely medical care in the hospital. Another example is a video filmed at a construction site, where a man points out how a wall collapses to illustrate that the construction in the country is of poor quality. In Gakharia’s group, examples of similar posts include a news article about the opposition leader and the political rally amidst COVID-19 pandemic, as well as another article about the response of a political leader about the alleged torture and subsequent death of a detainee in a Georgian prison, during the time the said politician served in the government.

In both groups, compliments in the comment sections are peppered with more than a healthy dosage of very similar, recurrent gifs, emojis, and stickers, expressing various sentiments and emotions. And while it is easy to get lost in the sea of insults below the more negative posts, most of them do carry an air of sarcasm and humor. Sarcasm, in general, is a weapon of choice when it comes to mocking those politicians that the members dislike.

Dissent in groups

In both groups, generally, the comments are all in a similar vein. However, people sometimes express divergent ideas and opinions, and heated discussions do take place. In Saakashvili’s group, the posts and comments containing criticism of the UNM are not tolerated, and the users that express misgivings about the mainstream opinion are often insulted. There was a case of a constructive dialogue when the users, although disagreeing and supporting different political parties, did not insult each other and just presented their arguments, but occurrences like these are quite rare. In Gakharia’s group, there are mostly two types of comments that deviate from others: firstly, comments made by those that openly oppose the Prime Minister and the Georgian Dream - such members are often rebuked in no uncertain terms. Secondly, the comments made by people who are or were in favor of the Georgian Dream but were left disappointed. The latter comments tend to be more neutral in tone.

Unconditional trust

In a group that has a very narrow focus, especially a politically motivated one, people seem to implicitly trust the information shared. The sources of information are not questioned or scrutinized, and distrust is very rarely expressed towards information provided. The only such instance included the results of the survey, ordered by *Rustavi 2*, regarding the upcoming elections and published in Gakharia's group. Almost all the members who engaged with the post were displeased when the opposing party (UNM) accumulated a certain percentage of votes. While the members doubted the results, citing various reasons, they did not mistrust their source.

One thing that content shared in both groups makes apparent is that people with specific political views appear to favor different media sources. For example, comments in Gakharia's group indirectly point out that *Mtavari TV* is favored by UNM supporters, who are "*drowning in darkness and lies*" by watching the channel.

A member responded to the UNM leader, who in the article shared in the group promised to bring about a lot of change after the elections, by commenting: "*What will you do first, close Imedi TV?*"; seemingly suggesting that *Imedi TV* is disliked by the UNM and is either more trusted or more preferred by the Georgian Dream supporters.

Same goal, different approaches

The sources of information shared in the groups are not only what makes them different. In Saakashvili's group the members appear to be supportive of the UNM in general, not simply focusing on Mr. Saakashvili; as opposed to Gakharia's group, where the focal point is the Prime Minister and less so the party itself.

Saakashvili's group originally had a different name and a different purpose. It was "*a group for supporters of Mtavari TV*," which later rebranded as a group for supporters of Mikheil Saakashvili. The change occurred on October 14th, 2020,⁵⁷ quite possibly in the anticipation of the Elections. The group appears savvier in terms of expanding its reach - employing techniques that are not used by Gakharia's group, mainly "calls to action" prompting the members to share the photos of the political candidates as much as possible.

In the end, however, both groups essentially serve the same purpose: they are utilized for campaigning and promoting their respective political parties, praising their leaders, and disparaging their competitors. Seeing the number of members and how active they all are, it would seem logical to assume that the groups are indeed successful in reaching their goals.

⁵⁷ The group has since changed the name four times. Now it bears the name "We will not let arrest Nika Melia! Get out!" (წიკა მელიას არ დაჰჭერინებთ! გამოდი გარეთ)

Case Study 2

Netnography of Public Groups “1.000.000 Georgians” and “Million Georgians”

(18.10.2020 – 20.10.2020 / 04.11.2020 – 07.11.2020)

“1.000.000 Georgians” (1.000.000 ქართველი), available at URL: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/601637823314617>), and “Million Georgians” (მილიონი ქართველი), available at URL: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1605345439732136>, are both public, general-interest groups with large membership, and while they share similarities beyond the obvious, they also differ in various ways.

Although “1.000.000 Georgians” has been around for several years and does have nearly a million members, it is not very active, neither in terms of frequency and number of posts shared, nor in terms of the engagement with the content itself. It seems that there is no definite line that the group follows, or rhyme or reason to what is shared and why. The motley assortment of posts includes, among others, photos or videos of attractive women, funny clips, or quasi-philosophical, quasi-historical content. However, after the 2020 Georgian Parliamentary Elections, a significant amount of politically oriented content was posted in the group and incited much more rigorous exchanges and debates by its members.

In contrast, “Million Georgians” is significantly more active, both with respect to the number of posts shared and the engagement exhibited by the members. “Million Georgians,” too, has posts of more general nature, for example, images of animals, amusing pictures, or posts with religious content, the latter being by far the most popular topic for members. However, the vast majority of the content shared in the group constitutes articles published by media outlets or videos shared from the official Facebook pages of TV channels. The comment sections are frequently lively and spirited, with people routinely participating in discussions and exchanging information.

Posts as narratives

By and large, the posts shared in both groups offered members a glimpse of what was happening in Georgia at the time the ethnographic research was conducted. Yet, both groups highlighted a slightly different version of that account.

Most of the posts published in “Million Georgians” contain news stories that are neutral in tone and seem to be shared in hopes of driving traffic to certain websites or Facebook pages.

This is evidenced by the fact that the people who share them are often employed by various news outlets. However, the way the posts are occasionally framed may influence how the information is perceived.

For example, the article devoted to the exchange rate of the Georgian Lari is supplemented by a comment from the person who shared it: “The situation is very bad” and a sad emoji.

Highlighting negative aspects of the topic may be a technique employed purely to draw attention to the article or video, nonetheless, it establishes a general mood, which is then echoed in the comments.

While credible news articles or videos, regardless of how the posts are set up, represent the greater part of the content shared in the group, they are interjected with political posts designed to discredit the government or the Georgian Dream party or to support the opposition parties and their claims of the electoral fraud – from multiple photos or videos seemingly containing proof of the rigged elections to a photo of the members of the Central Election Commission (CEC), with a caption that states: "[Thieves of people's votes should be imprisoned!](#)"

Several posts are shared directly from the pages of the opposition parties or their members, among them posts that urge people to come to the protests or posts containing live videos from the demonstrations. It should be noted that a number of these posts - for example, some that contain evidence of the forged summary protocols or Facebook events for the rallies - are shared by the administrators or moderators of the group, in effect endorsing the information presented. Altogether, the topics that are most frequently featured – the information on the pandemic, the state of the Georgian Lari, information about the issues with the elections, as well as the subsequent rallies, combined with the posts demeaning the government and the CEC, paint a picture of a country that has found itself in dire straits.

The atmosphere is entirely different in "[1.000.000 Georgians](#)," where most of the content is rather general and the posts that contain public affairs content are few and far between. Following the elections, while the general interest posts still persisted, a mixture of posts on political issues flooded the group as well, shared mostly by the same two members who joined the group shortly before the elections commenced. The posts fell broadly into two categories. In the first case, one of the members shared content explicitly aimed at smearing the opposition and disproving its accusations.

For example, a video was shared ostensibly showing the activists of the United National Movement (UNM) and the parties affiliated with it interfering with the CEC's work, incriminating secret audio recordings featuring members of the opposition, and other content of similar nature.

In the second case, another member relied less on scandalous information and instead shared articles from more reliable media outlets, yet in effect still relayed information that undercut claims of the opposition.

For example, a seemingly unrelated article about the OSCE's criticism of Donald Trump's allegations of electoral fraud in the US merely presented specific information, but when paired with a statement by Peter Stano, Lead Spokesperson for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy of the EU, declaring that a boycott of the Parliament by the opposition parties would not contribute to the development of democracy in Georgia, only reinforced the idea that the Georgian opposition was engaging in destructive behavior by insisting that the Elections were rigged.

In essence, "[Million Georgians](#)," presents a snapshot of a country rife with problems, issues, and conflicts, and while the group still contains a lot of general posts, they are drowned by the sea of content on socio-political issues, which in combination with the posts discrediting the government and its institutions, which are admittedly less frequent, as well as content from opposition parties, delineate those to blame and those who are beyond reproach.

In contrast, "[1.000.000 Georgians](#)," offers a much more pleasant environment, the discouraging information is scarce, and the group is mostly devoted to entertaining content. After the Elections, the setting changed and the posts that were shared vilified the opposition and refuted their claims while emphasizing that the Elections were successful and democratically held.

Comments as reinforcements

While the posts may create a narrative, it takes final shape only when reinforced with, and within, the comment section.

Comments constitute a vital tool for establishing a tone or a theme around a topic.

In both groups, commenters not only express their preferences or dislikes but, as it often happens, infuse their comments with various rumors and theories which often target some political actors or support others. If we take posts as living organisms carrying the power to influence the audience's beliefs and attitudes, then comments are tentacles that reach far and wide.

For example, in *"1.000.000 Georgians"*, the comments under posts featuring politicians and their statements on the elections, are often extremely negative and disapproving; If an unwitting person happens to stumble upon a post about any of the featured individuals and scrolls through the comment section, he or she will leave with the strong conviction that those discussed are highly untrustworthy.

The commenters often recall various anecdotes or hearsay that cast some politicians in an unfavorable light, likewise, they accuse them of being subservient to other, more influential political figures, for example, Mikheil Saakashvili, former President of Georgia, or Bidzina Ivanishvili, the founder of the Georgian Dream, and express their distrust based on these perceived affiliations. Discussions containing various tales and even personal accounts are commonplace not only in *"1.000.000 Georgians,"* but in *"Million Georgians"* as well, where the comment sections often feature passionate debates, and regardless of the topic of the post, often become a space for political arguments.

Politics have seeped into everyday life, and how the content is perceived or rationalized adheres to political preferences and views of those who consume it, creating connections where there may or may not be any. Information people exchange may often be based on speculations, gossip, and personal beliefs, or be otherwise unverifiable, stories are told about various injustices and corruption, and rumors are often repeated. For example, comments under the article featuring Paata Imnadze, deputy head of the National Center for Disease Control, warning the public about the upcoming COVID-19 peak, are not simply fearful or anxious about the pandemic, but are often imbued with political undertones, with some associating Imnadze with the Georgian Dream and even suggesting that Imnadze and his colleagues are voicing information per the party's wishes.

As a result, the comment sections, often chaotic and completely unmoderated, become a breeding ground for various theories, which can cause significant harm, especially when dealing with sensitive matters.

Some members do recognize that there may be "trolls" or "bots" among them, as evidenced by multiple comments. Admittedly, the idea is not implausible, individuals who add fuel to the fire, antagonize others, and sow seeds of doubt do indeed populate the comment sections. However, occasionally, people are assumed to be bots or trolls when they merely express opinions that are not to the liking of others, therefore it may be possible that labeling someone with such terms serves to belittle their opinions.

The comments in both groups are rarely homogenous, and while the overall sentiment may sometimes sway in one direction or the other, the microcosms of the comment sections are still divided between the two major factions – the UNM and the Georgian Dream supporters. Political polarization manifests itself not only in the way people formulate their opinions but also in the way they refrain from expressing them. People are aware that sharing divergent notions makes them vulnerable to attacks.

Those who do not agree with either political side or propose ideas that are dissimilar to the consensus reached in the comments, are often criticized, which may preclude more moderate members from participating in the discussions.

As one commenter notes:

“Even if you want to write something, it is better not to express your opinion, they constantly insult each other, or they call you a Nazi or a Qotsi [derogatory abbreviations for the UNM and the Georgian Dream members and supporters respectively]. We will not be able to get back on our feet while we are so divided.”

In sum, both groups present starkly different chronicles of the same events, and perhaps inadvertently feed into the outrage and discontent that already exists on both sides of the spectrum; moreover, both groups are susceptible to being exploited for easy dissemination of not only trustworthy content but also rumors or allegations – through posts that are either not moderated, or are authorized by people who run the groups, as well as through comment sections, where unconfirmed information is spread, solidified, and augmented by already highly divided members and may then circulate even further, beyond the boundaries of the group and the online sphere at large.

