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MEDIA INFLUENCE MATRIX: GEORGIA

Technology, Public Sphere and Journalism

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About CMDS

The Center for Media, Data and Society (CMDS) is a research center for the study of media, communication, and information policy and its impact on society and practice. Founded in 2004 as the Center for Media and Communication Studies, CMDS is part of Central European University's School of Public Policy and serves as a focal point for an international network of acclaimed scholars, research institutions and activists.

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Mainly as a result of slow economic growth, Georgia has been struggling to embrace new technologies. During the past decade, internet and mobile penetration have skyrocketed in the country, but that has not significantly changed news consumption patterns and habits. Technological innovation as well as the potential of cheaper internet and massive growth in mobile communications are yet to be fully utilized.

As mobile surfing became more affordable, more than half of Georgians use more than one mobile subscriber identification module (SIM) card and nearly 65% of them use the internet via a mobile device. The growth of the mobile sector was driven by various regulations (primarily, a cut of 4% in the excise tax for mobile services as of 2017) and increased competition (that led to a decrease in prices). In spite of all that, however, media consumption on mobile devices (thanks to friendly mobile web pages, news briefs designed for portable devices, podcasts and applications) has not increased much. The price for the creation and maintenance of a mobile application is still out of reach for most newspapers.

Nevertheless, the internet is expected to lead to substantial changes in Georgia's news media market. Increasingly, news media outlets are moving online and improving their strategies aimed at attracting followers. Moreover, unlike the media market, which is extremely politicized and polarized, the information technology sector in Georgia is still apolitical. None of the technology firms, either internet companies or telecoms, have ownership links with politicians or political parties.

Still, plenty of snags remain.

First, the internet market is dominated by a small group of the globe's technology giants whose business model is based on using local content to generate funding for themselves. None of that revenue comes back to Georgia's news media. On the contrary, the media routinely spend money on advertising on Facebook to ensure their content gets visibility on the platform. For most of these companies, Georgia is a market too small to invest. Hence, none of the world's technology players have an office or a local subsidiary in the country.

Second, policies on promoting journalism online are lacking. Georgian regulation does not cover companies like Google and Facebook and authorities are reluctant to take any action against them although they want Facebook and other foreign technology companies to open local offices in Georgia. All that leaves Georgian media with no other option than paying social networks, particularly Facebook, to be able to discover, attract and connect new readers.

Finally, the growing fake news phenomenon affects the trust in media, making it extremely difficult for independent journalists to compete as, again, the large social networks are used as the main distribution channel for false content. But in that respect, at least, some action was taken. Facebook removed hundreds of pages spreading fake news from its platforms. Many of those were connected with the political party in government.

Such initiatives, doubled by improved use of technologies to push quality content, could be the response, or part of it, to some of the many problems Georgian journalism is facing.

TECHNOLOGY OVERVIEW

New technologies have been slowly, but steadily, spreading in Georgia. In parallel, old, analog forms of communications have been constantly declining. Georgia has gradually become more mobile-focused during the past decade as fixed telephony has been losing importance. In 2018, the number of landline subscribers in Georgia decreased by 16.7% (or 119,000 subscribers) compared to the previous year, according to data for the last quarter of the year collected by the local regulator. [1] Between 2013 and 2018, the number of landline subscribers in Georgia halved to 595,000. In contrast, new forms of internet-powered communication have gained popularity. Voice over Internet Protocol (VOIP) connections grew from 41,000 in 2013 to some 65,000 in 2018.

Landlines

Fixed line telephony in Georgia, in '000, 2013-2018

Indicator	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Total number of fixed telephone lines (PSTN)	565	554	513	283	432	385
Wireless lines (CDMA)	595	491	382	294	217	145
VoIP	41	52	54	64	65	65
Total	1.201	1.097	949	577	714	595

PSTN: Public switched telephone network;

CDMA: Code-division multiple access;

VoIP: Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP)

Source: Georgian National Communication Commission (GNCC)

Landline telephony would have declined even further if telecom companies didn't bundle it into larger service packages customers are lured with. For example, local telcos include landline telephony services in better-priced service packages that include internet, television and, in some cases, even mobile services. Such offers have prompted many households to maintain their landline, even if they rarely use it.

This being said, during the past two decades, mobile communications have been considered one of the most profitable business sectors in Georgia. Mobile penetration in the country was a stonking 143% in 2018, which indicates that many Georgians have more than one mobile subscription. At the end of 2018, there were 5.3 million mobile subscriptions in Georgia, a country of some 3.7 million.

But although mobile services have become more affordable in the country, Georgians still rely on prepaid mobile packages as postpaid subscriptions are not even present. In lieu of postpaid mobile packages, Georgian increasingly use the so-called unlimited packages, which allow them to browse or make calls at leisure and to consume without any limitations content on the internet.

[1] GNCC. "საქართველოს კომუნიკაციების ეროვნული კომისიის წლიური ანგარიში" (GNCC Annual Report), available online at <https://www.gncc.ge/uploads/other/3/3706.pdf> (accessed on 30 May 2019).

Moreover, as Georgians have been traveling without a visa to the European Union since 2017, more affordable roaming services are in high demand, which will further push up data usage. In Q3 2018, 3% of the Georgian mobile subscribers used roaming in the summer season (the busiest season for Georgians travelling abroad). Revenues from roaming services in 2018 reached GEL 30.7m (€9.3m), which accounted for 6.4% of the total revenue from mobile retail use.[2]

Mobile communications

Number of mobile subscribers in Georgia, 2013-2018

Indicator	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Subscribers (m)	5.0	5.4	5.6	5.5	5.5	5.3
Penetration (% of total population)	134%	145%	149%	148%	148%	143%

m: in millions
Source: GNCC

Access to the internet has also increased significantly in the past decade. At the end of 2018, mobile internet penetration reached 79%. Smartphone usage has contributed to much of that, particularly thanks to young users who embrace new technologies more rapidly than older people. Fixed broadband internet penetration has also grown, but at a much slower pace than mobile broadband.

In the browsing business

Overview of internet subscriptions in Georgia, 2013-2018

Indicator	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Fixed broadband internet subscriptions, number of individuals (in '000)	495	572	604	660	737	817
Subscription penetration (% of total households)	44.6%	51.6%	54.4%	59.5%	66.4%	73.6%
Fixed broadband internet subscriptions, number of companies (in '000)	26.8	29.7	31.9	35.8	39.3	41.0
Total numbers of mobile internet subscriptions (in m)	1.6	1.9	2.1	2.5	2.6	2.9
Mobile broadband internet subscription penetration (as % of total mobile service users)	32%	35%	39%	45%	47%	55%
Mobile broadband internet subscriptions penetration (as % of total population)	43%	51%	58%	66%	70%	79%

m: in millions
Source: GNCC

[2] GNCC Annual Report, cit.

The Georgian electronic communications market has been declining for more than five years. However, from 2015 it started to grow again, reaching three years later a growth rate of 7.3%, higher than the GDP growth rate, according to the National Statistics Office of Georgia. The cancellation of the excise tax on mobile services and a cut in the interconnection fees in 2015 have contributed to the growth, allowing mobile operators to provide reduced tariffs on various services and hence attract more customers.

Revenue generated by fixed telephone services continues to decline, allowing mobile communications to cement their dominant market position. Mobile services generated a turnover of GEL 481m (€146.5m) in 2018, a high record for the past five years. Internet also plays a major role in revenue generation. Income from sales of internet services accounted for less than a third of the total mobile communications market in 2016, but the segment has since been growing steadily.

Monetizing technology

Revenue in the Georgian electronic communications market, in GEL m, 2013-2018

Indicator	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Revenue from all electronic communication services*	752	771	752	760	798	846
Revenue from all electronic communication services	353	358	394	390	422	391
(Other communication and non-communication revenues)						
Retail revenues of mobile operators	455	455	407	415	448	481
of which						
Revenue from household subscribers	382	380	332	334	348	356
Revenue from business subscribers	73	75	75	81	100	125

*retail revenue

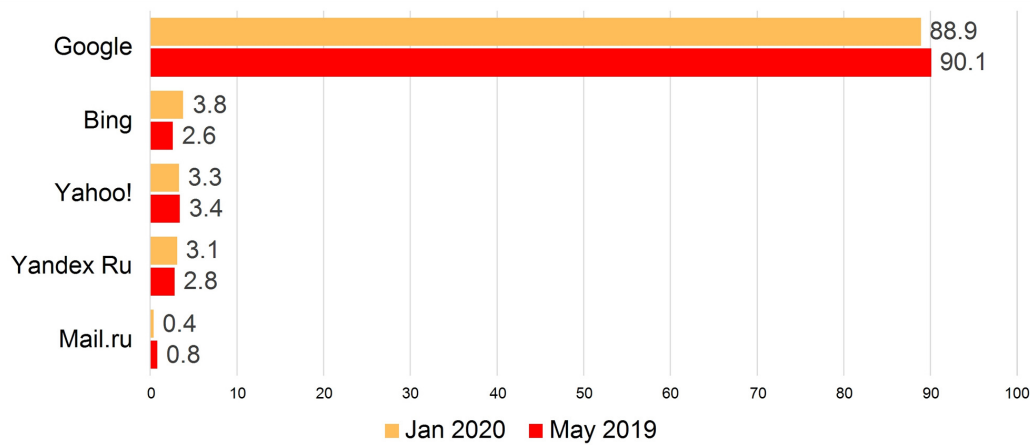
Source: National Statistics Office of Georgia

Google is the reigning champion of search engines in Georgia. However, Georgian web pages are not fully integrated into Google's search engines.[3] Changes in technology and global consumer interconnections allowed tech giants to gain high popularity on the Georgian market, too. Google accounts for 90% of the online searches carried out in Georgia. Its dominant position is also beefed up by the popularity of the Google-owned Chrome browser, which is used by 75% of the Georgian consumers.

[3] "ქართული ინტერნეტის განვითარების მიზნით პეტიცია შეიქმნა" (Petition created for Georgian internet development), Imedi TV, 3 January 2019, available online at <https://imedinevs.ge/ge/teqnologiebi/91791/qartuli-internetis-ganvitarebis-miznit-petitsia-sheiqmna> (accessed on 2 December 2019).

Searching online in Georgia

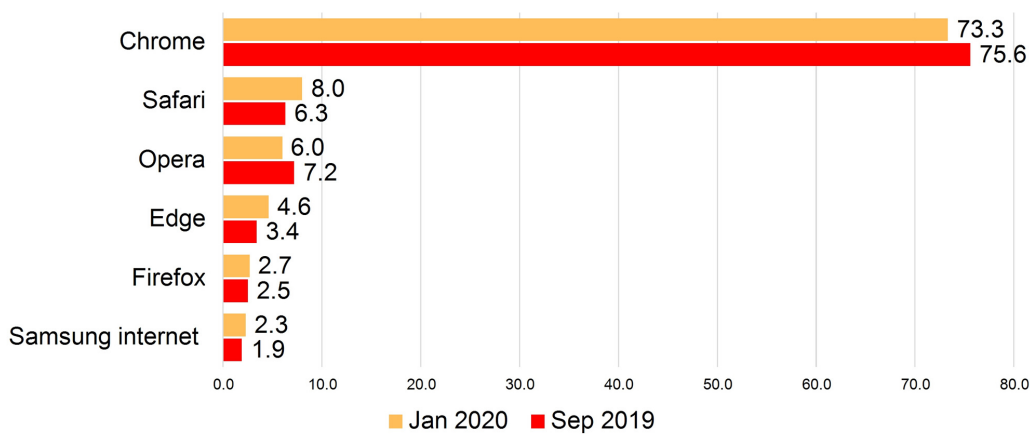
Search engine market share (%) in Georgia, 2019-2020



Note: the remainder to 100% is accounted for by all other search engines
Source: StatCounter

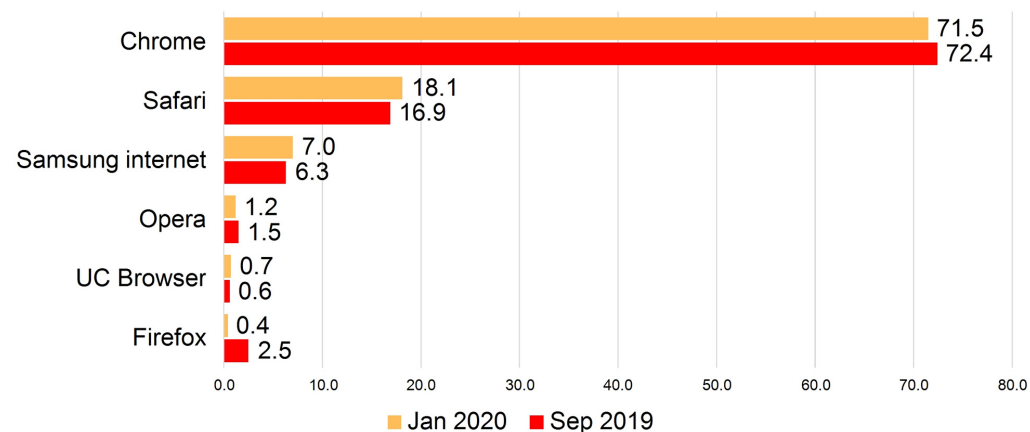
Georgian browsing

Browser market share (%) in Georgian, 2019-2020



Note: the remainder to 100% is accounted for by all other browsers
Source: StatCounter

Mobile browser market share (%) in Georgia, 2019-2020



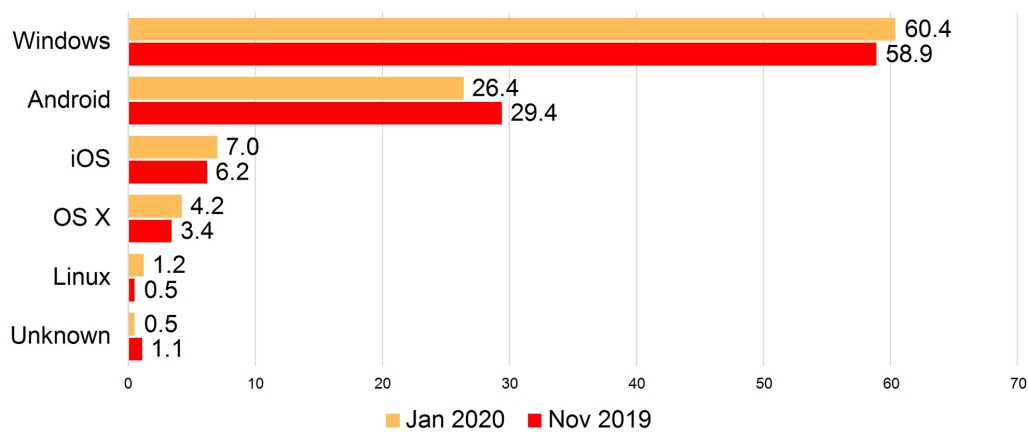
Note: the remainder to 100% is accounted for by all other browsers
Source: StatCounter

Georgians largely use Windows on their devices. Microsoft's share of the operating system market exceeds 64%. It is followed by Android with nearly 24%. Until recently, Samsung and Apple controlled jointly more than 60 percent of the mobile handset market, according to data from the GNCC.

However, the rise in popularity of cheap, Chinese-made smartphones, especially by the telecom giant Huawei, has changed the phone market significantly in recent years. Clashes in recent years over the involvement of Huawei in deploying the 5G technology across Europe and in the United States, as well as the suspension of Google's software from Huawei's technology, are likely to also affect the Georgian telecom market in the coming years.

Game of systems

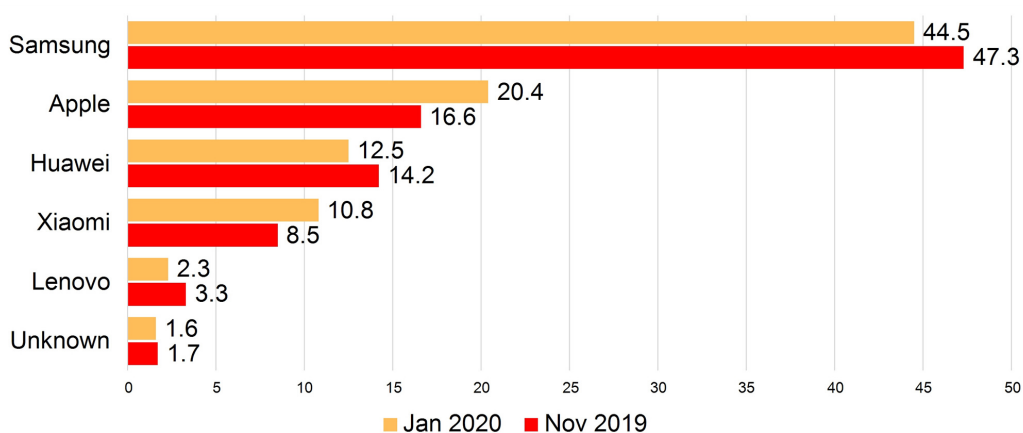
Operating system market share (%) in Georgia, 2019-2020



Note: the remainder to 100% is accounted for by other operating systems
Source: StatCounter

Mobile gadgets

Mobile devices used to connect to the internet in Georgia, share (%), 2019-2020



Note: the remainder to 100% is accounted for by other vendors
Source: StatCounter

Handset census

Number of mobile phones in Georgia, provider breakdown, 2019

Producer	Number of phones	Share of total (%)
Samsung	1,736,455	33.8
Other	1,076,353	20.9
Microsoft/Nokia	729,379	14.2
Apple	665,475	12.9
Huawei	502,646	9.8
Lenovo	172,102	3.3
LG	67,906	1.3
Sony/Ericson	67,201	1.3
TCT	57,104	1.1
HTC	43,356	0.8
ZTE	23,500	0.5
Total	5,141,477	100%

Source: GNCC

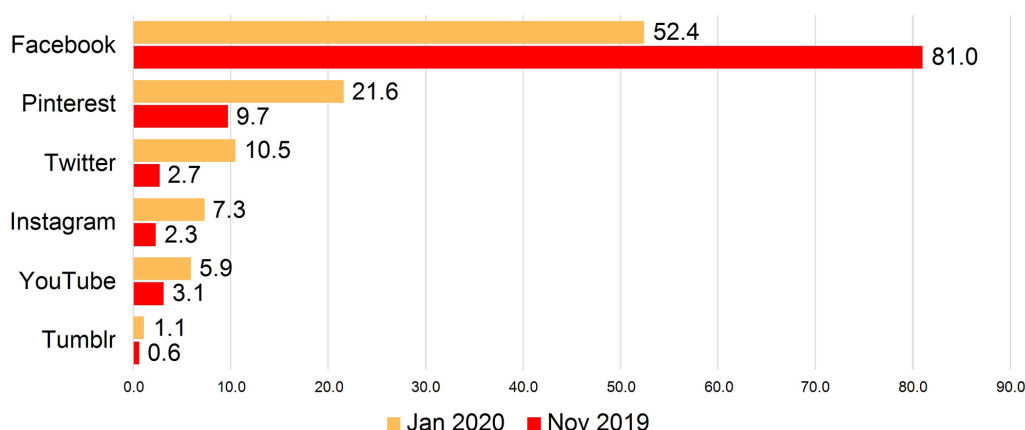
Facebook is by far the most popular social media website in Georgia, with a market share of nearly 81% in November 2019. However, its popularity slightly declined in 2017 because of a series of scandals around fake news and election tampering. This decline was temporary; Facebook started to recover slowly in 2018.

Facebook has usually faced weak competition from Pinterest, YouTube, Tumblr, Twitter and VK. While Twitter and Tumblr have not grown in the past two to three years, Pinterest and YouTube have significantly boosted their share of social media market in Georgia. Pinterest has grown from zero some two years ago to over 15% in April 2019. Major changes were seen in 2020 when most of Facebook's competitors increased their share of the Georgian social media market.

According to data from CMDS gathered from social media companies, Facebook had some 2.2 million subscribers in Georgia in 2019, which is nearly half of the Georgian population and almost 54% of all Georgian internet users.

Virtual socialization

Most popular social networks in Georgia, share (%), 2019-2020



Note: the remainder to 100% is accounted for by other social media. Source: StatCounter

ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY IN MEDIA AND JOURNALISM

Overview and Profiles of Key Players

Company Profiles

Internet and mobile

The internet and mobile market in Georgia are dominated by international giants. Google dominates the search market locally; Samsung and Apple are the largest players in the mobile market and Facebook is the largest player in social media. None of these players have established a local office in Georgia.

The big players in internet and mobile

Key players in the Georgian internet and mobile market, broken down by service

Company	Email service	Messaging and VoIP	Mobile ecosystems	Search	Social network & blog	Video & photo
Apple	✓	✓	✓			
Facebook		✓			✓	✓
Google	✓		✓	✓		✓
Microsoft	✓	✓		✓		
Samsung			✓			
Twitter					✓	✓

Source: CMDS

There is no major home-born search engine in Georgia; the sole attempts to create one had a short lifespan. Today, there is only one local search portal in Georgia: poorly operated, Boom.ge offers news aggregated from only one media partner, an email service, and pages with information on a broad range of topics and categories, including car sales portals, recipes, jobs and travel websites.

Facebook does not have a presence in Georgia and its name is not registered in the local trade registry. Some tasks related to content in Georgian are handled from Facebook's Dublin Office under the CIS countries management department. One of Facebook's employees in charge of Georgia, among other countries and topics, is Nina Nutsubidze. She joined Facebook in 2017. Because of the small market size and low-income generation potential, Georgia is not considered an important market for Facebook.

No other social media network has a registered office or subsidiary in Georgia.

Telecommunications

The Georgian telecom and internet market are dominated by two large players, Magticom and Silknet.[4] In 2018, their total internet retail revenue amounted to GEL 225m, an annual increase of 5.7%. The two companies and the third largest player, Akhali Kselebi, accounted together for some 87% of the total revenue in the Georgian telecom market. The remaining 13% of the market was disputed by a total of 168 companies.[5]

The big telcos

Top telecommunications companies in Georgia, by revenue, 2013-2019 (in GEL)

Company	Ownership	Country of ownership	Business segment	Year						
				2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019*
Silknet	Silknet group	Georgia	Fixed telephone service	44,730,470	41,169,454	34,534,367	30,480,278	27,037,605	23,445,357	18,529,410
			Internet television	14,430,684	16,974,559	24,490,373	25,546,239	29,310,190	34,900,992	37,898,866
			Internet service	57,855,009	61,660,790	73,980,620	80,061,865	84,057,179	82,841,041	85,121,276
			Total	117,016,163	119,804,803	133,005,360	136,088,382	140,404,974	141,187,390	141,549,552
MagtiCom	Telcell Celular LLC; Telcell Wireless LLC	USA	Fixed telephone service	17,989,142	13,078,653	8,455,911	6,181,011	4,894,985	3,581,678	2,351,474
			Internet television	10,161,439	9,665,153	7,578,163	12,050,636	25,300,969	44,666,677	51,240,167
			Internet service	372.89	168.185	80.077	26,638,263	84,598,217	102,302,899	112,811,419
			Total	28,523,471	22,911,991	16,114,151	44,869,910	114,794,171	150,551,254	166,403,060
Akhali Kselebi	Akhali Kselebi Group	Georgia	Fixed telephone service	8,512,013	7,570,268	6,286,162	5,421,444	4,615,545	3,916,748	3,071,819
			Internet television	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
			Internet service	6,587,321	7,975,160	9,368,277	10,060,927	8,763,625	6,711,658	6,885,224
			Total	15,099,334	15,545,428	15,654,439	15,482,371	13,379,170	10,628,406	9,957,043
Caucasus Online**	LTD Caucasus Online	Georgia	Fixed telephone service	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
			Internet television	4,398,073	5,038,278	6,339,288	6,601,741	-	-	-
			Internet service	45,463,384	56,488,771	59,018,530	33,555,179	-	-	-
			Total	49,861,457	61,527,049	65,357,818	40,156,920	-	-	-
Other***			Fixed telephone service	5,074,538	4,639,065	3,896,222	4,550,420	6,462,760	6,328,290	5,462,548
			Internet television	6,733,170	7,712,680	10,242,036	13,095,339	12,447,351	2,993,754	18,488
			Internet service	2,324,274	4,314,775	7,936,851	10,986,050	2,145,212	2,864,042	2,340,701
			Total	14,131,982	16,666,520	22,075,109	28,631,809	21,055,323	12,186,086	7,821,737

*Data for the Jan-Nov; **In 2016, Caucasus Online was bought by Magticom; ***A total of 168 companies.
Source: GNCC

[4] Nino Kvintradze, “ინტერნეტ პროვაიდერების შემოსავლები იზრდება - ბაზრის 80%-ზე მეტი ორ კომპანიაზე მოდის” (Internet service providers’ revenue is growing - more than 80% of the market comes from two companies), Forbes Georgia, 10 June 2019, available online at <https://forbes.ge/news/6405/internet-provaiderebis-Semosavlebi-izrdeba> (accessed on 2 December 2019).

[5] GNCC, Annual Report, cit.

MagtiCom was founded in 1996 and began commercial activities in September 1997. It is co-owned by two U.S. companies, Telcel Cellular (51%) and Telcel Wireless (49%), according to data from the local trade registry. MagtiCom's deputy directors are Andria Zodelava, David Donadze, Gia Koshoridze, and Natia Kakhidze (the first deputy). Gia Jokhtaberidze, the son-in-law of Eduard Shevardnadze, the former president of Georgia, founded MagtiCom and owns International Telcel Cellular, company that in 2016 bought the retail business of the Internet Service Provider (ISP) Caucasus.[6] In March 2017, Magticom also acquired Deltacom, a relatively small ISP that owns fixed broadband access networks and backbone infrastructure across the country. As a result of all these acquisitions, the company became the leader of the Georgian internet market.[7] Some observers raised concerns about market concentration, though pricing and service have not been thus far negatively affected by increased ownership concentration. As a result, it became the leader of the Georgian internet market.[8]

The second largest telco by revenue is Silknet, the former state-owned telecom monopoly, which was restructured in 2010. Four years later, Silknet acquired GMG, the country's largest interactive television station, which broadcasts six sports and movie channels nationwide; it was then rebranded as the Silk Media Group.[9] In 2016, Silknet acquired a small wireless internet service provider, V-TEL Georgia, which operated in several regions of the country under the name of Maxim, and fully integrated it into the company's portfolio. By the end of 2017, Silknet also acquired the satellite company Global TV, which had been in operation since 2006, covering almost half of the country.[10] In 2017, Silknet already had 41% of the internet market in Georgia, with 30% of Georgian families using Silknet's IPTV service. Meanwhile, the company also held 48% of the fixed telephone market. In early 2018, Silknet made the largest deal in Georgia's history, acquiring Geocell, one of the country's oldest and largest mobile telecommunications companies. Together, they formed the largest domestically owned operator in Georgia.[11]

[6] Caucasus Online, "Joint Statement of Caucasus Online LLC. and MagtiCom," 31 May 2016, available online at <http://www.co.ge/en/news/240/> (accessed on 6 February 2020); Magticom. "MagtiCom to become A-Net Ltd and Delta-Net Ltd service provider from March 1, 2017," 27 January 2017, available online at <http://bit.ly/2npGJeg> (accessed on 20 March 2017).

[7] "ვინ ფლობს კომპანია 'მაგთიკომს'?" (Who owns MagtiCom?), BM.ge, May 2018, available online at <https://bm.ge/ka/article/vin-flobs-kompania-quotmagtikomsquot-/16149> (accessed on 4 February 2020).

[8] "Who owns MagtiCom?" cit.

[9] "სილქნეტმა" GMG შეიძინა" (Silknet bought GMG), Bpn.ge, 16 May 2014, available online at <https://www.bpn.ge/article/4333-silqnetnma-gmg-sheidzina/> (accessed on 4 December 2019).

[10] "„გლობალ ტვ“-ის მომხმარებლებს ამიერიდან მომსახურებას „სილქნეტი“ გაუწევს" (From now on Global TV users will now be provided with Silknet), Bpn.ge, 8 January 2018, available online at <https://www.bpn.ge/article/41542-global-tv-is-momkhmareblebs-amieridan-momsakhurebas-silqneti-gautsevs/> (accessed on 1 December 2019).

[11] Sandro Juphalakhiani, "„სილქნეტმა“ „ჯეოსელი“ იყიდა - 1TV მოამბე" (Silknet bought Geocell-1TV), 27 March 2018, available online at <http://tv.ge/video/silqnetma-jeoseli-iyida/> (accessed on 31 January 2020).

Internet subscription

Company	Subscribers					
	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Number of residential subscribers by company ('000):						
Silknet	210	228	240	265	284	275
Magticom	150	173	180	188	287	365
Akhali Kselebi	72	80	82	84	70	65
Others	62	91	101	123	96	112
The number of business subscribers by company ('000):						
Silknet	13.0	13.5	13.8	14.3	15.7	17.9
Magticom	5.8	7.1	8.0	11.4	14.4	14.3
Akhali Kselebi	3.0	3.4	3.5	4.0	4.1	3.9
Others	4.9	5.7	6.6	6.1	5.2	4.9

Source: GNCC

Technology Companies & Government

Technology companies, especially mobile providers, invest significant time and money into lobbying regulators. There are no known ownership links between large telecom players and politicians in Georgia. However, suspicions of political influence in the telecom sector arise now and then.

In 2015, the Finnish-owned telecom group TeliaSonera announced its withdrawal from Georgia. In 2018, it sold its share in Geocell, the second largest mobile provider by revenue in Georgia, to Silknet in a transaction valued at US\$ 153m.[12] The move was part of a bigger exit strategy that included departure from the Central Asian markets. The decision to leave Georgia was apparently triggered by changes in regulations. In 2013, a representative of Geocell said that TeliaSonera had to pay GEL 48m (€14.7m) to extend a telecom license instead of GEL 34m (€10.4m) initially agreed, due to a change made by the regulator, GNCC, in the license tender conditions.[13] The deal led to the creation of a large telecom conglomerate and a market duopoly that worked against Beeline, the third largest mobile service provider by revenue.

Various NGOs also voiced concerns that Beeline's ownership was influenced by Russian capital. Mobitel, which operates on the Georgian market under the name of Beeline Georgia, entered the Georgian market in 2005, the third mobile network operator in the country. In 2006, 51% of

[12] "Telia Company agrees to divest its holding in Geocell," Telia press release, 26 January 2018, available online at <https://www.teliacompany.com/en/news/press-releases/2018/1/telia-company-agrees-to-divest-its-holding-in-geocell/> (accessed 2 December 2019).

[13] "ჯეოსელის დამფუძნებელი კომპანია საქართველოდან გასვლის საკითხს განიხილავს," (Geocell founder discusses leaving Georgia), Tabula, 24 September 2013, available online at <http://www.tabula.ge/ge/story/74929-jeoselis-damfudznebeli-kompania-saqartvelodan-gasvlis-sakitxs-ganixilavs> (accessed on 2 December 2019).

Mobitel's shares were acquired by VimpelCom through its proxy Watertrail Industries.[14] VimpelCom is a company closely affiliated with the Russian political establishment, being controlled by Russian billionaire Mikhail Friedman's company Altimo, in which he holds nearly 53% of the shares. Mobitel is co-owned by three companies whose ownership is hidden in the British Virgin Islands, a tax haven: Watertrail Industries (51%), Delgado Resources (31%), and Ivestico Alliance (17%).

Technology Companies & Journalism

There is no specific regulatory regime for online content in Georgia. The remit of the Georgian media regulatory body, GNCC, covers copyrighted online content. (*See Government, Politics & Regulation in Media Influence Matrix: Georgia*) The GNCC is not empowered to regulate social media or any other online platforms. However, it is foreseen that recent development in EU regulations related to online content, especially the adoption in 2018 of the Audiovisual Media Services Directive (AVMSD),[15] will be incorporated in the Georgia-EU Association Agenda.

The Rise of Misinformation

The use of social media as a disinformation channel has been a worrying trend, especially in a country where disinformation is generally thriving. According to the Computational Propaganda Research Project (COMPROP) of the Oxford University, Georgia is described as a country with a high level of propaganda content.[16]

Facebook, the leading platform for disinformation content in Georgia, has taken action against several cases of fake news dissemination, removing a total of 39 accounts, 344 pages and 13 groups from Facebook and 22 accounts from Instagram that originated in Georgia. According to a statement put out by Facebook, the accounts were taken down because of their "behavior, not the content they posted." In spite of an alleged attempt to conceal identities and links of these accounts to other entities, it transpired that the disinformation dissemination activity led to Panda, an advertising agency in Georgia that has business links with the Georgian Dream-led government. In total, the removed accounts spent almost US\$ 316,000 on advertisements on Facebook and Instagram. The incriminated pages were followed by over 440,000 accounts.

The removed accounts included pages that claimed to represent news organizations, political parties, public figures, activist groups and media outlets. Facebook did not publish a full list of the names of the removed accounts, releasing only the names of a few (Fastnews.ge, Mypress.ge, and Erovnuli Media (meaning "national media" in Georgian). The Georgian team at the Digital Forensic Research Lab of the Atlantic Council, a Washington, D.C.-based think tank, and FactCheck Georgia, a local NGO project, covered the removal of the Facebook accounts.[17]

[14] "The State of the Internet – Who Controls Georgia's Telecommunication Sector?", Transparency International Georgia, December 2012, available online at https://transparency.ge/sites/default/files/post_attachments/State%20of%20the%20Internet,%20Press%20Release%20ENG.pdf (accessed on 2 December 2019).

[15] See more at "Revision of the Audiovisual Media Services Directive (AVMSD)," available online at <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/revision-audiovisual-media-services-directive-avmsd> (accessed on 2 December 2019).

[16] Samantha Bradshaw, *The Global Disinformation Order 2019 Global Inventory of Organised Social Media Manipulation*, 31 January 2020.

[17] Eto Buziashvili, Givi Gigitashvili, "Inauthentic pages linked to majority government taken down in Georgia," Medium, 20 December 2019, available online at <https://medium.com/dfrlab/inauthentic-pages-linked-to-majority-government-taken-down-in-georgia-e31baebfa73a> (accessed on 2 February 2020).

Most of these accounts were publishing content waxing lyrical about the Georgian Dream-led government and criticizing opposition parties and activist groups.[18]

The number of fake news websites catering to the Georgian audience has dramatically increased in the past nine years. Most of them propagate a nationalistic, pro-Russian, anti-EU, anti-NATO, anti-American and anti-LGBT message. Some of these websites promote right-wing, nationalist parties. For example, Geworld and Saqinformi are known for being pro far-right movement outlets, strongly against the United National Movement (UNM), an opposition party founded by Mikheil Saakashvili in 2001. These websites write stories based largely on fabricated data and misinformation. In most of them, they argue that America is an aggressor, inspiring revolutions and encouraging terrorism, and that Russia is fighting against them.[19]

According to Media Development Foundation (MDF), a local NGO, the most influential propaganda organization in Georgia is the online edition of Georgia and World (Geworld.ge). The editor-in-chief of the publication is Irakli Todua who runs the Creative Union of Georgian Journalists, an umbrella organization of several propaganda-spewing outlets such as Asaval-Dasavali (newspaper), the Georgian Times (news agency) and New Georgia TV. The internet domains of both Geworld.ge and Sakinform are owned by Historical Heritage, company registered under the name of Taras Gagnidze.[20] Other outlets on this list include Obieqtivi TV and the newspaper Asaval Dasavali. (*For more information about ownership of media outlets in Georgia see Funding Journalism and Government, Politics and Regulation in the Media Influence Matrix: Georgia chapter*) Obieqtivi TV is operated by a for-profit entity, LTD Media House Obiektivi, and is co-owned by a group of local entrepreneurs and politicians. It is closely affiliated with the Alliance of Patriots of Georgia, a far-right political party. Asaval Dasavali newspaper was founded in 1992 and is published every Monday. Its owner and editor is Lasha Nadareishvili. According to Transparency International Georgia, an anti-corruption NGO, Nadareishvili owns a number of other companies related to Asaval Dasavali, including the Georgian News Agency, and is a board member of the Georgian Press Association. The newspaper publishes stories filled with hate speech against various ethnic, religious and sexual minority groups as well as different political groups.[21]

One of the most problematic aspects of online disinformation in Georgia is the tacit support such platforms receive from politicians. FactCheck Georgia says that the country's former prime minister and Georgian Dream party leader, Bidzina Ivanishvili, regularly encourages disinformation by keeping mum on anything that would risk Russian aggression against Georgia.

Some of the disinformation websites that target the Georgian public generate revenues through advertising, but there are also many websites that are financing themselves directly through government funding. In 2013-2014, at least US\$ 45,000 was spent by the government, through advertising contracts signed by ministries and state agencies, on anti-western and hate speech

[18] Mariam Tsitsikashvili, “„ფეისბუქის “დიდი წმენდა” (Great cleansing of Facebook), Factcheck.Ge, 24 December 2019, [available online](#) (accessed on 31 January 2020).

[19] Tamar Kinwurashvili. ანტიდასავლური პროპაგანდა (Anti-western propaganda), 2018, available online at http://mdfgeorgia.ge/uploads/library/89/file/anti_dasavluri_propaganda_2017_-_GEO.pdf (accessed on 2 February 2020).

[20] Nata Dzelishvili, Tazo Kupreishvili, “Russian Influence on Georgian NGOs and Media,” June 2015, available online at <https://idfi.ge/public/upload/Meri/Russian%20Influence%20on%20NGOs%20and%20Media.pdf> (accessed on 2 February 2020).

[21] ასავალ-დასავალი | მითების დეტექტორი.” Asaval -Dasavali. Mythdetector Mythdetector.Ge, 2020, www.mythdetector.ge/ka/profile/asaval-dasavali. Accessed 2 Feb. 2020.

propaganda. According to Media Development Foundation (MDF), the government awarded US\$ 25,000 to Obieqtivi TV and another US\$ 20,000 to the newspapers Alia and Kviris Kronika.[22]

Media Content Distribution

Facebook

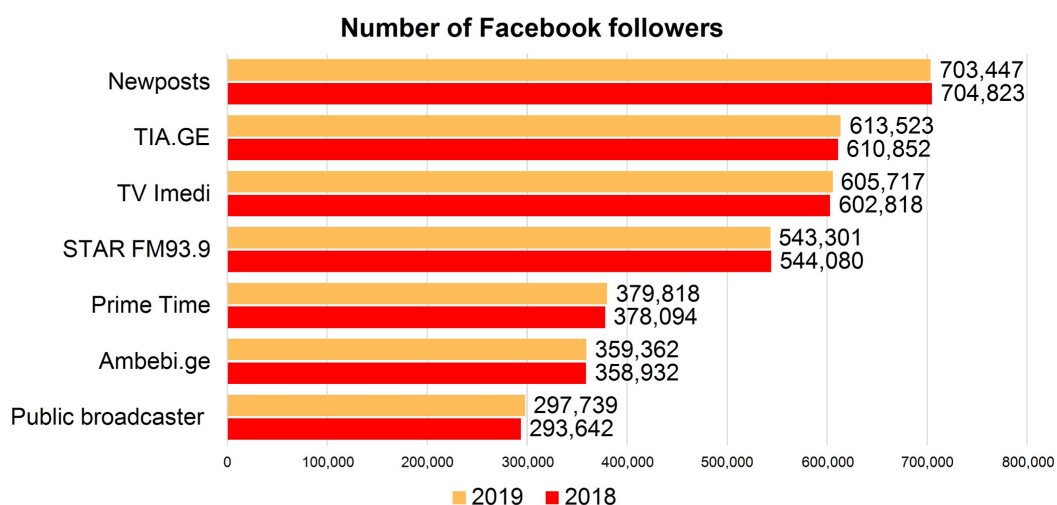
Despite Facebook's extreme popularity among news media agencies as a major distribution channel, media experts interviewed for this report say that the network's content promotion algorithm harms the media outlets' long-term financial stability because none of the revenue generated on Facebook goes back to local media. However, Georgian media outlets are trying to boost their visibility on social networks as a way of reaching out to the younger generation.

There is no financial information about how much money Georgian media spend on social media platforms to boost their content. However, most news outlets in the country admit that they allocate funding for social media promotions on a monthly basis. According to one journalist interviewed for this report, social media are used by Georgian media companies because they offer "the best way to target accurately specific readers" and "flexible payment systems."

Journalists interviewed for this report say that the reach of Georgian news media on Facebook is higher than the number of "likes" because news content is widely shared through networks of friends and private groups. Facebook is extremely important for the news media also because it helps them sell ads on their own web pages. Moreover, due to Facebook's algorithms, many users keep content of many media on their own wall even if they don't like or agree with some of their articles, which further increases the exposure of Georgian news media.

Most liked media

Ranking of the most popular media on Facebook in Georgia, 2018-2019



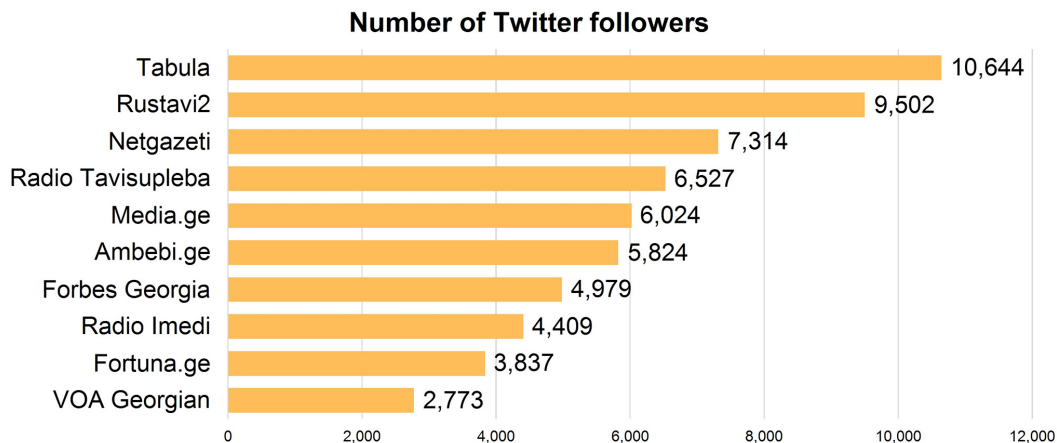
Source: Socialbakers

[22] "საქართველოს მთავრობა ბიუჯეტიდან ანტიდასავლურ მედიასაშუალებებს აფინანსებს" (The Government of Georgia is funding anti-Western media outlets from the budget), 2013, available online at <https://factcheck.ge/ka/story/21724-giorgi-kandelaki-saqarthvelos-mthavroba-biujetidan-antidasavlur-medias-aphinansebs> (accessed on 2 December 2019).

The Georgian news media is not actively present on other social media such as Twitter or YouTube. On Twitter, for example, the most popular news outlet in Georgia is Tabula with a piffling 10,000 or so followers. On YouTube, except for TV Imedi, a mainstream television channel that has 192,000 subscribers, all other Georgian media have a low number of followers.

In the world of tweets

Ranking of the most popular media on Twitter in Georgia, 2019



Note: Media.ge and Tabula stopped operations five and three years ago, respectively, however, they still rank among the most followed accounts.

Source: Socialbakers

Down the tube

Ranking of the most popular media on YouTube in Georgia, 2019

Outlet	Number of subscribers	Total uploaded video views
TV Imedi	192,000	189,943,900
Pos TV	78,200	61,969,690
Rustavi2	74,100	34,953,537
Большой Кавказ	29,400	34,917,733
FirstCaucasian	14,400	30,591,809
TV Pirveli	29,500	24,533,779
Tabula Television	26,200	23,876,684
Radio Tavisupleba	21,500	9,388,933
Palitra News	13,700	7,648,645
Artareatv	17,600	7,385,556

Note: Tabula and First Caucasian, a successor of the PIK TV suspended their activities years ago, but they still rank among the most followed accounts.

Source: Socialbakers



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