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# Internet Freedom in Georgia

Report N2 – October – December, 2013

Report was prepared within the framework of project Promoting Internet Freedom in South Caucasus. The project is being implemented by Stichting Free Press Unlimited and regional partner Institute for Development of Freedom of Information (IDFI).

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January, 2014

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## Introduction

When the engineers and scientists started another attempt to increase defense during the Cold War, and eventually sent their first tests of data packets between interconnected computers in the early 1960s, probably very few could have imagined the impact that internet has on daily lives of billions of people nowadays. With the Cold War and its threats long ceased to be on the agenda, internet has gradually spread to virtually all aspects of human life – communication, services, education, news, entertainment, business, governance etc. The worldwide coverage of the global net, which, among others, has resulted in increased possibilities to play an active role in the society, has at the same time led to new potential threats of its limitations. For this reason, the need for respect and defense of freedom of speech, freedom of expression and freedom of information has been transferred to online activities as well. In this light, protection of internet freedom has been increasingly seen as one of the essential bases of democracy.

Within the scope of the project “Promoting Internet freedom in South Caucasus” IDFI has been conducting comprehensive research of various directions of internet freedom, which aims at giving better understanding of the existing conditions and challenges in Georgia. In order to achieve this goal, the report covers various areas: technical overview of the existing infrastructure, legislature and users; limits on internet content, including technical filtering and blocking of websites, self-censorship and the recent cases of internet users' rights and their violations in Georgia; overview of pluralism and online activism in Georgia are given in the final part.

The first part of the report starts with extensive overview of internet users in Georgia – number of users, frequency of usage, reasons for not using etc. Since the strategic policy-level vision of the government is essential for development of internet, the report continues with describing current infrastructure projects and challenges on Georgian internet market. This is followed by summary of legal norms regulating internet including the rights and obligations of the regulatory body.

The second part concentrates on potential and existing limitations of internet content, the role and vision of Internet Providers, regulatory body, the state and the civil society in this process, and the situation when users abstain from freely expressing their opinions online, referred to as self-censorship. This is continued with a number of recent cases when online activities have led to violence, threat, dismissal etc.

The report concludes with describing the extent of freedom of social media and the impact of internet on social activism.

## Methodology

The information presented in this quarterly report was obtained through the combination of various quantitative and qualitative methods. Firstly, during this reporting period, local experts from Georgia conducted in-depth interviews with thirteen respondents in total. Out of them three were editors of different online media outlets in Georgia. Moreover, IDFI experts had opportunity to talk with three legal experts about Georgian legislative basis regarding internet. With regard to people actively using internet services, especially for work-related purposes, interviews were carried out with two journalists, one blogger and one employee of Ministry of Justice of Georgia. Other three interviewees were specialists working on the topics of social media, internet infrastructure, e-services, etc. Finally, interview was also obtained from a representative of Georgian National Communication Commission (GNCC).

All of these respondents were mainly specialized in the following fields: legislature, new technologies, internet infrastructure, new/online media, social networks, filtering and blocking of internet and other issues connected to access to internet and freedom of expression on various e-resources.

Moreover, experts of IDFI organized a focus group discussion with the participation of four journalists, two editors, a blogger and a former blogger/journalist. The main topics discussed during the meeting were:

- Internet freedom in Georgia;
- Self-censorship of news media on internet;
- Pluralism of online media.

Besides, public information was requested from some governmental institutions: Ministry of Internal Affairs<sup>1</sup>, Ministry of Regional Development and Infrastructure, Ministry of Economy and Sustainable Development, Prosecutor's Office<sup>2</sup> and Georgian National Communication Commission. This way, experts wanted to obtain various information including statistics about internet users, governmental projects and initiatives regarding internet, cases of internet surveillance, etc.

In addition to these qualitative research techniques, media content was monitored, reports and publications on the above motioned topics were analyzed and information about several cases related to freedom of expression on social networks and generally internet was gathered in order to reveal main tendencies and challenges with regard to accessibility to internet in Georgia.

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<sup>1</sup> The request concerned cases of internet surveillance, however, the MIA has responded that the requested information could not have been collected due to inexistence of a systematized database.

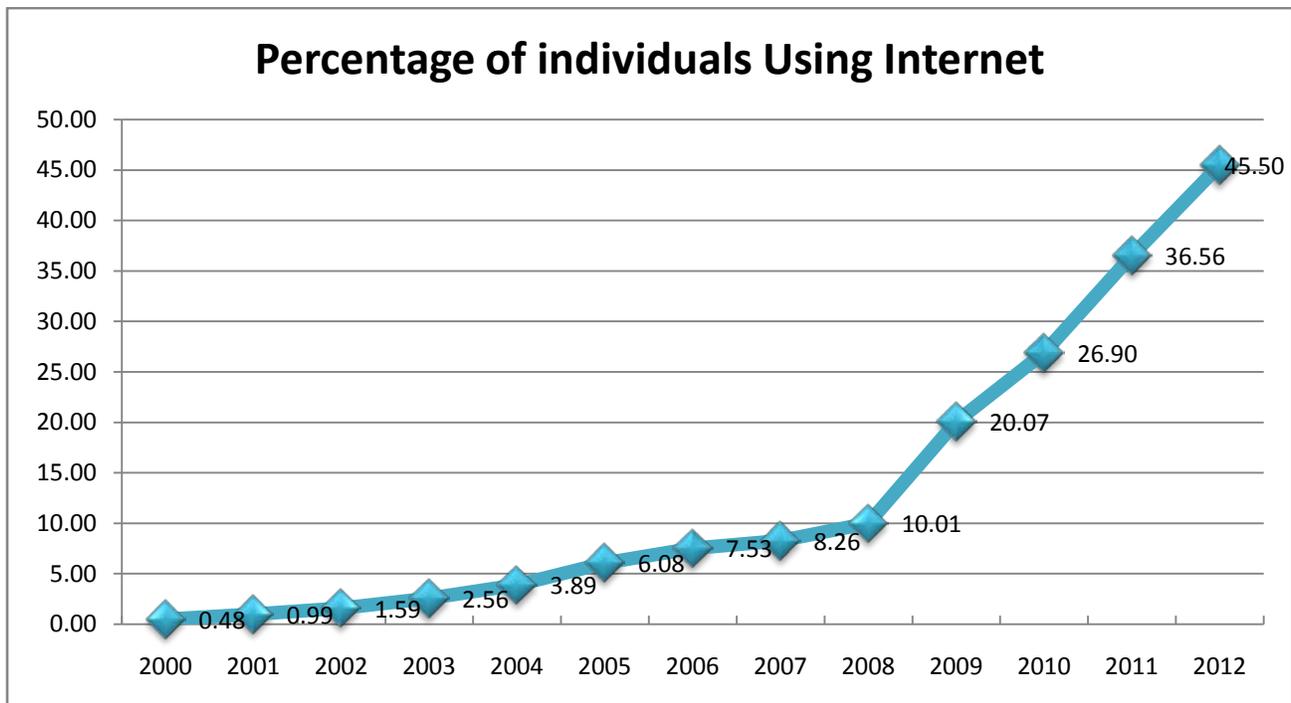
<sup>2</sup> The request to the Prosecutor's Office was sent on 28.11.2013 and no reply has been received yet.

Concerning quantitative methods, statistical data of International Telecommunication Union (ITU) and Caucasus Research Resource Center (CRRC) were used. In case of the latter, results of a countrywide public opinion polls are not published in SPSS format on their web-site yet. However, CRRC representatives provided experts with all the necessary figures. We are very grateful for their assistance since these statistical measures were valuable contribution for the report.

## Internet User's Profile

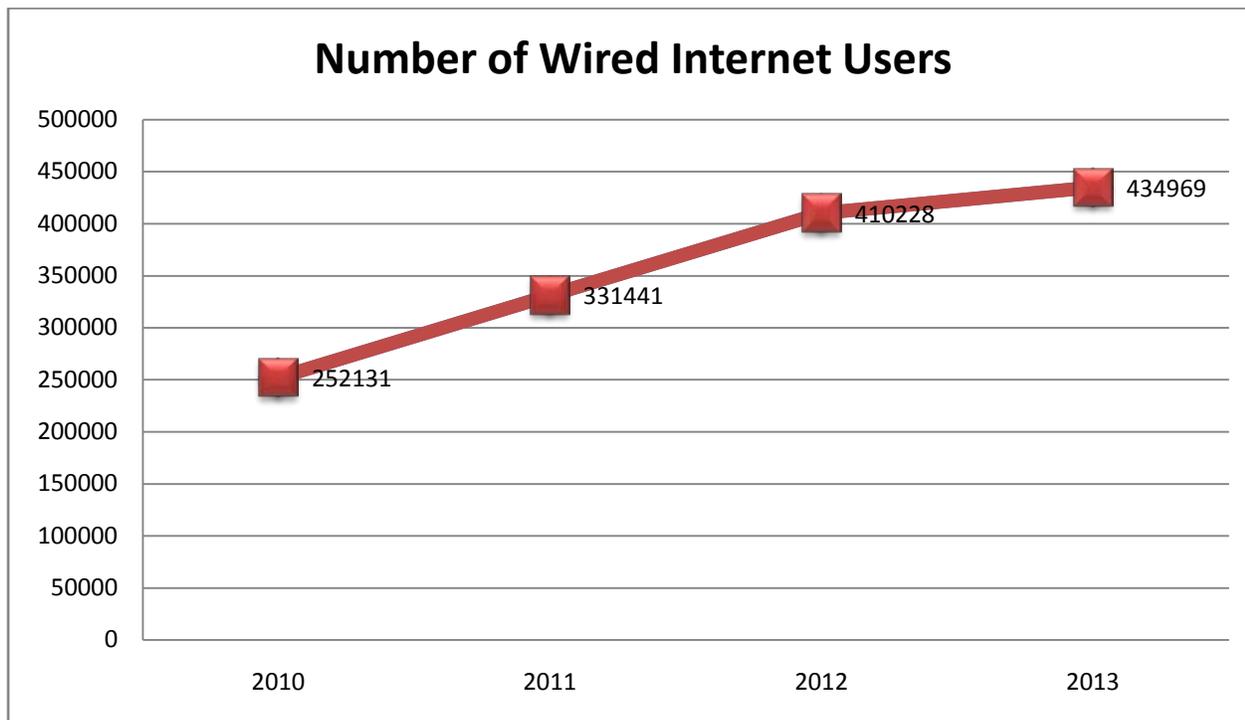
In Georgia internet is characterized by increasing tendency in terms of the number of users. Even though there is no objective and reliable statistical data on internet accessibility throughout the country, we possess fragmented information about approximate number of consumers of particular types of services based on various both large- and small-scale surveys conducted, and official reports prepared, by international and governmental institutions.

For instance, according to estimations and statistical data of International Telecommunication Union (ITU), the United Nations specialized agency for information and communication technologies, internet is available for more and more Georgian users year by year. It is evident from the graph below that significant progress has been observed since 2008. As of 2012, internet was accessible for about 45% percent of the population.<sup>3</sup>



<sup>3</sup>International Telecommunication Union (ITU). Statistics. Time Series by Country. Available at: <http://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/stat/default.aspx>, last accessed 30.12.2013

Growing tendency in internet usage is also demonstrated from the measures obtained by Institute for Development of Freedom of Information (IDFI) from the Georgian National Communication Committee (GNCC). Upon request of public information the Commission provided IDFI with the number of holders of wired internet. The graph below illustrating these measures shows that despite constant increasing tendency, this positive drift has become relatively modest.

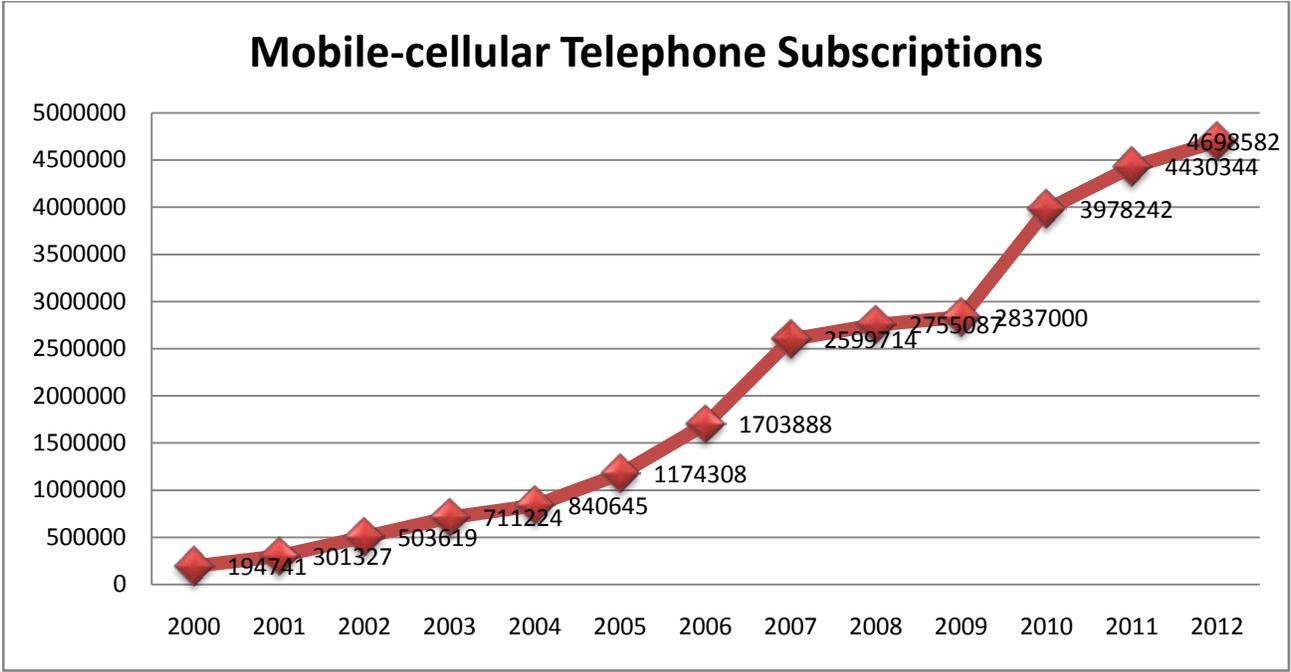


Apart from this, ITU annually publishes information about the scope of consumers of different telecommunication services for each country. In particular, its web-site contains the information about the number of:

- Mobile-cellular telephone subscriptions;
- Fixed-telephone subscriptions;
- Fixed (wired) broadband subscriptions.

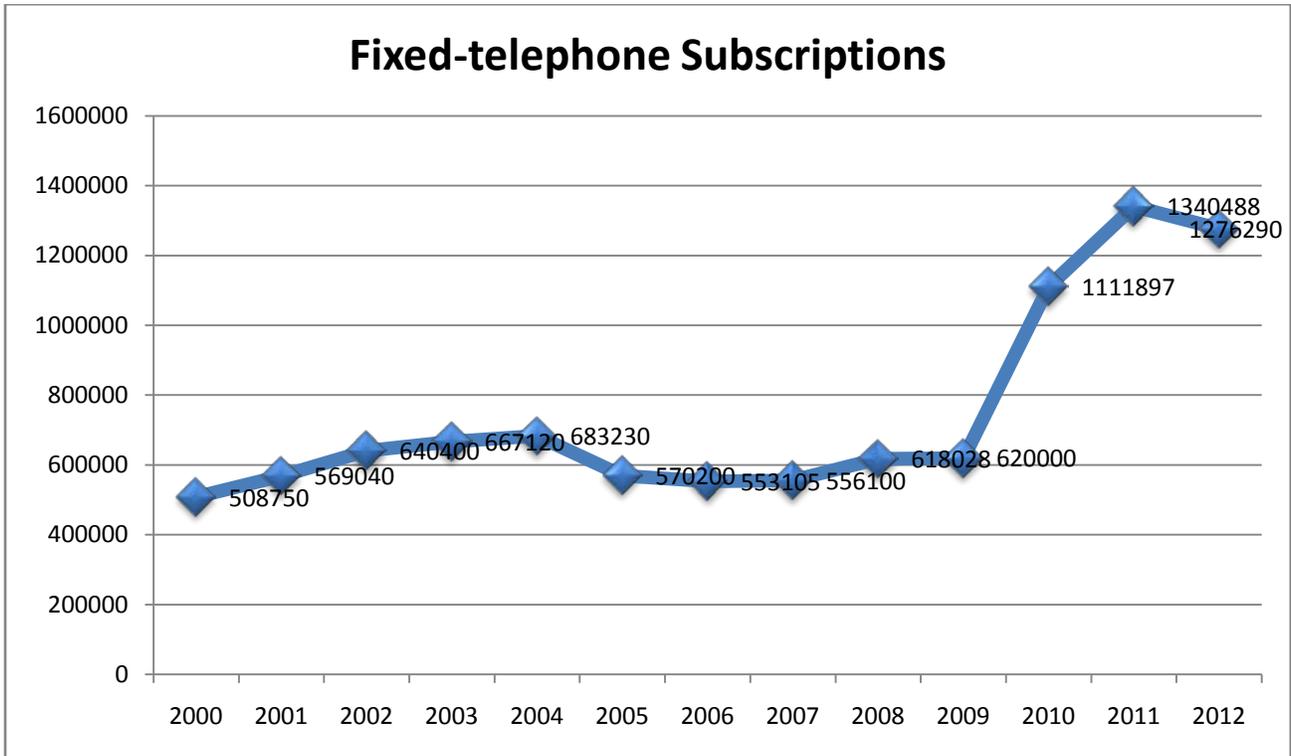
It is visible from the charts that until 2007 the amount of mobile-cellular telephone subscriptions was subject to gradual increase, this tendency was retarded for two years. In 2010 the number of subscription of this type of technology started to grow again, however this positive tendency was not maintained afterwards. According to the 2012 data, Georgia had more than 4,5 million subscriptions.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup>International Telecommunication Union (ITU). Statistics Time Series by Country. Available at: <http://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/stat/default.aspx>, last accessed 30.12.2013



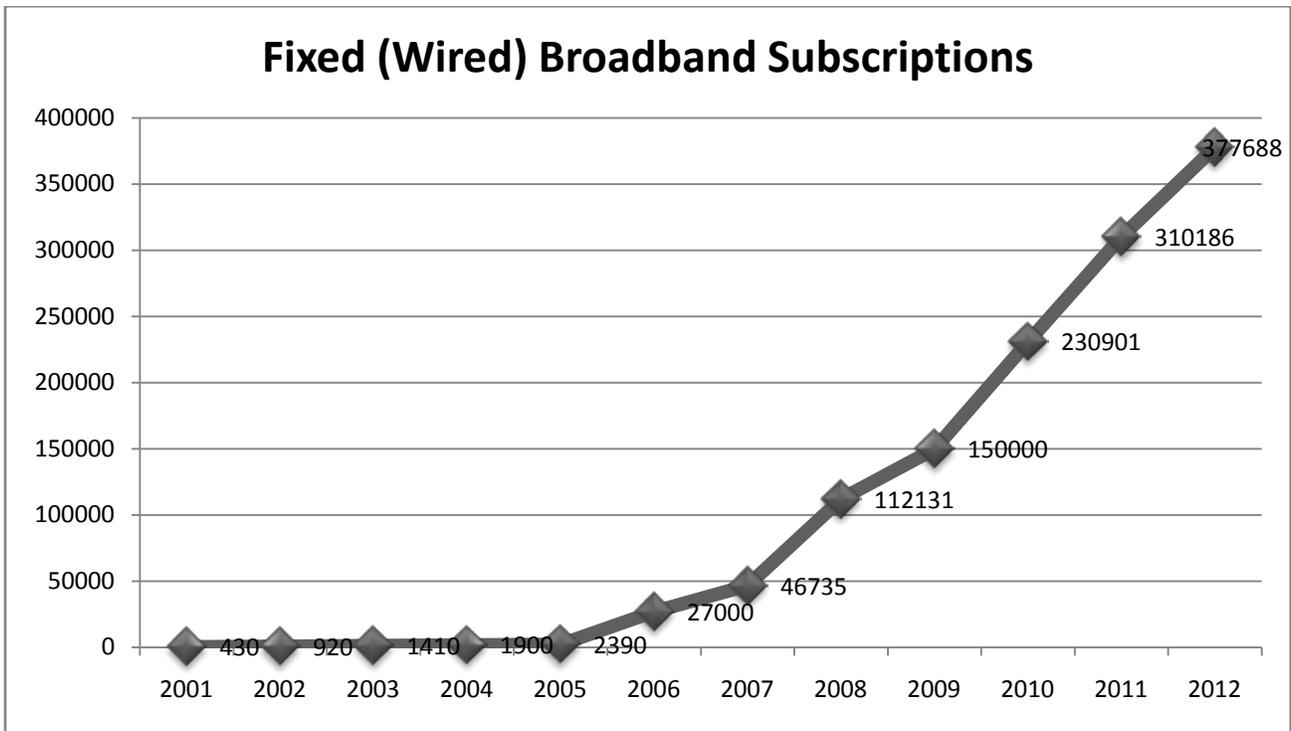
The number of fixed-telephone subscriptions was frequently subject to fluctuation. After permanent growth, in 2005 fixed-telephone subscriptions began to decline. However, this negative inclination was followed by sharp step-up in 2009 when the amount of its subscribers suddenly increased by more than 720 thousand. However, in 2012 the decreasing tendency again resumed. According to the latest data, fixed-telephone subscriptions amount to more than 1,2million in Georgia.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup>International Telecommunication Union (ITU). Statistics Time Series by Country. Available at: <http://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/stat/default.aspx>, last accessed 30.12.2013

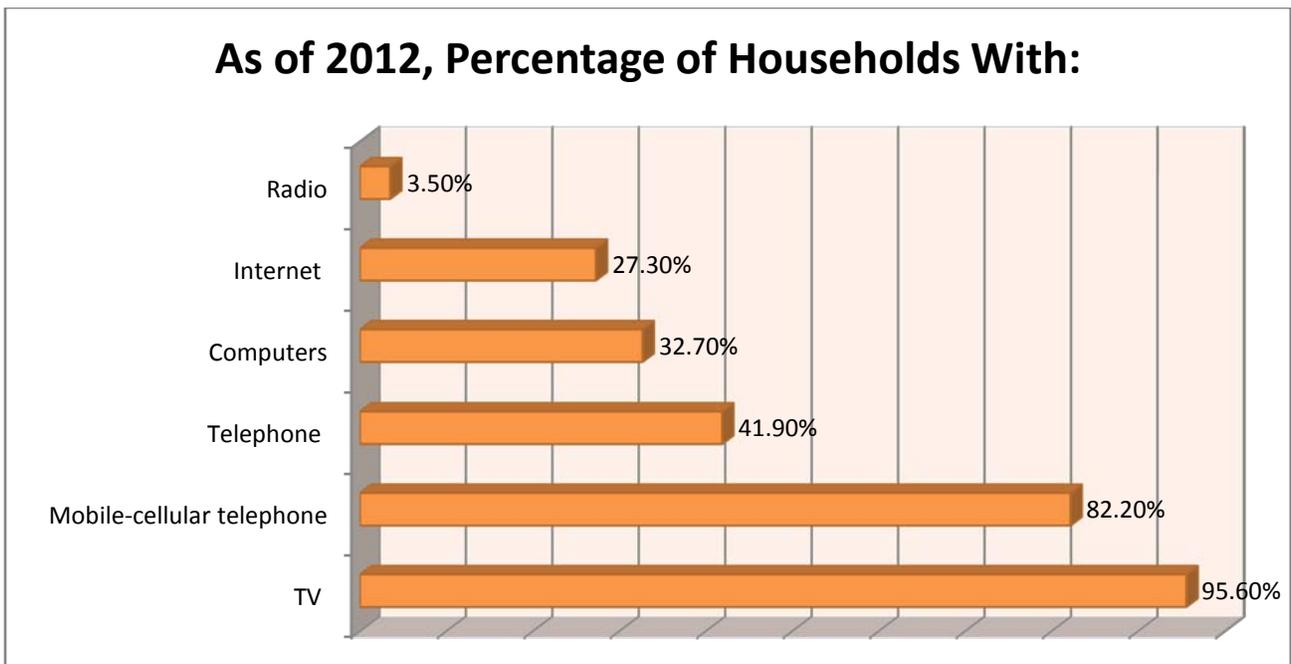


Concerning fixed (wired) broadband subscriptions, it was marked by its constant expanding disposition, especially since 2007. Based on ITU calculations, in 2012 the number of its subscribers reached 377 668.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup>International Telecommunication Union (ITU). Statistics Time Series by Country. Available at: <http://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/stat/default.aspx>, last accessed 30.12.2013

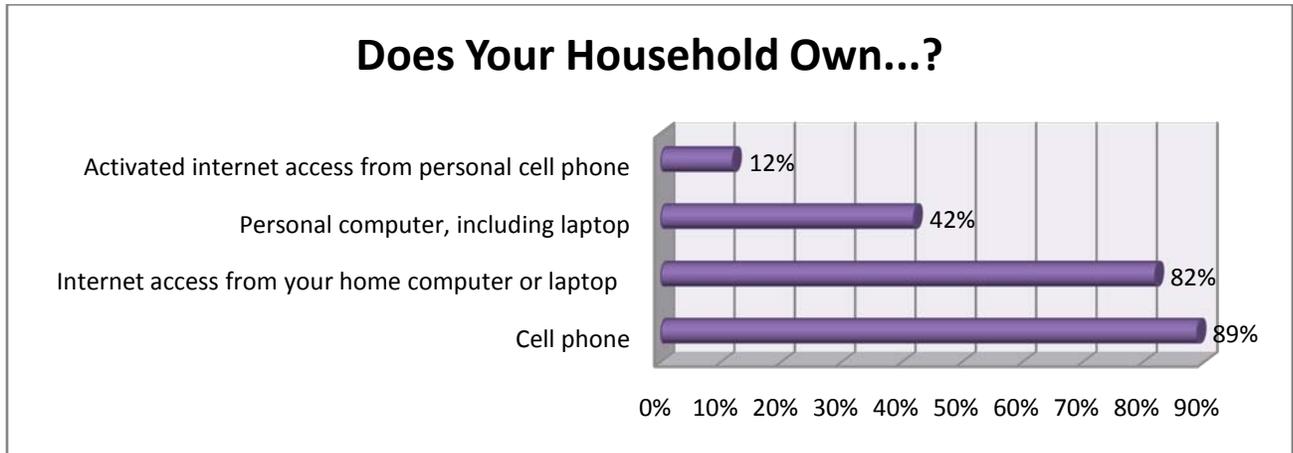


Additionally, based on the data provided by ITU, as for 2012, 95,6% of households possess TV, 82,2% has mobile-cellular telephone. In comparison with them, ownership of telephone and computer may seem relatively modest - 41,9% and 32,7%, respectively. Internet (27,30%) and radio (3,5%) possession ratio is even low among Georgian households.<sup>7</sup>



<sup>7</sup>International Telecommunication Union (ITU). Statistics Time Series by Country. Available at: <http://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/stat/default.aspx>, last accessed 30.12.2013

In this regard, latest figures of Caucasus Barometer, a countrywide survey, carried out by Caucasus Research Resource Center (CRRC) are worth mentioning. According to its nationwide results, more households possess cell-phone (89%) in comparison with personal computer and laptop (42%). Despite this, greater portion of households with accessibility to internet browse it from home computer or laptop (82%) rather than from personal cell phone (12%). These tendencies should be taken into account by government, internet providers and other actors connected to internet market.<sup>8</sup>



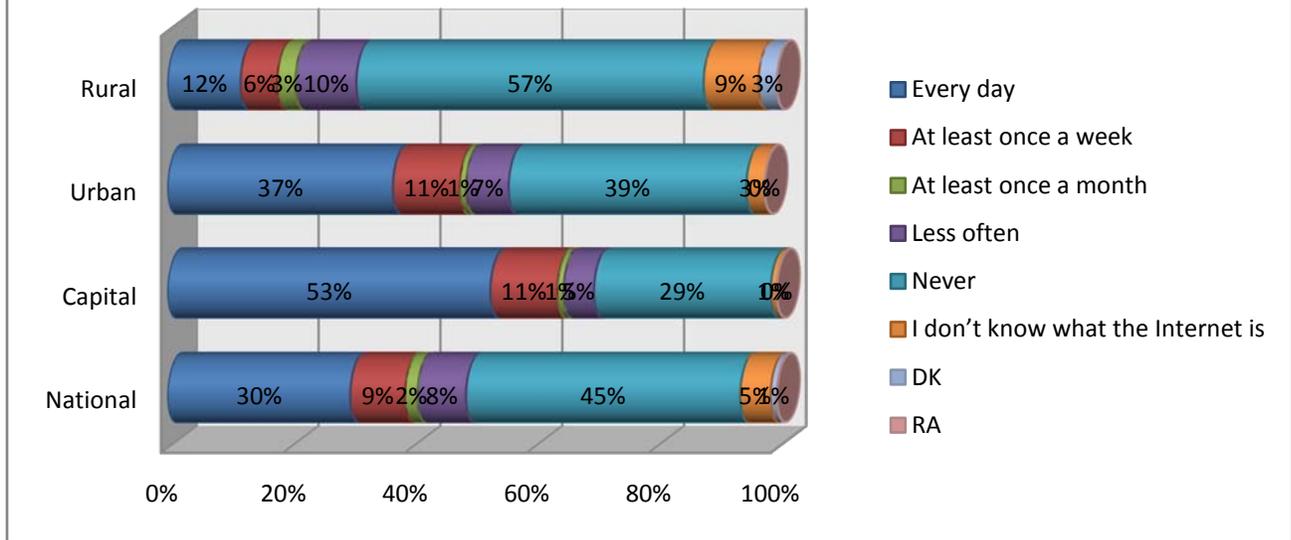
Additionally, CRRC outcomes enable to estimate approximate number of internet users. Comparison of data for the last three years displays that there is relative increase in daily usage of internet. In fact, 42 percent of the residents of the capital of Georgia were using internet every day in 2011. Next year this indicator was increased up to 46 percent.<sup>9</sup>As of 2013, internet is consumed by 53% of population of Tbilisi on a daily basis. Georgian villages have seen 8 percent of growth of the number of internet subscribers, from 4 to 12% during last two years.<sup>10</sup> Thus, one of the main objectives for the Georgian government should be to overcome the uneven urban/rural coverage. Rural settlements need proper attention from communication system operators, service providers and government.

<sup>8</sup>Caucasus Research Resource Centers.(2013) "Caucasus Barometer". Data for 2013 was provided by CRRC (26 December, 2013)

<sup>9</sup>Caucasus Research Resource Centers.(2011) "Caucasus Barometer". Retrieved from <http://www.crrccenters.org/caucasusbarometer/> on 20.12.2013

<sup>10</sup>Caucasus Research Resource Centers.(2013) "Caucasus Barometer".Data for 2013 was provided by CRRC (26 December, 2013)

## How Often Do You Use the Internet? (2013)

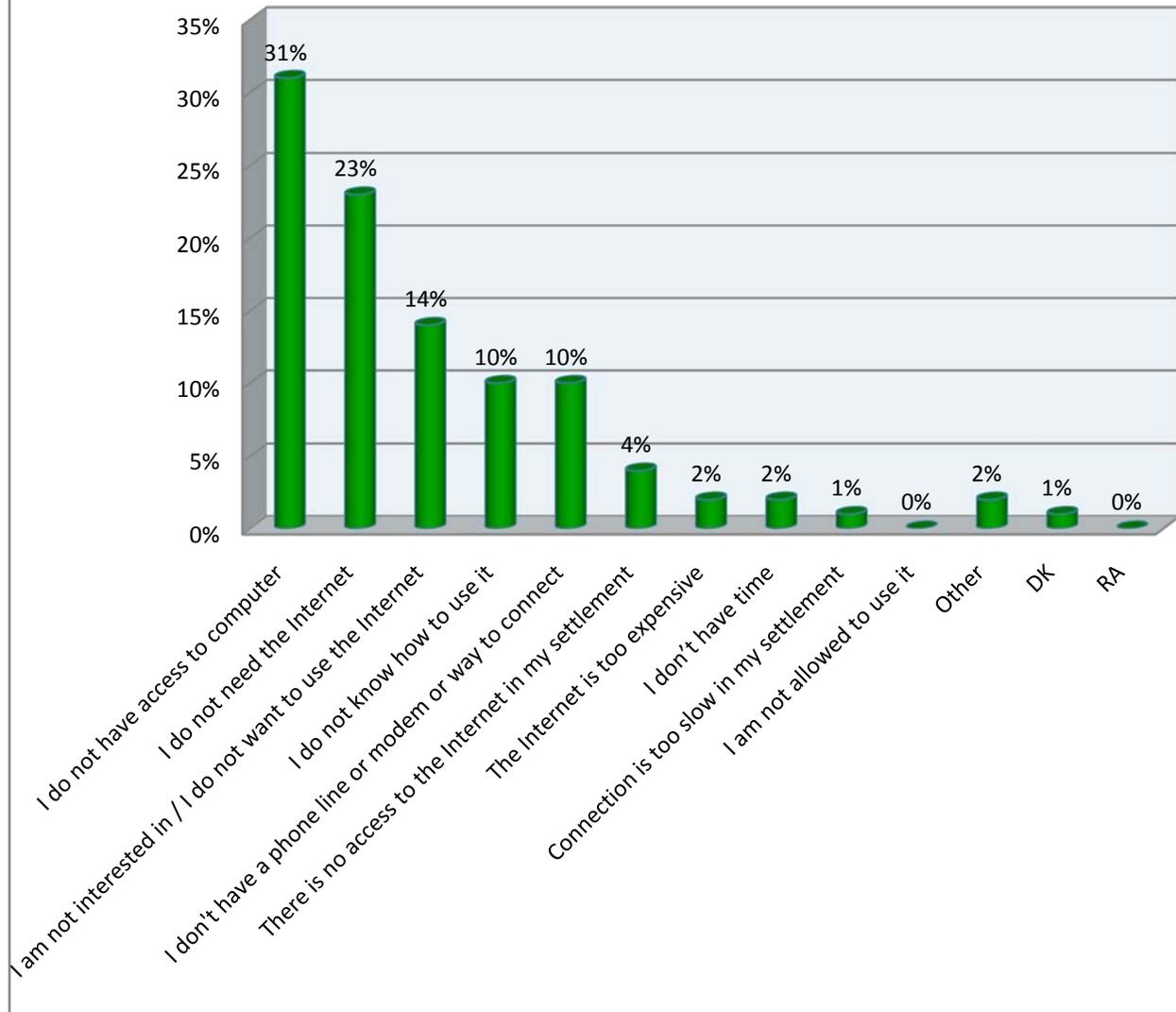


Despite growing tendency, it is widely acknowledged that low internet accessibility still remains one of the fundamental challenges for development of new technologies, electronic governance and generally, sustainability of online media. While addressing the issue of obstacles to internet expansion, various researches and reports have highlighted several factors: low speed of internet, inappropriate prices for services, inadequate infrastructure, economic burden, lack of needed skills, etc.

For instance, according to CRRC Caucasus Barometer 2013, limited internet connectivity is caused by the following factors: lack of access to computer (31%) and internet (4%), less necessity of internet (23%), lack of interest (14%), insufficient internet literacy (10%), lack of necessary devices (modem or phone line) (10%), high prices on technology (2%) etc.<sup>11</sup>

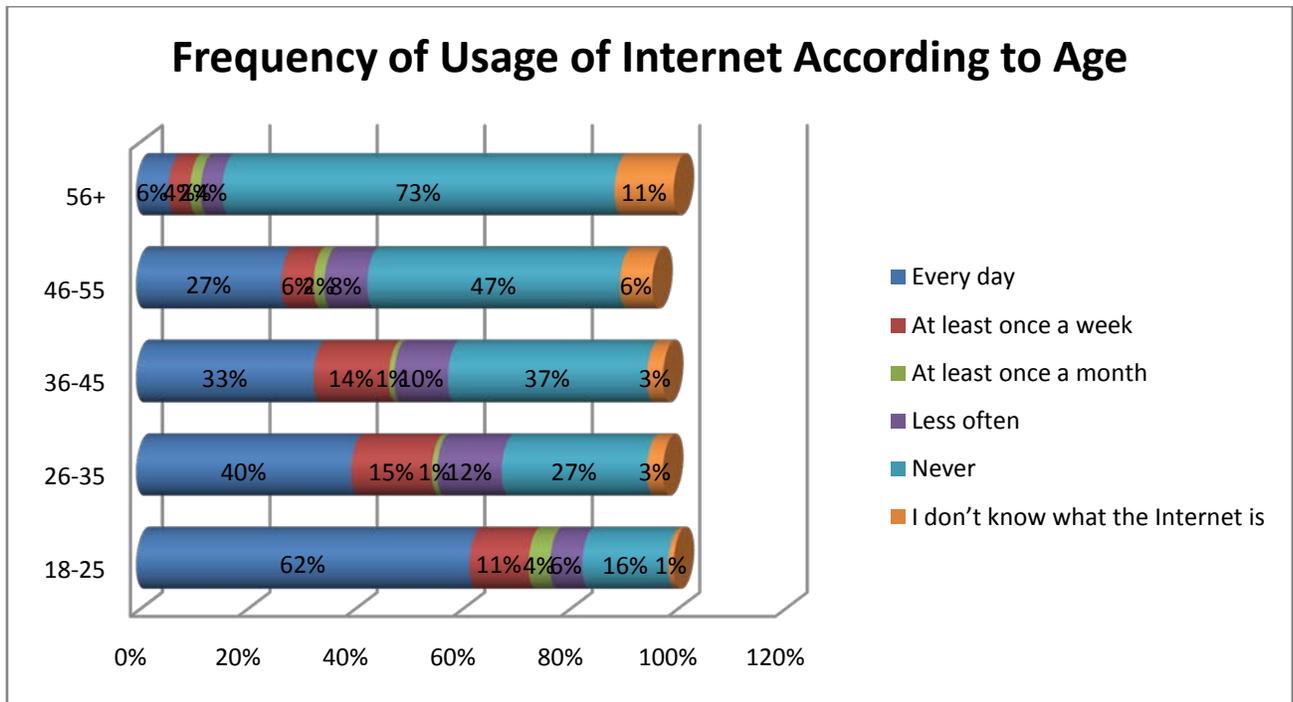
<sup>11</sup>Caucasus Research Resource Centers.(2013) "Caucasus Barometer".Data for 2013 was provided by CRRC (26 December, 2013)

## Main Reason for Not Using Internet

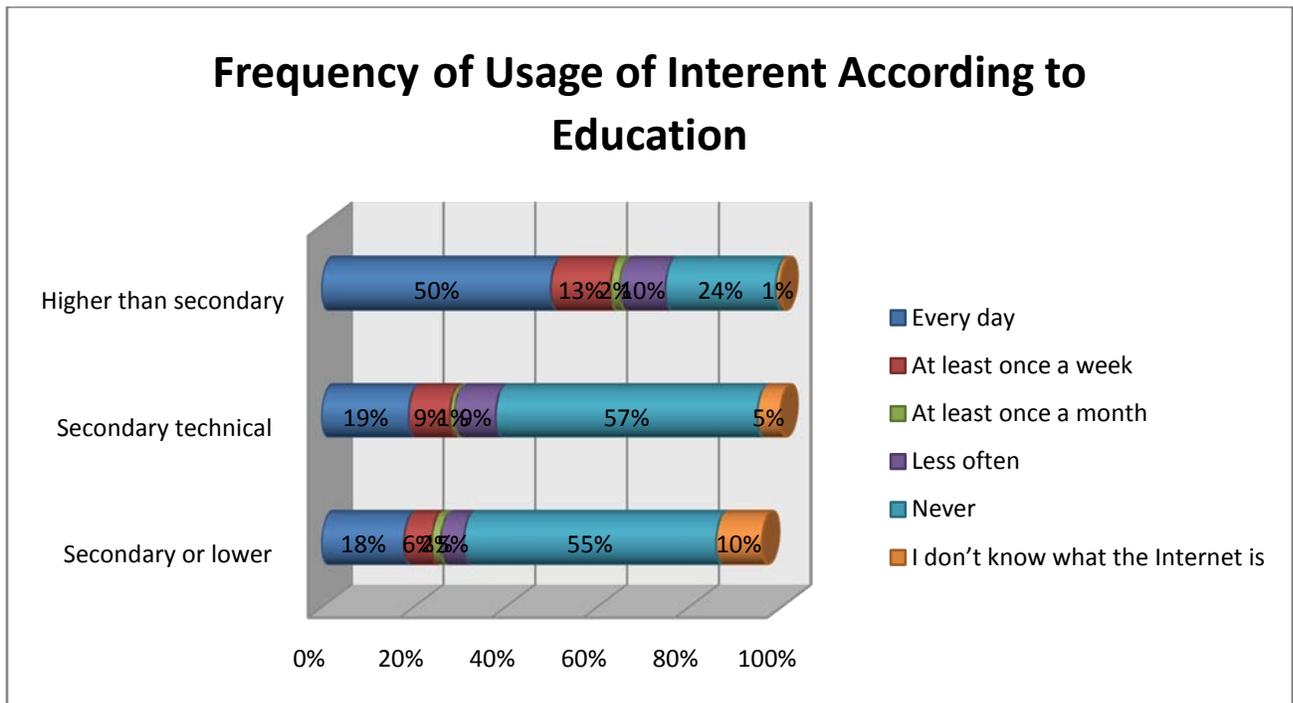


In order to expose the main features of internet users, we have attempted to show the frequency of usage in terms of gender, level of education and age, based on CRRC survey 2013. It is visible from the graphs below that younger generation is more active online.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup>Caucasus Research Resource Centers.(2013) "Caucasus Barometer".Data for 2013 was provided by CRRC (26 December, 2013)

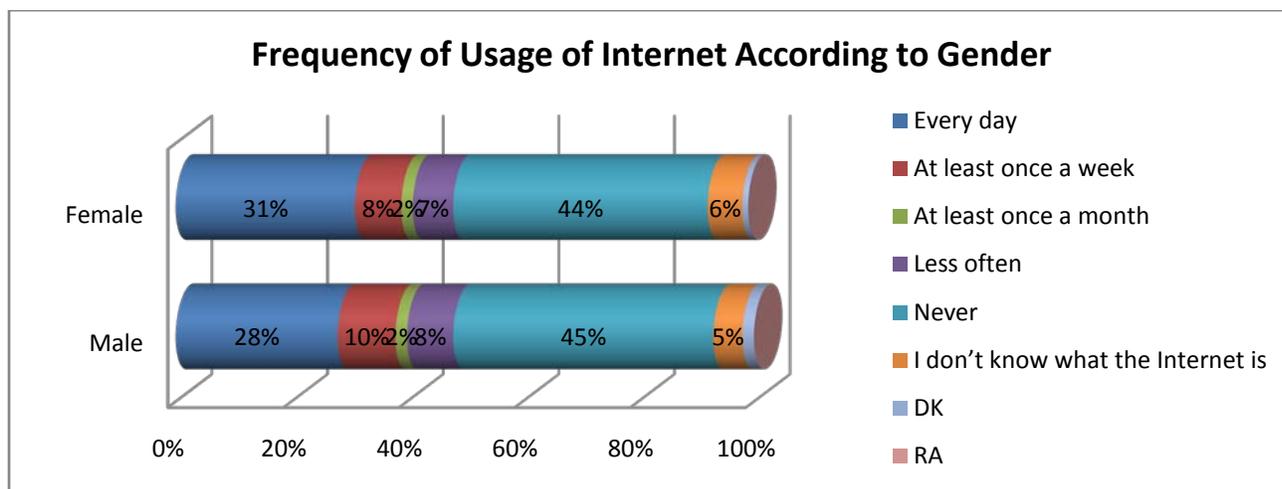


Moreover, people with higher education browse internet more frequently.<sup>13</sup>



As for distribution of internet users according to gender, there is not a great disparity in this regard. From those using the internet on a daily basis, 31 percent is female and 28 percent is male.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup>Caucasus Research Resource Centers.(2013) "Caucasus Barometer".Data for 2013 was provided by CRRC (26 December, 2013)

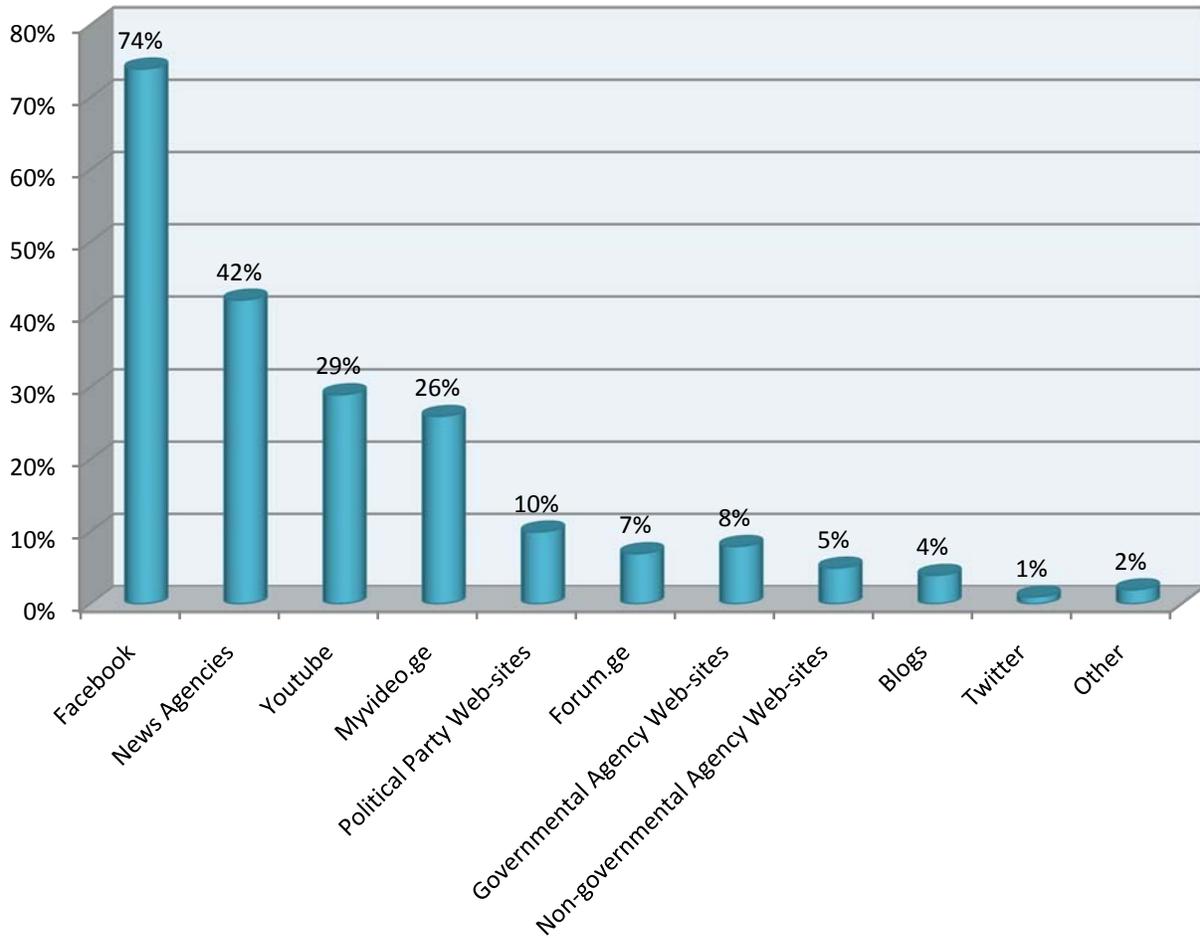


Finally, one of the significant aspects is analysis of users' behavior. Such approach can play contributory role in identifying the influence of contemporary technologies and facilities/devices over social mobilization, civic education and ensuring political participation of ordinary citizens in decision making process. Consequently, it is interesting, what kind of services are mostly surfed and demanded by internet users online. Several researches claim that checking social networks, searching for information, chatting via Skype and sending/receiving e-mail are most essential online activities for Georgian online activists. According to the survey released by National Democratic Institute in November, 2013, people perceiving internet as the main source of news and developments in the country amount to 19% of the whole population. In addition, this segment of Georgian citizens get information about political affairs from social network Facebook (74%), news agencies (42%) and several video-sharing websites – mainly via Youtube (29%) and Myvideo.ge (26%).<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup>Caucasus Research Resource Centers.(2013) "Caucasus Barometer".Data for 2013 was provided by CRRC (26 December, 2013)

<sup>15</sup>National Democratic Institute, Survey Report November, 2013, last assessed 21.12.2013. Available at <http://ndi.org/node/20977>; last accessed 25.12.2013

## What Are the Top Internet Sites You Visit for Politics?



## Overview of Internet Infrastructure Projects in Georgia

Development of internet infrastructure in Georgia can be roughly divided into three parts. The first period started in the 1990s, when all providers were connected with Russia, and the only web-site was that of the Georgian National Academy of Sciences. This was followed by appearance of the pioneer providing companies: Kheta ([www.kheta.ge](http://www.kheta.ge)), “Goodwillcom” and others. However, the prices were high and the speed too low. With the advent of new companies on the market (Sanet, [www.sanet.ge](http://www.sanet.ge); Caucasus, [www.caucasus.net](http://www.caucasus.net)), the prices decreased and the speed increased. At this stage the providers used satellite and cable connections. The third period in development of internet in Georgia started with introduction of fibre-optic network which enabled Georgia to connect with European internet. At the moment internet is the fastest growing segment of Georgian electronic communications market after mobile communication, the income of providing companies has increased from 3,15 mln GEL in 2000s up to more than 30 mln GEL by 2010s.<sup>16</sup>

In order to learn more about current trends and plans in development of internet infrastructure, IDFI has sent public information requests to the Ministry of Regional Development and Infrastructure, the Ministry of Economy and Sustainable Development and Georgian National Communication Commission.<sup>17</sup> The received information gives interesting insights into the existing situation. So, for instance, the public information obtained from the Ministry of Regional Development and Infrastructure of Georgia (December 11, 2013) has revealed, that the Ministry is not implementing and does not have any plans to implement projects on development of Internet infrastructure (broadband networks).

As both the official information received in reply to public information requests and the comments made during in-depth interviews made it clear, at the moment it is the Ministry of Economy and Sustainable Development of Georgia that deals with development of broadband internet infrastructure. Importantly, according to the Ministry of Economy, no financial sources have been allocated from the budget on implementation of the projects on internet infrastructure.

According to the public information received from the Ministry of Economy on December 6, 2013, in order to promote development of broadband access networks in 2012-2013 the Ministry continued active participation in formation of Trans-Eurasian Information Super Highway (TASIM), “a major regional initiative aiming at creation of transnational fiber-optic

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<sup>16</sup> Internet in Georgia, Georgian National Communication Commission (GNCC), available at [http://gncc.ge/index.php?lang\\_id=GEO&sec\\_id=5704&info\\_id=6429](http://gncc.ge/index.php?lang_id=GEO&sec_id=5704&info_id=6429) last accessed on 07.01.2014

<sup>17</sup> The reply from the Georgian National Communication Commission (GNCC) (request sent on 28.11.2013) was received with timeframe violation (reply received on 03.01.2014) and due to large scope of the received data, only small parts could be included in the given report, while the complete analysis will be delivered in the next quarterly report.

backbone targeting primarily the countries of Eurasia from Western Europe to China.”<sup>18</sup> On December 14, 2012, as well as in past years, Georgia supported UN resolution project on establishing new informational super highway (TASIM). During the sessions of intergovernmental commissions on economic cooperation together with participatory countries (Azerbaijan, Turkey, Georgia, China, Kazakhstan, Germany, etc) Georgia will consider fostering formation process of super highway.

Regarding development of internet infrastructure in Georgia there are various opinions as of the roles and extent of involvement of the main actors: the regulatory body, the state and the providing companies.

GNCC has noted that development of fixed internet infrastructure is not a task of regulatory bodies worldwide but should be part of a strategy of the country. However, in case of Georgia the representative of GNCC as well as experts have pointed out about the lack of active role of the state on policy level since there is not a strategy on development of internet infrastructure. In the light of policy development some information has been received by the Ministry of Economy as well. For instance, in 2013 the “Department of Communications, IT and Innovations” of the Ministry of Economy, with the technical assistance of European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), has prepared a project “Policy on development of e-communications in Georgia”. Following the request from the Ministry of Justice, the project along with “Strategy and Action Plan of Digital Georgia 2014-2018” prepared in 2013 within the framework of Twinning project (Support of E-Governance Development in Georgia) and the concept of “Innovative Georgia 2020” which is still being prepared, will be discussed and further elaborated upon in 2014.

While the central responsibility of GNCC is to regulate market and protect users’ rights, it also actively participates in the strategy development process and gives the state its recommendations and vision regarding internet infrastructure development. E.g. GNCC gave the government its recommendations on creating a map of broadband infrastructure, so that all providers and investors know the directions for development. Besides, GNCC suggested extending regulation to “passive infrastructure” (non-communication infrastructure such as antennas, roads and bridges) through ensuring that e.g. there are not three antennas of various companies next to each other and additional pipes for fiber-optic cables are laid while constructing new roads and bridges.

However, the recent political changes in the country, as well as changes of heads of GNCC and creation of the investigation commission in May 2013 have significantly hindered working

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<sup>18</sup>International Telecommunication Union (ITU), Broadband Commission & Partnerships : Activity Details, available at <http://www.itu.int/wsis/stocktaking/plugin/broadband/documents2BB.asp?lang=en&project=1318837144> last accessed on 25.12.2013

process of GNCC, as admitted in interviews with GNCC representative<sup>19</sup> and independent experts.<sup>20</sup>

Besides the need for a comprehensive strategy, there is not a single opinion about the extent of involvement of the state in the infrastructural development. On one hand, one of the experts believes that the lack of internetization in Georgian regions is an economical problem, since due to the lack of population and purchasing power providers are not interested in some regions; in these cases the state cannot “force” providers which are commercial companies to internetize the country, thus the role of the state is only in regulating the market.<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, the representative of GNCC has given international examples when internetization was financed by the state in service deficit areas where providers were not planning to develop broadband themselves in a reasonable period of time, and in many cases this was followed by increased interest of providers afterwards. However, there are also examples when such active investment from the state may not have been efficient in the long run, if, due to various reasons, the new infrastructure is not used by the providing companies. GNCC has given an example of Portugal, where, even though the European Commission has allocated money on development of fiber network, and every family is connected with optic fiber, 60% of it is unused, because it is cheaper for operators to use their own DSL networks, rather than pay rent for optic fiber.<sup>22</sup>

## Legal Regulation

Georgian legislation regarding internet regulation can be regarded as one of the liberal and less restrictive ones. However, as experts claim it needs modernization in order to be in accordance with current developments. Most importantly, good legislation does not automatically result in a good practice. That is why the type of behavior of different actors involved in the sphere of internet service is vitally important.

The Law on Electronic Communications regulates the electronic communications sector in Georgia. It establishes legal and economic grounds for the pursuit of activities by means of electronic communications networks and facilities as well as principles for the development of competitive environment in this sector, defines scope of competence of the national regulatory authority, the GNCC, specifies the rights and obligations of natural persons and legal entities owning, using or providing services by means of electronic communications networks and facilities.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Interview conducted with GNCC representative 12.12.2013

<sup>20</sup> Interview conducted with N.K. 22.11.2013

<sup>21</sup> Interview conducted with K.S. 26.11.2013

<sup>22</sup> Interview conducted with GNCC representative 12.12.2013

<sup>23</sup> Article 1; Law of Georgia on Electronic Communications

The Commission is entitled to provide authorization to entities willing to pursue activities in the sphere of electronic communication. While applying for authorization they should submit some information to the Commission. The latter maintains these data about all entities and after the successful completion of authorization process this information should be accessible to the public.

It is generally admitted that these procedures are not discriminative. Even though, by law the GNCC is an independent regulatory body, there are many concerns regarding its neutrality. The process of the GNCC members' nominations have always been the subject of political manipulation and interference, since president single-handedly selected nominees and presented to the Parliament.

However, in the end of October, 2013, new changes to this rule came into force. According to these latest amendments, the head of the state nominates candidates only after the consultations with the Government - the official confirmation of the Prime-Minister of the list became compulsory. Afterwards the list of candidates is submitted to the Parliament. The procedure of selecting the Head of the Commission was subject to changes as well. Precisely, instead of the President, he/she is appointed by the commissioners themselves. Furthermore, political parties no longer present the candidature of a commissioner and everyone is entitled to do that. Requirements for potential members were also extended. They should hold master's degree or an academic degree equal to it, in economy, public administration, business administration, law and electronic communications. With regard to practical experience, they should have worked at least 10 years in the appropriate field.

These modifications were assessed by civil society representatives positively. However, experts claim that everything depends on political readiness to put these rules into practice. The greater role and prominence of this institution is admitted, as, in theory, it is an independent body. At the same time, its effective and appropriate functioning is limited because of some factors, including:

- Lack of political independence and permanent concerns about political affiliation and economic interests of its members;
- Non-existing common strategy created by state in this sphere, which would enable commission to plan its own activities based on the set priorities.

While talking about potential ways for improving Georgian legislation, some experts urge that there is a great necessity of establishing common standard, approach and strategy concerning internet, since regulations or normative acts related to internet are fragmented and mainly part of different codes, acts and laws.<sup>24</sup> It was also noted that the content transmitted through new

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<sup>24</sup>Interview conducted with D.K. 29.11.2013

technologies should not be subject to such regulations. Instead, comprehensive, long-term strategy and appropriate regulations should create solid foundations for healthy competition, should determine precise responsibilities of each agent operating on the internet market and most importantly, protect users' rights, firstly in terms of speed and quality of internet provided. Regulations can only be imposed on the issues containing potential signs of crime.<sup>25</sup>

Apart from this, experts declared that to some extent Georgia has quite satisfactory legislative basis regarding accountability of internet providers, however laws are not properly executed. They urge that even ideal legislature does not automatically result in good executive practice. Norms and behavior of many actors, including companies and internet providers, stem from norms established by good practice.<sup>26</sup> Consequently, laws will work only if actors affected by these norms and directives are willing to obey and follow them.

Furthermore, legislature on internet is thought to be very superficial, vague, old and very general. Precisely, greater leverage and room is left for actors operating on the market. Consequently, provision of high speed and quality of internet relies on honesty of companies.<sup>27</sup> Such practice hinders development of healthy and good competition and the market remains undeveloped.<sup>28</sup>

Moreover, Georgian users are regarded to have poor legislative culture: either they are not aware of their rights or do not try to protect them through appealing to court. Instead, as some of the respondents claimed, most frequently Georgians prefer to settle particular disputes with the help of personal contacts<sup>29</sup> or oral agreements.<sup>30</sup>

As for other aspects of legislation, freedom of expression is ensured by the Constitution of Georgia. During this reporting period attempts to add new Article 1691 to the "Code of Administrative Offences of Georgia" should be mentioned in this regard. This initiative was proposed by the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia and contained a clause aiming at banning expression offensive to feelings of believers. Namely, the article declared public expression of hatred towards religious sanctities, religious organizations, religious servicemen and pious people and/or other offending actions aiming at offending religious feelings of the believers, including defiling religious buildings and other religious objects by damaging or writing graffiti, as violations of law and imposed administrative on those grounds. Amendments specified administrative fines: for the first-time offenders a fine constituted between 300-500

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<sup>25</sup>Interview conducted with D.K. 29.11.2013

<sup>26</sup>Interview conducted with U.S 11.12.2013

<sup>27</sup>Interview conducted with N.K. 22.11.2013

<sup>28</sup>Interview conducted with U.S. 11.12.2013

<sup>29</sup>Interviews conducted with L.Z. 13.12.2013, N.T. 20.11.2013

<sup>30</sup>Interview conducted with D.K. 29.11.2013

GEL. A repeated offence within one year of the last offense would result in a fine of 1 000 – 1 500 GEL or 15 days in prison.

This proposal was regarded as contradiction to the Constitution of Georgia, basic human rights and international standards by the part of Georgian Civic Society Organizations and several religious organizations. Common statement of some NGOs claimed: “Such a legal provision, if enacted, will place arbitrary and unjustified restrictions on freedom of expression in terms of its content, and will jeopardize free public debates in society. The placement of such restrictions is especially unacceptable in view of the challenges of secularism that require the rationalization of public debates and processes related to authority and religion.” Another statement signed by more than 10 religious organizations emphasized that the law could be used against minorities and freedom of expression in general in future perspective. Additionally social activists and civil society of Georgia had concerns that after adoption of such regulations, freedom of expression could be threatened also in internet, since ordinary people would try to abstain from posting or commenting about religious issues especially in social networks.

Because of such reactions from society, the draft law was modified however, part of organizations still demanded the government to withdraw the legislative proposal since these amendments do not resolve the problem and the risks related to freedom of expression have not been eliminated by these modifications.

The similar position was shared by Davit Kldiashvili, the secretary of the Council of the Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics, who asserted that adoption of this amendment would be a retrograde and backward step in terms of democratization and freedom of expression.

## **Limits on Internet Content**

### **Technical filtering and blocking of websites**

Along with increased significance and influence of internet on virtually every aspect of modern life, the potential threats limiting free access to internet content have raised concerns of human right defenders. As a legal expert has admitted in case of Georgia, such concerns are not groundless, since “every government will be tempted to control sources of information” and the only guarantee is the mutual control among the civil sector, the regulated subjects and the different branches of the state.<sup>31</sup>

Technically there are many ways by which the state, regulatory body or providing companies can filter or block websites. “While managing internet traffic the operators can give priority to

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<sup>31</sup>Interview conducted with N.K. 22.11.2013

some services, and limit the others. This creates two possibilities: to manage network and block unwanted content. This is why internet providers are called “gate keepers” – was said in GNCC.

As admitted both by independent experts and regulatory body, in Georgia there is no direct censorship, filtering and blocking of websites. However, friendly or threatening calls, offences, appeals, warnings, blackmail are quite often.

There have been only a few cases of blocking content of websites so far. One of the most well-known cases is blocking Russian websites during 2008 August war. As mentioned in an interview, it was result of appeals and recommendations from the regulatory body and independent experts. The goal was to protect population from negative information, which could cause panic among citizens. Even though only one provider has obeyed to the appeals (Caucasus Online), and there were no sanctions for those who did not, it still had significant result since Caucasus Online was by that time the leader of the market, with about 70-80% of coverage.

Another case was when “Five Days of War”, a film about 2008 August war between Russia and Georgia, spread in internet before it was onscreen in cinemas, and regulatory commission was asked to block this content, so GNCC has addressed the providers. “We can tell the providers to block something illegal. But even in that case the people almost made revolution; they hacked our web-page and wrote something there. Because they wanted to watch the film” – said GNCC representative in an interview.

As to what extent calls with threats may have effect, one of the experts has given an example: “there have not been such cases, but when I asked the head of Pro-Service, owner of all three hosting companies (Intelcom, Serv.ge and Pro-Service), on whose servers there are 90% of web-sites in the country, whether he would disable a web-site in such situation, he said “yes”. He said – firstly, because I like this government<sup>32</sup>, my brother has a position in the Ministry of Economy; secondly, I do not want to lose my business because of 15 GEL. When I asked the same question to another hosting company, I was told “court decision is needed, but it is difficult case, probably we should obey.”<sup>33</sup> In another interview it was mentioned, that all operators did cooperate with the state with interception: “especially lately, all operators were forced to install it, even the small ones. It was everywhere and maybe there is even today.”<sup>34</sup>

Even in cases of content violation and threats, it is very rarely appealed in the court. No appeals have been received by GNCC regarding blocking of websites and content limitations either. “Either the user is in the cave or the procedures are too complex that they do not wish to

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<sup>32</sup> President Saakashvili government

<sup>33</sup> Interview conducted with K.S. 26.11.2013

<sup>34</sup> Interview conducted with U.S 11.12.2013

complain to the regulatory commission” – was said in one interview.<sup>35</sup> As mentioned during the interview with GNCC representative, most requests received by the commission refer to decrease in prices and increase of speed.<sup>36</sup> This statement is supported by the public information received from the commission in reply to request of copies of appeals as well. As for effectiveness of the appealing process, as the legal expert has noted, generally the appeals in GNCC are considered timely, which has not always been the case with the law enforcement institutions.<sup>37</sup>

However, the concerns with unwanted intervention in the freedom to use internet are not to be mixed with the need to regulate internet. “The term – to regulate internet – means to regulate conditions of traffic, not the traffic itself, not the information and content. Only in cases where there is violence or pornography, in other cases they should have freedom and equal conditions.”<sup>38</sup> The importance to clearly understand the term “internet regulation” has been pointed out in another interview as well. Namely, it was mentioned that internet regulation should not be misinterpreted as an example of such bad practices, like in Russia, where the Ministry of Justice has a list of prohibited websites, which it can delete at any time, without an order of the court. “We should regulate actions in the internet, and not internet itself” claimed the expert.<sup>39</sup> In this light Georgian internet has been evaluated as “anarchically free”, since even illegal content is not properly controlled in Georgian internet e.g. illegal films. The regulatory body has mentioned the lack of resources and the lack of readiness of the society to comprehensively control illegal online content.<sup>40</sup>

## The speed problem

One of the issues mentioned regarding internet infrastructure, which can potentially have impact on internet content control, is problem with internet speed. It was mentioned in an interview with an expert that the providers cannot guarantee upload speed as much as download speed. In another interview it was said that the users do not really know what kind of internet they buy, they only know the upper limit of the speed; however, the actual consumption and possibilities to get it are unclear. “This is the blank spot and creates precondition for not being able to say, which side is telling lies: the user or the providing company.”<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Interview conducted with U.S 11.12.2013

<sup>36</sup> Interview conducted with GNCC representative 12.12.2013

<sup>37</sup> Interview conducted with N.K. 22.11.2013

<sup>38</sup> Interview conducted with U.S 11.12.2013

<sup>39</sup> Interview conducted with D.K. 29.11.2013

<sup>40</sup> Interview conducted with GNCC representative 12.12.2013

<sup>41</sup> Interview conducted with U.S. 11.12.2013

The regulatory body believes however that power of internet is not limitless and speed is never enough. Besides, GNCC points out that the strength of provided internet depends on specific service, as some services require real time connection (Voice Over IP (VOIP), while others (e-mail) can function with some delay. Also, it is not speed that gets blocked, but some applications. The difficulty to find out whose fault is low speed, has also been mentioned by an expert – the fault can be of the operator, or the visited web-site, or problem with cable etc.<sup>42</sup>

Experts talk about not enough control over providers, and low quality of internet which is not studied officially.<sup>43</sup> As mentioned in an interview with GNCC, it is difficult to manage traffic and internet quality: “one can easily see whether provider is blocking application or service, but bad quality is connected with many parameters. The provider is connected with numbers of companies, impossible to control quality everywhere; provider is only responsible for the internet provided directly to user.”

As for official studies to measure speed there was a project with a company RED-M aiming at measuring quality of internet with the help of 400 devices, which would send tests to various servers and check internet quality while user was not active. However, while testing the devices a problem occurred with wi-fi and this resulted in termination of contract with the company, one of the only two companies doing such tests. One of the disadvantages of the test has been mentioned to be its measuring quality not during peak times and overloaded network, but when the network is free.<sup>44</sup>

In the point of view of the legal expert, the lack of such studies is a problem from users’ rights point of view: “internet has been here for a long time and the regulatory commission does not manage to ensure user with quality. The rights of the users are violated.”<sup>45</sup> For GNCC however, the primary goal of the project was “not so much for user rights protection, but to see situation on market, observe tendencies for further development.”<sup>46</sup> It aimed at measuring speed and seeing to what extent internet was open. Also to see whether operators fulfill their obligations, but not everything depends on operator. Another expert has pointed out that while the goal of GNCC was to “punish operators”, it was not right, since the regulatory body should help the users become wiser, demand and control on their own. Besides, small companies would be in worse situation if GNCC started “punishing them”, as they do not have scale effect, buy internet more expensively and cheat the users more. “Fining is not the ultimate goal. The goal is to help the users, to regulate the market, so that everyone has equal conditions, create competition; competition is good for prices and quality. And if someone is cheating the users, they should be able to escape.” Besides, the RED-M project would be unable to give a whole picture of the

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<sup>42</sup> Interview conducted with U.S. 11.12.2013

<sup>43</sup> Interview conducted with N.K. 22.11.2013

<sup>44</sup> Interview conducted with U.S. 11.12.2013

<sup>45</sup> Interview conducted with N.K. 22.11.2013

<sup>46</sup> Interview conducted with GNCC representative 12.12.2013

country, and the stress should not have been made on cities, but on regions, where there is problem with internet, claimed an expert.<sup>47</sup>

## Self-censorship

While being online, where thousands of people see your posts, comments and shared content, you may abstain from freely expressing your opinions about different topics. This is especially common for those associated with particular institutions, organizations or companies. Journalists are one of them, as they sometimes have to take into consideration professional standards.

Several online and offline discussions have already been held regarding this issue. The main questions of such debates were where the boundaries between journalism and civic activism, private opinions and position of an editorial office lie.

One of the online media has special guidelines and regulations for journalists' behavior on social networks. According to these rules, they are requested not to express their own positions on the topics they are working and preparing journalistic materials. Nestan Tsetskhladze, the chief editor of Netgazeti pointed out that since they are short staffed, journalists have to cover different issues and thus, it is safer to abstain from pointing out one's stance in general.<sup>48</sup> Even she tries not to participate in public discussions - she usually comments only on professional, journalistic issues and never expresses her viewpoints.

In case of other media outlets, for instance, Liberali.ge and Media.ge, even though they do not have such formal rules, there is an oral agreement between journalists and editors that they will abstain from posting comments or statuses about politics and their potential respondents on social networks.

"It is especially difficult in Georgia, since everything depends on personal relationships and preliminary expectations are of vital importance in media activities" – says Lika Zakashvili, executive director of Liberali.

In-depth and focus group interviews conducted with the participation of journalists of some online media representatives and bloggers revealed that reporters regard restraining from evaluation of current political events and activities of politicians as a part of standards of journalistic ethics.<sup>49</sup> Even more, they urge that this way they will avoid being perceived as partial either themselves or the publisher they work for. Moreover, readers will not judge their articles or reports in accordance with their pictures, statuses, replies and links posted on their

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<sup>47</sup> Interview conducted with U.S. 11.12.2013

<sup>48</sup> Interview conducted with N.T. 28.11.2013

<sup>49</sup> Interview conducted with A.T. 25.11.2013

social network profiles. Therefore, this segment of journalists does not consider the fact, that to a certain extent their actions within social networks are constrained, as a self-censorship. Also, during in-depth interviews some of them admitted that they had deleted comments written on Facebook several times, since they contained their attitudes and dissatisfactions towards on-going political events or high officials.<sup>50</sup>

In addition, journalists outlined that such approach simplifies their relationships with respondents,<sup>51</sup> more importantly, reputation, image and reliability of the media they represent and the materials they create are ensured.<sup>52</sup>

Part of them insisted that instead of constant online statements on particular policies, they prefer to prepare argument- and fact-based analysis on these topics and make people devote extensive attention to certain problems by means of delivering professional articles and reports.<sup>53</sup>

On the contrary, other journalists are very actively engaged in discussions held on social networks and openly express their views about various internal and external affairs happening in the country. As a result of their conduct, they are generally regarded as supporters of some political forces and sometimes the objectivity of the news agency they are associated with is questioned by the population.<sup>54</sup>

Finally, the third group of people posits that journalists should control their online behavior, however their social activism is acceptable only if their viewpoints are buttressed up by facts<sup>55</sup> or are related to the issues of social significance.<sup>56</sup>

## Internet Users' Rights and their Violations

Although Georgia is ranked as “Free” in the Freedom on the Net 2013 Report by Freedom House<sup>57</sup>, along with the USA, UK and Estonia and may have much more free internet than those further down the list, like Russia, Iran or Cuba, the cases of repercussions for online activities still take place in Georgia. The current report covers four cases, some widespread in the media and some told by the immediate victims, when internet activities led to verbal and/or physical violence against students, regulation of internet activities or dismissal of the employees.

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<sup>50</sup>Interviews conducted with G.G (26.11.2013) and T.Z (04.12.2013)

<sup>51</sup>Interview conducted with T.K. 04.12.2013

<sup>52</sup>Interview conducted with N.D. 25.11.2013

<sup>53</sup>Interviews conducted with T.K (04.12.2013) and N.D (25.11.2013)

<sup>54</sup>Interview conducted with A.T. 25.11.2013

<sup>55</sup>Interview conducted with N.N. 25.11.2013

<sup>56</sup> Interview conducted with L.Z. 13.12.2013

<sup>57</sup> Freedom on the Net 2013, A Global Assessment of Internet and Digital Media, pp.14-15 accessed at: [http://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/resources/FOTN%202013\\_Full%20Report\\_0.pdf](http://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/resources/FOTN%202013_Full%20Report_0.pdf)

## Cases of [www.reactor.ge](http://www.reactor.ge); [www.studentebi.com](http://www.studentebi.com) and Initiative “Targmne”

A student of Tbilisi State University has told IDFI about a few cases of violence against students, one involving the respondent himself and two more cases involving his friends. The facts given below are taken from the interview and may require further investigation as well as coverage of additional sources.

*In September 2013 Students of one of the leading private universities, Free University, have published a post on their problems on a students’ blog, [www.reactori.wordpress.com](http://www.reactori.wordpress.com).<sup>58</sup> The administrators of the blog received threats on both Facebook page and blog, were “advised” and demanded to remove the post as it was “incorrect” by one of the students of Free University. The blog-post has not been deleted.*

*There is a blog created by law students of Tbilisi State University about issues surrounding their university life and the student self-government [www.studentebi.com](http://www.studentebi.com). In spring of 2012 the vice-president of the student self-government at Tbilisi State University claimed that the blog did not have right accents, and that it created negative PR against student self-government. Consequently, two bloggers, Z.M. and T.U. were beaten in the office of the student self-government. The police was called and some measures were taken. During the following days, there were demonstrations in front of the university. The administration of the university was waiting for official response from the police and on its side had promised to punish those involved. However, there was no information on final decision from the Ministry of Interior. The students, who have fallen victims of violence, were further threatened. There were even calls to their families and finally they decided not appeal to court. Later, Facebook accounts of these two students and one more student, I.B. were hacked at Tbilisi State University. Therefore, they created a new blog.*

Besides, in 2011, after a student presentation of an initiative “targmne” (translate), demanding major textbooks at universities to be translated into Georgian language, a few students were beaten. Two bloggers wrote posts on these facts and were beaten themselves.<sup>59</sup>

### Case of LEPL of the Ministry of Justice

The dismissal of the head of a Legal Entity of Public Law (LEPL) of the Ministry of Justice has been largely covered by Georgian media. Following the dismissal, apparently reaction of the Ministry on an article published in an online magazine, two managers of the LEPL spread information in the social network, that they were threatened and pressed by the Ministry in response to their critical statuses about dismissal of their director. IDFI has conducted an

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<sup>58</sup> <http://bit.ly/Klm1ol>

<sup>59</sup> Interview conducted with B.G. 28.11.2013

interview with one of the managers. While the outcome of the process is not clear yet and further investigation is needed for drawing specific conclusions, we believe that the collected information may still give interesting insights. The facts given below are based on the interview with one of the managers of the LEPL.

*An online magazine published an article about the delay in signing by the Minister of Justice of the agreements for grant given by the one Legal Entity of Public Law (LEPL) of the Ministry of Justice to NGOs. In November 2013 the director of this LEPL was dismissed for “poor management”. Following this fact, two managers of the LEPL, T.A. and A.S. wrote critical statuses on their own Facebook pages. The next day these managers and five more employees were called to the Minister, who had their Facebook statuses printed out and called them “remnants of the previous government”. The new director told them that the General Inspection will consider the case as “action against the system”. Further, there was a suggestion, that unless they quit, they will not be able to find jobs elsewhere. Both T.A. and A.S. declined to voluntarily resign from their positions in exchange for less harsh report of the General Inspection. Now they expect to be effectively fired from their jobs as a result of reorganization process. In the meanwhile, after their remarks of Facebook, T.A. and A.S. were given no additional tasks. They were invited neither to strategic planning workshop, nor to regular management meetings. These two and one more assistant, who wrote similar Facebook post, did not receive the 13<sup>th</sup> salary, the annual bonus. They have already visited the Public Defender and a non-governmental organization Georgian Young Lawyers’ Association (GYLA) for legal support, plan to write an open letter for NGOs and appeal to the court. Besides, T.A. said in the interview that self-censorship is very common among public service employees, even public officials, but nobody speaks about it openly.<sup>60</sup>*

### **Case of Natia Imnadze**

According to the information spread in the media, a case similar to the dismissal in the system of the Ministry of Justice has happened in the Office of the Public Defender of Georgia. The information given below is based on the media coverage and requires further investigation.

*The Minister of Corrections and Legal Assistance of Georgia, Sozar Subari, has criticized the part of the report of Public Defender concerning prisoners with Tuberculosis, calling the recommendation of the Ombudsman on this issue “unprofessional” and questioned his obligation to have met prisoners in person. Following this critic, in April of 2013, the magazine Liberali has conducted an interview with the Head of Department of Monitoring and Prevention, Natia Imnadze.<sup>61</sup> Imnadze has noted that although no article obliges the Minister to meet the prisoners in person, such meetings would have been beneficial for gathering better information.*

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<sup>60</sup> Interview conducted with T.A. 26.12.2013

<sup>61</sup><http://www.liberali.ge/ge/liberali/news/114482>

Besides, Imnadze spoke about the lack of professionalism of some people and spontaneous and fast changes of new management in the penitential system and increased power of some prisoners. In November of 2013 Imnadze and her deputy Otar Kvatchade were dismissed. Imnadze said that one of the reasons of her dismissal may have been her critic of the penitentiary system earlier in an interview with Liberali. She also said that after the interview in April, her contact with the media has been limited, since she first had to obtain a permission from the Press Centre and the Public Defender. The representative of the Office of the Public Defender claimed that the Office cannot publicize grounds of dismissal because of the law on personal data protection.<sup>62</sup> The Public Defender himself stated that Imnadze was dismissed because of intentional failure to perform duties.<sup>63</sup> Following the dismissal, three more employees of the same department have left their positions voluntarily.<sup>64</sup> Natia Imnadze and Otar Kvatchadze regarded their dismissal as illegal and were going to appeal to the court.

### Case of [www.TSpress.ge](http://www.TSpress.ge)

Another case widely covered by the media refers to an article by a journalist, followed by publication of her personal information and physical violence. The facts below are based on the information spread in the media.

On July 17, 2012 Iza Salakaia, a journalist of Samegrelo-Zemo Svaneti Information Centre (TSpress.ge) wrote an article<sup>65</sup> about internal confrontations in Poti office of the Coalition Georgian Dream regarding Majoritarian candidate Eka Beselia. After the publication of that article, one of the visitors Sh.M. posted a copy of chat between Iza Salakaia and Z.M. as of July 4, 2012.<sup>66</sup> A few days afterwards Sh. M. attacked Iza Salakaia in the street.<sup>67</sup> The journalist addressed a non-governmental organization Georgian Young Lawyers' Association (GYLA) for legal assistance, investigation was launched.<sup>68</sup> In April of 2013, Poti Police, having finished investigation, awarded Iza Salakaia with a victim's status, but did not publicize information about the case and the alleged perpetrator.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>62</sup><http://www.liberali.ge/ge/liberali/news/116902>

<sup>63</sup><http://www.ick.ge/articles/16431-i.html>

<sup>64</sup><http://www.liberali.ge/ge/liberali/news/116911>

<sup>65</sup><http://www.tspress.ge/ka/site/articles/12487/>

<sup>66</sup><http://www.tspress.ge/ka/site/articles/12526/>

<sup>67</sup><http://www.tspress.ge/ka/site/articles/12506/>

<sup>68</sup> Freedom of Expression in Georgia, Media Analysis, January 2006 – September 2012, Georgian Young Lawyers Association (GYLA), 2013, p. 60.

<sup>69</sup><http://www.tspress.ge/ka/site/articles/13986/>

## Case of SAKAERONAVIGATSIA

Official norms regulating employee communication with the media (including making statements using social media) are sometimes regulated in Georgian institutions. Interestingly, On October 4, 2013 the General Director of the state-owned Ltd. "SAKAERONAVIGATSIA", which conducts management of air traffic within the Georgian airspace, signed an order according to which all employees of the company are obliged to refrain from commenting on issues connected with activities of the company in any printed or electronic media, including internet, without having agreed with the directors and PR manager of the organization. Besides, without prior agreement with directors and PR managers, employees are not allowed to make comments, announcements, evaluation or spread of any kind of information on behalf of the organization or its representative in printed or electronic media, including internet.

### To sum up

The cases covered above require further investigation of facts and more pluralism of the sources. However, they may still give interesting insights into the current state of internet freedom and its limitations in Georgia. Along with active monitoring of any further issues, when the rights of internet users were violated, IDFI is planning to further continue investigation of the above mentioned facts and deliver a more a more comprehensive analysis in the next report(s).

## Pluralism

Development of online media is crucial for obtaining diverse and alternative information in Georgia. During focus and in-depth interviews, bloggers, journalists and editors of some internet media representatives noted that until recently internet, particularly social network, remains a largely free arena in Georgia.

As one of the respondents declared, social networks are most independent in Georgia, since nobody can impose restrictions on your actions. Anyone is able to create personal Facebook page, twitter account, register a blog and disseminate his/her own ideas among internet users through modern technologies. Web-sites are not subject to any blocking or filtering, livestream and skype can be used without any deliberate obstacles.

Furthermore, spreading information and expressing themselves is quite easy for minorities and small groups. "Positive is the fact that everyone says what he/she thinks. If you look through these discussions and content on Facebook, you will be able to summarize different positions

and come to your conclusions”.<sup>70</sup> “People express their opinions, even very unacceptable ones, about any topics or institutions, very freely. This is felt especially during last year.”<sup>71</sup>

“Social media is absolutely free in Georgia and if a person is willing to be socially active, he/she has a wide range of opportunities for this.”<sup>72</sup>

With regard to media sources, no single cases of obstacles to access to internet have been identified yet. Online media organizations are not in need for official registration or licensing in order to launch online activities.

Even more, according to our respondents, increasing number of web-sites, labeling themselves as news agency, are being established. There are dozens of web-portals which do not display information about their founders, editors, authors, mission or history. Emergence of some agencies is believed to be connected to particular political developments and groups. For instance, the founders of electronic newspaper [www.iveria.biz](http://www.iveria.biz) are former high officials and articles are mainly written by these people.

“Recently so called projects of various political groups emerged as web-sites of news agencies and they disseminate information according to their political editorial strategy. However, it cannot be claimed that they influence on general picture significantly.”<sup>73</sup> As a rule such web-sites are deleted in the light of ongoing political processes. Respondents also stressed that there are several web-sites containing false and inaccurate information.

“Internet media outlets have mushroomed. Although, it is still easy to identify unreliable web-sites, which call themselves news agencies and spread thousands of information not complying with professional standards.”<sup>74</sup>

One of our respondents even claimed that internet is too free in Georgia. You may encounter all kinds of viewpoints there.<sup>75</sup>

Davit Kldiashvili, the secretary of the Council of the Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics, claims that it depends on the policy and approach of the country. Georgia has not chosen the policy of regulation of online media representatives. Internet news agencies are not required to register in advance. He makes comparison with Russia, where registration of each online news

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<sup>70</sup>Interview conducted with G.G. 26.11.2013

<sup>71</sup>Interview conducted with T.K. 04.12.2013

<sup>72</sup>Interview conducted with N.D. 25.11.2013

<sup>73</sup>Interview conducted with N.T. 28.11.2013

<sup>74</sup>Interview conducted with T.K. 04.12.2013

<sup>75</sup>Interview conducted with N.E. 25.11.2013

portal is obligatory. He does not support regulative strategy and claims that each media organizations should gain representation through its own content and information released.<sup>76</sup>

On the other hand, some segments of society think that somehow professional qualification of such e-publishers should be checked, with simultaneous protection of their rights to establish media outlets.<sup>77</sup>

In spite of the evidence of subjective online publishers, several reliable online media outlets can be distinguished. Existence of accessibility to different and diverse information is proved by research-based analysis. For example, with assistance from the European Union and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) in Georgia under the project “Professional Media for Elections” qualitative and quantitative monitoring of 12 online media outlets (netgazeti.ge, droni.ge, internet.ge, liberali.ge, news.ge, presa.ge, civil.ge, tabula.ge, tribuna.ge, onlinenews.ge, for.ge, dfwatch.ge and palitratv.ge) was performed from May till November, 2013.

According to the key findings of the monitoring, coverage of news about main developments of the country was more or less impartial and balanced by these web-sites, however there were several exceptions. More precisely, monitors observed frequent cases of violation of ethical norms and journalistic standards on droni.ge, for.ge and presa.ge, while other web-sites had not such problems and materials published on these media outlets complied with the general journalistic standards. Apart from this, the final results of the monitoring claim: “The most widespread form of violation of journalistic standards was subjective reasoning of journalists, and deficit of differentiating the comments from references or the lack of accuracy of facts. Often there was no balance of sources either.”

Based on this analysis, several problems of online media can be highlighted: mixing the facts and references of journalists, violation of ethic norms and in some cases, open and clear bias of journalists towards certain political forces. Most importantly, despite such challenges, research based analysis displayed that different opinions and positions are heard and spread through internet and active online users can encounter news covering political events from different angles.

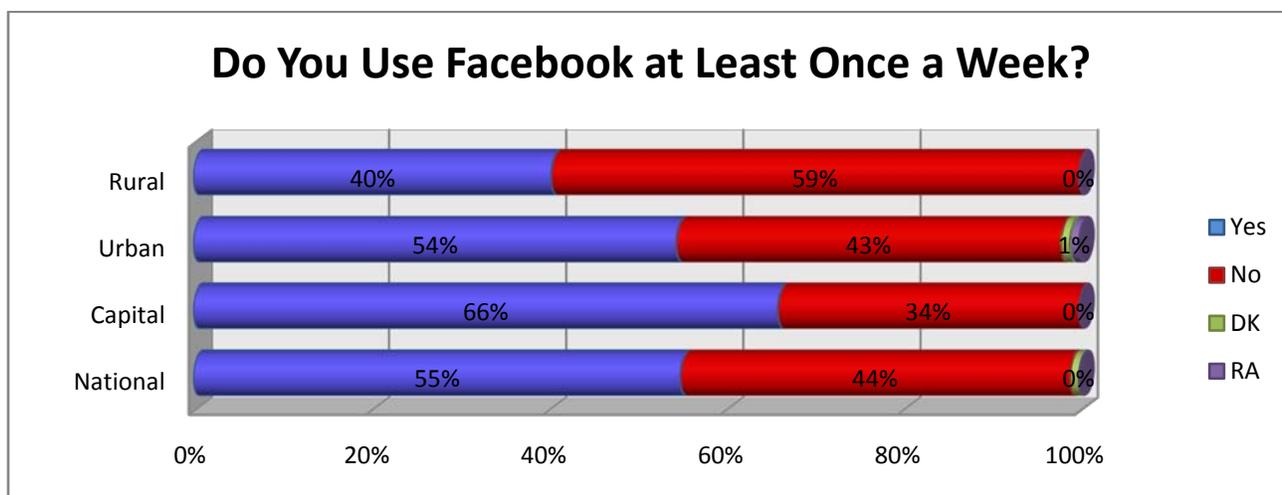
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<sup>76</sup>Interview conducted with D.K. 29.11.2013

<sup>77</sup>Interview conducted with A.T. 25.11.2013

## Info-activism

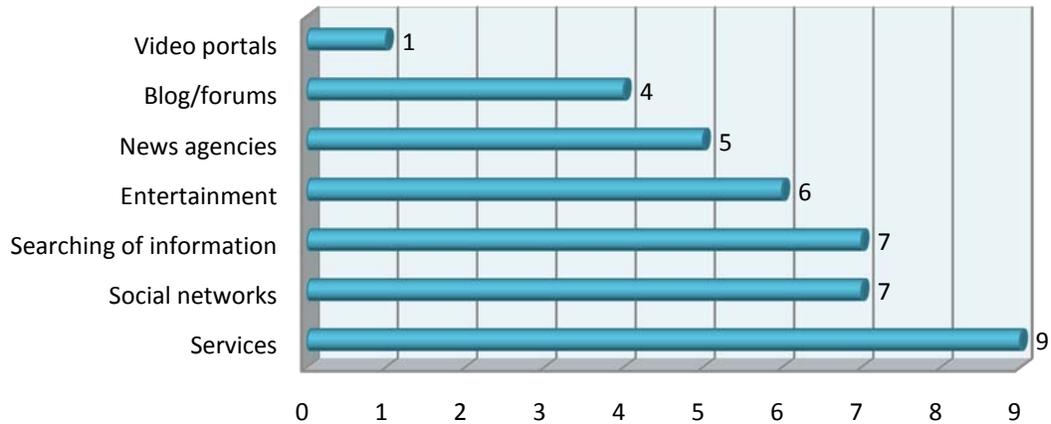
Development of internet technologies promoted online media, info-activism and greater freedom of expression and information in Georgia. People can create and promote their own online personal profiles, accounts and blogs. Generally, online media and social networks has become a significant source of alternative information for some parts of citizens in the country. As it was mentioned above, 19 percent of the population named internet as a main source of information. Social network Facebook is the leader in this regard. Generally, frequency of accessibility to this web-site is quite high not only among the internet users of the capital of Georgia, but also throughout the country. According to CRRC survey, 66 percent of residents of Tbilisi (out of those who have internet access) check Facebook at least once a week and the same indicators for urban regions and rural regions are 54% and 40%, respectively.<sup>78</sup>



In order to show the clear picture what kind of e-resources are popular among online society of Georgia, information provided by Alexa.com can be relevant. It is an e-resource of California-based subsidiary company of Amazon.com, which provides web-traffic data, including Top Sites, Internet Traffic Stats and Metrics. Based on this web-page, Georgian users most frequently browse the following five web-sites: Facebook.com, Google.com, Youtube.com, Google.ge and Odnoklassniki.ru. We have allocated the first forty top e-resources into one of the following categories: entertainment, social networks, searching of information, blog/forums, services, news agencies and video portals. The chart below shows that web-sites with several e-services (mainly e-shops), social networks and searching browsers are most often visited by Georgian internet society.

<sup>78</sup>Caucasus Research Resource Centers.(2013) "Caucasus Barometer". Data for 2013 was provided by CRRC (26 December, 2013)

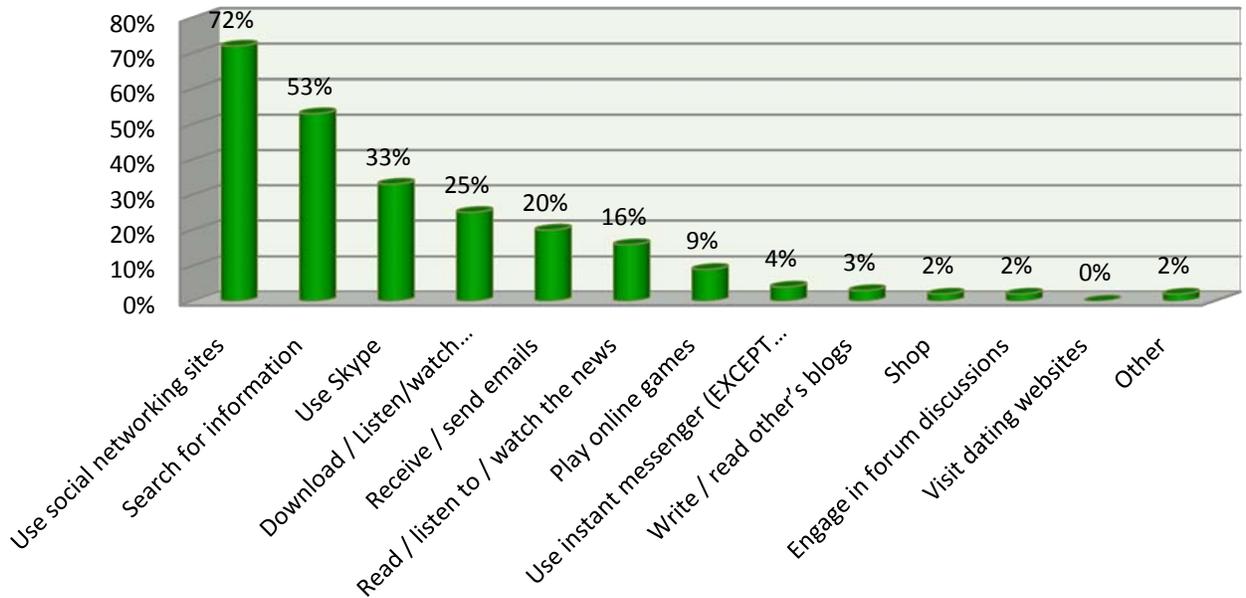
## Type of Most popular Web-sites in Georgia



Furthermore, it is interesting, what kind of services are mostly surfed and demanded by internet users online. Several researches claim that checking social networks (72%), searching for information (53%), chatting via skype (33%), downloading, listening, watching news (25%) and sending/receiving e-mail (20%) are most essential online activities for Georgian online activists.<sup>79</sup> These results mostly coincide with the statistical data provided by Alexa.com.

<sup>79</sup>Caucasus Research Resource Centers.(2013) "Caucasus Barometer". Data for 2013 was provided by CRRC (26 December, 2013)

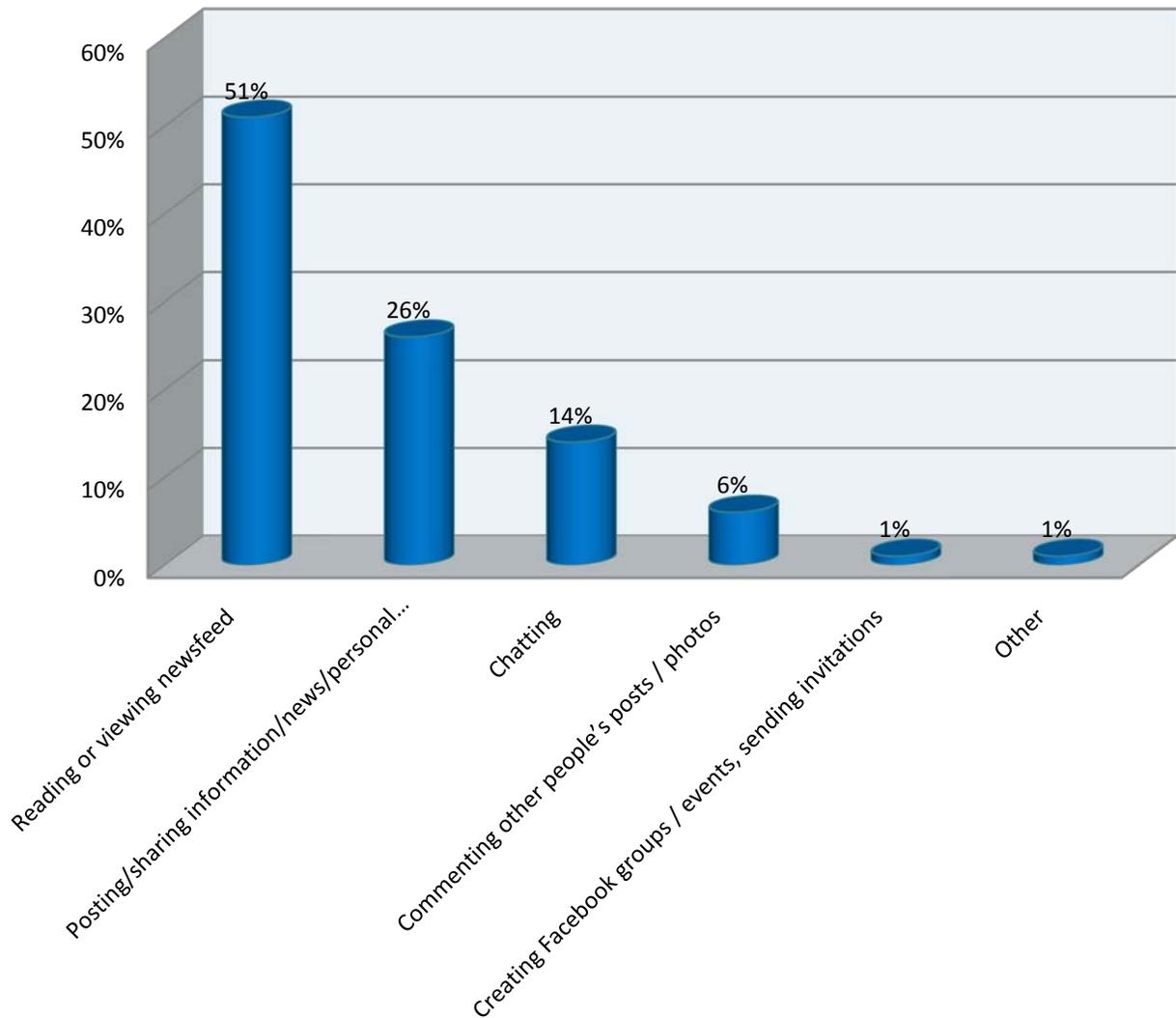
## Most frequent activities using the internet



This information talks much about the behavior of Georgian internet users. In this regard, the level of interaction and activeness of ordinary citizens on social networks is more significant factor, since it reveals their willingness for online communication through expression their own views, active involvement in discussions and forums. However, it is evident that internet is infrequently used for relatively interactive purposes. Georgians' little inclination for active online discussions is proved by countrywide public opinion polls. For instance, CRRC survey says that more than half part of Facebook users check it for reading or viewing newsfeed (51%), while only 6% expresses his/her own opinions on other people's posts.<sup>80</sup> Based on these measures, it can be assumed that users of social networks are mainly passive recipients of information existing on several e-resources.

<sup>80</sup>Caucasus Research Resource Centers.(2013) "Caucasus Barometer". Data for 2013 was provided by CRRC (26 December, 2013)

## What Do you Do Most Frequently, When you Are Actually on Facebook?



Besides, it is argued that socially active people usually do not translate their virtual activism into real actions. For example, various Facebook events have been created on problematic issues and challenges the country is currently facing (E.g. cutting down forests in the countryside of Tbilisi, protecting rights of minorities, etc.). Consequently, this online platform was effectively used for civic mobilization. However, practice showed that although thousands of people supported particular activities virtually, finally, only dozens of people were attending these events physically.

During this reporting period several peaceful protests were planned and organized on Facebook regarding Vake Park. Demonstrators have been demanding from Tbilisi City Assembly, Tbilisi

City Hall and Tbilisi Architecture Service to suspend building of seven-stored hotel in the park, within the crucial recreation area of the capital. The organizers launched e-petition on [www.secure.avaaz.org](http://www.secure.avaaz.org). As of today, it has gained 5 013 signatures.

It should be noted that practice of creating petitions and making appeals to the Government of Georgia became quite widespread these days. However, the web-sites where these petitions are published are mainly created by volunteer groups. On the other hand, the Government has not yet established common mechanisms for responding online petitions. Consequently, such online initiatives are mainly left without proper reactions and feedbacks from the Government.

Within the framework of international initiative, Open Government Partnership Georgia made commitment to launch web-site [ichange.ge](http://ichange.ge) – a platform where citizens will be able to express their opinion, criticism or ideas. According to the action plan,<sup>81</sup> a project team will work on this web-site to tackle the most discussed topics, identify major concerns and inform responsible authorities. Additionally, [Ichange.ge](http://ichange.ge) will enable to create and submit e-petitions. When an e-petition reaches a certain number of signatures (depending on the scale of the issue under question) authorities will be under the obligation to react. IDFI provided the Government with recommendations and concept of this e-platform elaborated with the consideration of international practice.<sup>82</sup> Despite active support from civil society, the Government of Georgia has not taken appropriate steps in this direction yet.

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<sup>81</sup>Open Government Partnership/Georgia. Available at: <http://www.opengovpartnership.org/country/georgia>, last accessed 25.12.2013

<sup>82</sup>Concept of Citizen Platform – [www.ichange.ge](http://www.ichange.ge). Institute for Development of Freedom of Information. Available at: <http://www.idfi.ge/?cat=researches&lang=en&topic=104&header=>, last accessed 26.12.2013