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"As quiet as a mouse": Media use in Azerbaijan

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Abstract: During the Soviet period, the media served as one of the main propagandist tools of the authoritarian regime, using a standardized and monotype media system across the Soviet Republics. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, 15 countries became independent. The transition from Soviet communism to capitalism has led to the reconstruction of economic, socio-cultural, and political systems. One of the most affected institutions in post-Soviet countries was the media. Media have played a supportive role during rough times, when there was, on the one hand, the struggle for liberation and sovereignty, and, on the other hand, the need for nation building. It has been almost 30 years since the Soviet Republics achieved independence, yet the media have not been freed from political control and continue to serve as ideological apparatuses of authoritarian regimes in post-Soviet countries. Freedom of speech and independent media are still under threat. The current study focuses on media use in Azerbaijan, one of the under-researched post-Soviet countries. The interviews for this study were conducted with 40 participants living in Nakhichevan and Baku. In-depth, semi-structured interview techniques were used as research method. Findings are discussed under six main themes in the conclusion.

Keywords: media use, mass media, post-Soviet media, Azerbaijan, in-depth interview

Introduction

Media effects have always been a controversial issue for both mainstream and critical approaches since the beginning of the 20th century. While the mainstream perspectives focus on the media's positive effects in terms of sharing information and constituting the states' fourth power to promote the existing political structures, critics underscore the media's tendency to share misinformation as a way of serving political interests. In this context, while analyzing the content of mate-

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rials allows us to know what media do with individuals, the audience research reveals what audiences do with media. The reception studies were firstly conducted by Elihu Katz and Paul F. Lazarsfeld in the late 1950s. Since then, these studies have become more detailed and prevalent in the literature in the domain of Cultural Studies.

In the current study, the interviews were conducted with Azerbaijani individuals to comprehend the general media situation in Azerbaijan. The comprehensive research revealed that no studies have yet examined the media from the perspective of the audience. Therefore, this study can be incentive and directive for future studies that will analyze the media in Azerbaijan as one of the post-Soviet countries.

In the Soviet Union, media was an effective propaganda tool of Soviet communism. The main aim of Soviet media was to plant the Soviet ideology in individuals. There was strong censorship of media in both production and distribution. In the first half of the 20th century, newspaper and radio were the main components of this Soviet propaganda. Following the 1950s, cinema was also used to disseminate Soviet propaganda in the USSR (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics). Television proved to be the most effective tool (Zasoursky, 2016, p. 6).

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, 15 countries have gained independence. The difficult period was initiated with the transition to new political, economic, and social systems. Media have also seen many changes. Many private broadcasting organizations were established in post-Soviet countries, expanding and differentiating media. New laws and regulations were adopted for the formation of democratic media systems in those countries. According to Richter (2008, p. 308), although constitutions of all post-Soviet countries ban censorship, it persists in new ways. Those practices can be categorized as below:

- 1. Direct intervention in editorial policies or contents
- 2. Refusal to serve independent or opposition outlets
- 3. Restriction of information and advertising
- 4. Abuse of state subsidiaries and monopolies
- 5. Abuse of regulatory and supervisory functions
- 6. Lawlessness
- 7. In-house censorship
- 8. Illegal pressure ("soft censorship") (Richter, 2008, pp. 308–313)

Soft censorship and self-censorship, the most common of the above-stated types, are prevalent in post-Soviet countries. Journalists tend not to be objective in preparing the content of the news under these authoritarian regimes. Rather, they avoid meddling. This situation leads to a decline in public confidence in

the media and increased alienation between societies and states (Richter, 2008, p. 314).

The media is still a problematic field in the former Soviet republics for many political and technical reasons. Various studies and research reports (Becker, 2004; IREX, 2018, 2019; Junisbai, 2014; Lauk, 2008; Lehtisaari, 2015; Manaev, 2014; Mejias and Vokuev, 2017; Oates, 2007; Shafer and Freedman, 2003) have analyzed the media systems in the post-Soviet countries from different perspectives. Those studies invariably have found that various types of censorship are being implemented under strict state control and that this pressure is stunting the whole media system in these countries. Oates (2007) described a filtering system in Russia that re-edits the content and that television is the most dominant media outlet in Russia. Monopoly of media ownership adversely effects the development of journalistic standards, and self-censorship has occurred since the Soviet period. According to Lauk's research (2008, p. 61), the political management and elite journalists control the professional media environment in Estonia. The implementation of laws is insufficient to secure the media's responsible performance. The research report by IREX (2019) also showed that journalists' professionalism is weak, and state control of the media is still very strong in Estonia. Junisbai (2014) found that unlike in Kazakhstan, in Kyrgyzstan, radio and print media are as effective as television. Users in both countries, however, watch videos for pleasure and distraction. According to Mejias and Vokuev (2017), the situation of Russian media is not different from that of other post-Soviet countries. The mainstream media have been privatized by a few actors, whose interests are being served. In Uzbekistan, the media and the internet are also strongly controlled by the government. According to Shafer and Freedman (2003, p. 92), the government conducts prior-censorship practices to media outlets. In addition, the government monopolizes printing and distribution systems, and finances the mainstream newspapers. The research conducted in Turkmenistan by IREX (2018) showed that the state control of the media is still strong and that self-censorship is prevalent amongst the journalists. However, internet access is as expensive as in other post-Soviet countries in Central Asia. Concerning the media environment in Georgia, which is one of the neighboring countries of Azerbaijan, Mitchell (2006) mentioned the political barriers for setting up free media. In another neighboring post-Soviet country, Armenia, lack of media independence, political bias, unfavorable broadcasting legislation, and the working conditions for journalists are considered the main factors hindering media freedom (Sargsyan, 2014).

Another common finding of the above-mentioned studies was the increasing political impact of the internet in post-Soviet countries. According to Reuter and Szakonyi (2013, p. 31), in authoritarian regimes, where the access to traditional media is restricted, the internet – and in particular social media – is becoming the alternative platform for raising political and social awareness. For Gordon (2017, p. 2), this alternative platform includes tools to raise awareness among individuals who share a point of view. In this way, social media can be useful in raising community awareness, framing arguments, engaging with mass media, stimulating and organizing protests, and obtaining resources.

The current research focuses on the media use in Azerbaijan. As stated above, though there are some studies that analyze the general structure of media in Azerbaijan, no studies have been conducted to discover how individuals use media. In this context, the main purpose of this study is to learn what Azerbaijanis do with media. To this end, six main research questions were identified:

- 1. What are the general dynamics of media in Azerbaijan?
- 2. What are the audience preferences?
- 3. Which medium is used as the main information source by individuals?
- 4. Why are Russian and Turkish channels preferred over national channels?
- 5. What is the role of social media?
- 6. What do Azerbaijanis expect from the media?

Based upon these research questions, in-depth interviews were used as research method. The interviews were conducted with a total of 40 participants. The interviews were carried out via Skype. The findings are discussed in the conclusion.

Media in Azerbaijan

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Azerbaijan gained its independence on October 18, 1991. According to the Constitution adopted on November 12, 1995, Azerbaijan is defined as "a democratic, secular, and unitary Republic". Though the national language is Azerbaijani, Russian is also prevalent. Furthermore, Turkish is widely used colloquially by Azerbaijani youth due to the influence of Turkish TV broadcasting. In fact, both Turkish and Azerbaijani are rooted in Old Oghuz Turkic. Although there are some phonological, morphological, syntactic, and semantic differences, those two dialects are fairly similar (Tokat, 2017). Therefore, Azerbaijanis can readily understand and speak Turkish. On the contrary, Turkish people sometimes have difficulties to understand Azerbaijanis due to the use of some Russian words in the spoken language.

The culture of Azerbaijan includes multi-denominational religious structures. The majority of the population is Muslim, including both Sunni and Shia forms. Christianity (Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant) is the second most

common faith in the country. In addition, three Jewish communities - Mountain Jews, Ashkenazi Jews, and Georgian Jews – live mostly in the northern regions. All religious groups are protected by the law and regulations. Currently, it is estimated that there are more than 380 registered religious communities in Azerbaijan¹.

The government system of Azerbaijan is mainly based on a separation of powers: The National Assembly (Milli Meclis) holds legislative power; the president, executive authority; and the courts, judicial power. During the former Soviet regime, the centralized one-party government held control. As in other Soviet republics, the ideological propaganda of the Soviet regime was engrained in the citizenry through press and broadcast media. Today, according to current information from the MFA (Ministry of Foreign Affairs)², there are 55 political parties and more than 4,000 governmental and non-governmental organizations in the country.

The economy is mainly based on the oil and gas industry. The Gross Domestic Product (GDP) reached US\$ 189,050 billion in 2019. Although natural resources have enabled the rapid growth of the country, there are still many economic problems in terms of the people's livelihood, one of them being the transition from a socialist economy to a market economy. This posthaste transition has negatively influenced the income distribution in society on account of the inadequate social and economic policies, and has led to economic disparities in the caste system (Suleymanov, 2004, p. 51).

During the Soviet regime, it was impossible to think of independent and pluralist media. There was only a monotype media environment shaped by the instructions of the Bolshevik Party in all former Soviet republics. In Azerbaijan, only one television channel ("The State Television and Radio Committee Under the Council of Ministers") and one radio station ("Araz" radio) were broadcasting (Nifteliyeva, 2015, pp. 211–212). Furthermore, the press were also functioning as an ideological apparatus of Soviet communism (Husiyev, 2014).

In the first periods of Azerbaijan's independence, the Constitution from November 12, 1995 legalized freedom of thought, expression, and mass communication in the Articles number 47 and 50. However, although the Constitution was updated with amendments accepted in 2002, 2009, and 2016, the comprehensive research report of the Institute for Reporters' Freedom and Safety – IRFS (2017, p. 6) – found that there was a lack of transparency and accountability in politics in the country and that the total score for freedom of expression was low

¹ http://www.mfa.gov.az/?language=az&options=content&id=8

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in a worldwide comparison. At the same time, depoliticization is high among young individuals in Azerbaijan. According to Pearce and Kendzion (2012), this is related to the fact that young Azerbaijanis, who have grown up in a chaotic post-Soviet environment, value stability and avoid political issues. The media do not want to risk opposing the ruling party. Therefore, the content of media outlets does not include any critical reporting. The press and internet media are under the control of the Press Council, established in 2003. As the access to the internet has become possible and easy across the country, the government has started to monitor it vigilantly. In 2012, the amendment of Criminal Codes, which aimed to prevent the use of computers and the internet for criminal purposes, was passed (Pearce, 2104, pp. 52–53). In addition, two main internet filtering techniques – IP blocking and blockpage – have been supported by the government and used to restrict access to political (dissident-opinion) and pornography-themed online platforms. This selective filtering system blocks a small number of specific sites across a few categories (Faris and Villeneuve, 2008, pp. 13, 18-19). The main information sources and traditional media are strictly monitored by the government. Opposition groups cannot access traditional media properly (Sultanova, 2014, pp. 27-33). Bunce and Volchik (2008, p. 20) found in their research that the ruling party was represented in 79 % of media outlets during the Parliamentary Elections in 2005. Few newspapers and journals even mentioned the other parties.

According to Pearce's (2014, p. 40) research, instead of using high-level filtering, psychological techniques are used to create an environment in which self-censorship prevails. In fact, this environment is voluntarily instituted by individuals themselves. As defined by Bar-Tal (2017, p. 42), this sort of censorship is the withholding of opinions without formal obstacles. Individuals choose, on their own, not to express their opinions or ideas in the presence of partisan media. Under those circumstances, the internet takes on the task of information dissemination for the opposition. Thus, the internet is becoming increasingly popular among activists. Social media such as Facebook, Twitter, and blogs are widely used by activists (Bedford, 2014, p. 10). In particular, flash mobs are preferred by liberal and leftist activists and groups (Mehrabov, 2016).

For Enserov (2013, p. 75), two main factors have led to the emergence of partial and complimentary media in Azerbaijan: the legacy of the former authoritarian regime and an inadequate legislative and normative base for media development. As it was under the Soviet regime, television continued to be an authoritarian tool of the ruling party in the first decades of independence. The purpose of the media outlets was mainly to plant the ideology of nationalism in the population. The content and structures of the programs were almost the same in all media. However, because broadcast technology in Azerbaijan was not sufficiently devel-

oped, in this period viewership of Russian and Turkish TV channels was higher than for national channels. Only after the 2000s did different types of programs start to be broadcast. The number of private media outlets began to increase and have started to cover more entertainment and to produce talk shows. Today, there are 26 national and local TV channels in Azerbaijan (Maharramova, 2019, pp. 24-39).

Azerbaijan is one the under-researched post-Soviet countries in terms of media environment and use. Although there are a number studies primarily analyzing the issue of ethics in journalism (Hacili and Ağaliyev, 2008; Memmedli, 2007), the history of press (Aşirli, 2009; Husiyev, 2014; Yildirim, 2013), and broadcast journalism (Çapli et al., 2017; Elibeyli, 2011; Enserov, 2013; Maharramova, 2019; Meherremli, Kerimova, Elibeyli, and Eliyeva, 2017), no comprehensive study has been conducted on the consumption of media in Azerbaijan. The focus of the previously mentioned studies was on the general assessment of the country's media environment. However, the current study aims to analyze the media use in Azerbaijan. Using in-depth techniques, the interviews were conducted with 40 participants living in Nakhichevan or Baku. Of the 40 individuals, 21 were male and 19 were female. The findings are discussed in the conclusion.

Research method

Within the scope of this study, an in-depth semi-structured interview was selected as research technique to analyze the findings. The main reason for selecting a qualitative method is the possibility to examine and comprehend the opinions about the issue in a detailed way. In this context, this research technique allows the researcher to ask additional, follow-up questions in order to probe any issue (Lindloff and Taylor, 2011). The participants were selected within snowball sampling, and the interviews were conducted with 40 individuals via Skype. In total, the participants were asked 15 main questions and approximately 5 to 10 additional questions in the course of the interviews. The duration of each interview was between 30 and 40 minutes. The ages of the participants ranged from 20 to 60 years. The participants were anonymized. Only sex, age, and profession were indicated. All the interviews were conducted by the author and translated from Azerbaijani to English. The translation was checked by an independent expert. The findings were categorized within six main titles relevant to the research questions.

Findings

The in-depth interviews were conducted with a total of 40 participants (21 male and 19 female). Six main categories were identified in order to analyze the findings in a detailed way. The categories were determined based on the thematic evaluation of the participants' responses. These categories are: *Media environment in the country, Main information sources, Audience preferences, Interest in Turkish and Russian TV broadcasting, Social media use,* and *Expectations from the media.*

Media environment in the country

In the first category, the participants were asked to express their opinions about the existing media environment. The aim was to learn about their satisfaction levels with the current media situation in the country. In this context, production values and the quality of the content of traditional media were the focal points. Two opposing groups emerged. The first group, representing 53% of the total (n=21), thinks that the media's technological infrastructure has been sufficiently developed. They are satisfied with the content of the programs:

I haven't thought about it before. In fact, I am not interested in national or local media. However, yes, they are not structurally different from foreign media. (m, 23, engineer)

I can say that I am quite satisfied with the content of programs via traditional media. It is developing [...]. (f, 28, teacher)

Compared to previous times, yes, I can assure you that it has developed significantly. Today, the broadcast content is prepared more meticulously. (m, 33, civil servant)

The second group of participants, made up of 47 % (n=19), contradicted the first group. These participants complained about the current media situation in the country. In particular, they cited the banality of the content, the lack of interesting programs, and such:

Media? In Azerbaijan? No, so bad. Have you ever watched any kind of program on TV even once? Oh God! Those entertainment programs, so-called talk shows. So ridiculous. At least news programs satisfy me. (m, 31, academic)

Just watch Russian and Turkish channels, and then watch ours. You realize the big difference between them. No words to say. (f, 20, graduate)

I'm not satisfied with either the structure or content of broadcasts in the country. When I watch Turkish or Russian channels, I begin to grouch about the differences [...]. (f, 38, nurse).

As can be seen above, the second group of participants emphasized the poor quality in terms of production and content of Azerbaijani programming compared to Turkish or Russian programming.

Main information sources

In this category, the participants were asked about their preferences for, and reliance on, the main information sources. While 88 % of the participants (n=35) cited television as their main platform for news, 80% (n=32) cited social media as their main information source. Concerning the reliability of information sources, three different types of responses were revealed. Half of the participants view the news on television with some suspicion. They think that national and local media sometimes exaggerate or ignore certain details. These participants therefore concluded that social media is the best platform to verify the related news:

Maybe 50%, maybe 60%. I do not totally trust the news on television. I also read the news via social media. (m, 30, civil servant)

Well, let's say fifty-fifty. I also have to verify that news on Twitter. I think it is a much more effective way to receive news properly. (f, 23, unemployed)

I am in the middle between believing and not-believing. Of course, I watch the news on television. However, as you know, that news is sometimes so exaggerated. Or sometimes some details are not completely or correctly reflected [...] Thanks to social media, we can get more accurate information. (m, 35, technician)

The second group of individuals with 28% (n=11) thinks that television is providing accurate information. They also indicated that they watch the news on a regular basis:

I believe in the accuracy and reliability of information on television. The content of news and shows is sufficiently satisfying me. For instance, Xezer TV, Az TV, ATV, and so on. (m, 31, academic)

I don't think there is a problem with our TV channels. I mean, I enjoy watching all the programs. In particular, news programs. I trust the accuracy of information in the news. (f, 41, civil servant)

ATV, Ictimai TV, Xezer TV, and Lider TV are my favorite ones. I prefer to receive the news via those channels. (m, 42, accountant)

The third group, which consists of 22% of the total (n=9), thinks that the national and local media are functioning neither properly nor objectively. According to them, the media are not accurately reflecting the present political and societal situation in the country. Rather, the traditional media are falsifying reality in the news:

I am not satisfied with the news on television. I don't think the news conveys the real information to us. I prefer to read the news via social media. (f, 32, academic)

Unfortunately, I don't trust the news disseminated via traditional media, whether print or broadcast media. Social media are the best information source to receive the news properly. (m, 25, unemployed)

I can't say all news is reflected accurately or correctly on television. In an environment of partisan media? No, of course not. We don't see any critical content in the television news. Therefore, I prefer to get the information via social media. (f, 28, graphic designer)

As reflected in the opinions of the participants, social media are glorified compared to traditional media in terms of reliability of information. Social media are described as providing an effective alternative platform against partisan media. In addition, the participants, except one person, mentioned print media or radio.

Audience preferences

In the third category, the audiences were asked to indicate their preferences concerning media outlets and broadcasting. None of the participants indicated print media. The common response was indifference to, and disinterest in, local and national newspapers. However, 88 % of the participants (n=35) mentioned television as the most preferred mass medium:

In fact, I don't read any newspapers because we can also watch that news on television. Furthermore, I feel so tired after work, so I prefer to watch TV rather than read anything. (m, 44, civil servant)

Absolutely, television. You can receive any kind of information, entertainment or music via television. It is a very important media outlet [...]. (f, 49, housewife)

I don't read any newspapers released in the country. All of them are the same. The same news, the same design. On the other hand, at least there is a variety of programs on television. Therefore, of course, I will prefer using TV rather than other outlets. (m, 30, photographer)

Another salient point regarding the use of television was the preference for foreign channels by the participants. This will be discussed in the following category. As to which contents of broadcasting are mostly consumed by the participants, eight main themes emerged: soap operas (70 %), sports programs (40 %), competition programs (35%), newscasts (25%), health-oriented TV programs (18%), quiz shows (18%), TV cooking shows (6%), and talk-shows (6%).

I usually watch soap operas on TV; sometimes, health and competition programs. But all of them. Rarely talk-shows. (f, 45, HR officer)

Firstly, newscasts. When I arrive at home, I take the remote control and turn on the newscast. Aside from this, I also watch some soap operas on Turkish channels. But also, I have favorite sports programs. (m, 34, doctor)

I watch many soap operas. I have many favorite Turkish soap operas. If needed, I can list them all. I enjoy watching them all. Also, TV cooking shows – I like watching them. New recipes, *music and everything. (f, 53, housewife)*

Soap operas are preferred by 70 % of the participants (n=28). The second highest percentage (40 %) (n=16) refers to sports programs, which are mentioned only by the male participants.

Interest in Turkish and Russian TV broadcasting

Within this category, the reasons for the intense interest in Turkish and Russian channels were discussed. The findings revealed that all the participants watch Turkish and Russian channels on a regular basis. Out of 40 participants, 70% (n=23) mentioned only Turkish, 23% (n=9) both Turkish and Russian, and 7% (n=3) only Russian channels. The most preferred program types are the same as the eight main themes mentioned in the previous category. In particular, soap operas are widely mentioned by the participants. Second, sports programs and health-oriented programs were referred to:

Monday, Wednesday and Thursday are my "soap opera" days [...] We watch those soap operas with the whole family. Kanal D, Start TV and NTV Spor are the favorite channels. Sometimes, I also watch CNN Turk. (m, 28, electrician)

I know all the TV channels broadcast in Turkey, and some in Russia. I don't watch Russian channels too much. But I watch ATV, Show TV, Kanal D, Star TV, TV8, Kanal 7 etc. In fact, I watch all the Turkish TV Channels. (f, 20, graduate)

There are many good and well-prepared programs, TV shows in Turkish and Russian channels. For example, TNT is a good Russian channel. For Turkish channels, Kanal D, Star TV, TV 8, CNN Turk, NTV Spor are broadcasting very interesting programs that I enjoy watching [...]. (m, 38, finance officer)

Concerning the reasons for the great interest, particularly in Turkish channels, important factors such as quality of production, content of programs, wide range of options, entertainment, similar language, and so on were mainly underscored by the participants:

I accept that our media have also gained ground. But it is so difficult to compare them with the Turkish channels. Their productions are very developed and interesting. For example, soap operas. Very good. You have many options. This is a privilege for the audience. (f. 33, musician)

When I watch our TV programs, I am not satisfied with the content or quality of production. They do not entertain me. Look at Turkish channels. There are many kinds of channels and programs. Whatever you want you can find. We almost speak the same language. That's all! What else can I want? (m, 27, computer engineer)

Well, I also watch our national channels. But when I am on the fence, I will prefer to watch Turkish TV channels. Above all, I know I will be very satisfied with what I watch. The same language and higher-quality content or production. So, if you were me, what would you choose? (f, 58, retired teacher)

The findings showed that the convergence between the use of similar language and better-quality production prompts the participants to opt for Turkish TV channels. In this respect, the success of the Turkish soap opera industry cannot be ignored. Almost all participants mentioned the Turkish soap operas at least once.

Social media use

This category focuses on the participants' social media use. The findings showed that all the participants have access to the internet and use social media on a regular basis. It was revealed that Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram are commonly used by the participants as information source and entertainment platform. According to the findings, the majority, 68 % (n=27), of the participants use social media for leisure-time activities and entertainment purposes:

For me, social media represent an entertainment platform. I watch animal videos, follow some celebrities. I don't know, for many entertainment purposes. I am having fun with social media. In particular, Instagram is my favorite one. (m, 28, reporter)

Social media are the only media I use. I'm not interested in any other kind of mass media. I am active on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter. I like sharing photos, having fun in Facebook groups through conversation. (f, 44, unemployed)

In my lunch break, cigarette break, coffee break, that is to say, in all leisure times, I check my social media accounts consistently on my phone. I watch videos on YouTube. In addition, Instagram and Facebook are my favorite social media. (f, 27, sales assistant)

While 20 % of the participants (n=8) mentioned social media as a corroborative information source for the news disseminated via television, 12 % of the participants (n=5) only use social media to receive domestic and foreign news:

Social media are very interesting platforms. You can get accurate information instantly. They are more reliable than television. People must use social media in an effective way. They mustn't trust all the news on television. They should corroborate the news on social media as well. (m, 41, engineer)

There are many options for getting information from social media. You are not obliged to receive the standardized news as on TV. You can verify the information from different sources on social media thanks to the internet and to technology. (m, 50, civil servant)

Social media are like a medium to verify or comb through something. There is a great deal of data and great variety of information and sources. Therefore, I am not content with news or information only via TV, I also try to corroborate it on social media. (f, 33, researcher)

As seen in the above-stated responses, social media play a significant role in the interviewees' everyday lives. They provide reassuring support for the participants to verify information.

Expectations from the media

Within the scope of the research, the participants were also asked to describe their expectations from the media, that is, how they should adequately serve the audience. In this context, while 32% of the participants (n=13) did not point to any recommendations or expectations, 68% of the participants (n=27) underscored the improvement of the content quality, reflecting the truth and contributing to democracy:

Media is important for the country. I hope our media outlets will also develop. First, the quality of the content must be improved. In this context, Turkish channels or other foreign media can serve as good examples [...] You can get all the accurate information on Turkish channels. There are dissident channels along with partisan media. However, we are not sure of the accuracy or reliability of information. (f, 44, teacher)

We should take examples from developed countries. There are still many different problems of media in the country. We are at the bottom of the list in terms of covering expression of speech, democracy, and free media. The first function of media is to contribute to the development of democracy. Media shouldn't be biased. Instead, they must be the voice of citizens [...]. (m, 24, MA student)

If the media contribute to the development of democracy in the country, it means there is media freedom there. Media form the mirror of society that reflects all the events, truth, etc. Our media still need to gain ground. (f. 43, secretary)

The findings revealed that although the participants did not tend to discuss the freedom of speech and media in the previous categories, when asked about their expectations they mentioned the partiality of mainstream media in a roundabout way.

Conclusion

This study analyzed Azerbaijanis' media use. In-depth interviews were conducted with 40 participants. In total, six main research questions and, accordingly, six categories were identified to analyze the findings in a comprehensive way. The first research question was used to understand the general situation of media in the country. The findings showed that television is still the most used mass medium for the participants. However, the participants did not consume print media or radio. At the beginning of the interviews, 53% of the participants (n=23) showed their appreciation for the mainstream media in the country; however, later in the interviews, 68 % of the participants (n=27) mentioned issues including the lack of technology, the problematic content, and unreliability, which mainly pointed to partiality of the media. The reason(s) for the extant biased media in the country is related to the two main factors underlined by Enseroy (2013); the legacy of the former authoritarian regime and an inadequate legislative and normative base. Yet, as Reuter and Szakonyi (2013) concluded in their research, the internet plays a significant role in post-Soviet authoritarian countries due to restricted access to traditional media. In the current research, 80 % of the participants (n=32) also cited the internet as an effective mass media platform.

While television was defined as the main newscast platform by 88% of the participants (n=35), the internet was underscored as the main information source by 80% of the participants (n=32). The information disseminated via social media was considered as accurate and objective compared with traditional media. Therefore, social media play a corroborative role in verifying the information on

TV. However, only 23 % of the participants (n=9) complained about the partiality of media and their serving of power interests.

The findings showed participants' preferences include mostly entertainment programs such as soap operas, 70 % (n=28), sports programs, 40 % (n=16), competition programs, 35 % (n=14), newscasts, 25 % (n=10), health-oriented TV programs with 18 % (n=7), quiz shows with 18 % (n=7), TV cooking shows with 6 % (n=3), and talk-shows, 6 % (n=3). However, similar to the study of Pearce and Kendzion (2012), the findings showed that depoliticization is prevalent among the young in Azerbaijan. The current research also revealed that the vast majority of the participants maintained an apolitical stance and avoided harshly criticizing the partiality of media or the present political order. It was observed that they internalized the present condition and did not wish to risk this stability. It is a sort of voluntary self-censorship. As can be seen in studies conducted by Pearce (2004) and Richter (2008), different kinds of self-censorship exist in all post-Soviet countries.

One of the salient findings was the great interest of the participants in Turkish and Russian TV channels. According to the findings, all the participants watch Turkish and Russian TV channels. It was also shown that the vast majority - 93 % of the participants (n=37) – choose Turkish TV channels over the national media. The main reasons for the preference centered around higher-quality program content and production, especially in the case of soap operas, and a wider range of entertainment options. Given Azerbaijanis' Turkish and Russian language skills, they prefer those countries' more developed and higher-quality programming. However, the media environments in those countries are also problematic. By the late 2000s, pro-government media had been formalized. Big media holdings with different political orientations were forced to sell some of their media outlets. Now there is only a small number of media outlets with oppositional views (Yilmaz, 2006). As mentioned before, the neo-authoritarian media system in Russia is no different. There is still political control and different types of censorship in the media (Becker, 2004).

According to the findings, all the participants have access to the internet and use social media regularly. As to the reasons for their use, 68 % of the participants (n=27) pointed to leisure-time activities such as watching funny videos and learning about domestic and global news. As stated before, one of the salient findings was the strong reliance on information disseminated through social media. In other words, social media were considered to be corroborative platforms used to verify the news and information presented on TV.

Within the last category, the participants were asked to discuss their expectations from the national media. It is interesting that, although the participants adopted an apolitical stance during the interviews, the majority underlined the importance of neutrality and objectivity in the media. They pointed to the lack of such objectivity as a problem that must be resolved immediately.

Consequently, the findings showed that television was the mass medium preferred by the participants. The participants did not mention the use of print media or radio at all. The other salient finding is that there is a high level of distrust in, and reliance on, national media organs. This is a result of the poor quality and production, and a lack of impartiality. The participants considered social media a reliable information source. Furthermore, the findings showed that the participants chose to watch mostly Turkish and Russian TV channels rather than national media TV channels. In general, the participants were perfectly aware of the present political and social issues and of media bias. However, they did not discuss such problems directly or comprehensively. Instead, they preferred to be "as quiet as a mouse", a behavior which also characterizes mainstream media. In fact, this idiom can be used for understanding media environments and the attitudes of people in almost all post-Soviet countries. In the case of Azerbaijan, the lack of political interest is much more effective than the fear of repression. This has two main reasons: people's distrust in mainstream media in the country, and their wish to protect stability and the status quo. Furthermore, the internet and the Turkish and Russian TV channels are meeting the needs of the audiences.

This limited research aimed to analyze the use of media in Azerbaijan, which has not been studied before. In any case, there are no related studies available online. No commercial or academic studies or databases of public and private broadcasters were found during the detailed research. Although journalism is mainly taught in several public and private universities, no research or analysis reports have been conducted on the use of media in the country. As mentioned in the literature review, the existing studies focused mostly on the historical background, functions, and some specific problems of the media outlets. Therefore, this study can be considered as a pioneer for future studies to follow; however, the findings are limited due to the small sample size of 40 participants. The study hence cannot be generalized. In this context, it is believed that this study can be directive for further and more comprehensive studies.

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