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Country:	Armenia
Year:	2017
Status:	Partly Free
Total Score:	32 (0 = Best, 100 = Worst)
Obstacles to Access:	7 (0 = Best, 25 = Worst)
Limits on Content:	10 (0 = Best, 35 = Worst)
Violations of User Rights:	15 (0 = Best, 40 = Worst)
Population:	2.9 million
Internet Penetration:	62.0%
Social Media/ICT Apps Blocked:	Yes
Political/Social Content Blocked:	No
Bloggers/ICT Users Arrested:	No
Press Freedom Status:	Not Free

Key Developments, June 2016-May 2017

- Facebook was unavailable for almost an hour on several ISPs during protests surrounding a political hostage crisis in Yerevan in July 2016 (see "Blocking and Filtering").
- Journalists streaming live broadcasts during the July protests were targeted and violently obstructed by police (see "Intimidation and Violence").
- Coordinated, possibly automated accounts spread misinformation about the April 2017 parliamentary election on Twitter, while independent media accounts were briefly suspended (see "Media, Diversity, and Content Manipulation").

Introduction:

Internet freedom declined in Armenia after users experienced temporary restrictions on Facebook, while online manipulation increased in the lead-up to parliamentary elections.

The past year in Armenia was marked by periods of civil unrest and transition. In late 2015, a constitutional referendum changed the country from a semi-presidential system to a parliamentary republic, a change which critics said was designed to allow the ruling party to maintain

dominance. The referendum was marred by suspicions of ballot stuffing and pressure. The country held its first parliamentary election in April 2017, with the ruling Republican Party, headed by President Sargsyan, winning a majority of seats.

The lead-up to the election saw unprecedented levels of manipulation online, with coordinated bots spreading misinformation and attempting to stifle independent reporting on Twitter. Around the same time, civil society figures received Google notifications that state-backed hackers were attempting to hack their accounts.

Though the government does not usually engage in blocking or filtering, Facebook was briefly restricted in July 2016 when armed opposition figures took over a police station in Yerevan, holding several police officers hostage. Mobilizing on social networks, thousands of citizens took to the streets to demonstrate against the government at the same time. Online journalists covering the events were violently dispersed by law enforcement.

Self-censorship on some issues improved during the coverage period. As tensions between Armenian and Azerbaijani forces in the Nagorno-Karabakh region simmered down following the April 2016 flare up in hostilities, social media users and online journalists faced less pressure to restrict their reporting on the conflict.

Overall, the internet remained relatively free, with gradual improvements in infrastructure and accessibility connecting more of the population. Activists regularly use social media as a tool to promote their causes, and opposition and independent media flourish online.

Obstacles to Access:

Internet access in Armenia continues to grow. The ISP market is relatively diverse, with foreign-owned as well as local providers competing for customers, though an urban-rural divide persists, limiting access and quality for those living outside major cities.

Availability and Ease of Access

Internet is ubiquitous in the capital, Yerevan, with most shopping malls, cafés, universities, and many schools providing free Wi-Fi access. There is also Wi-Fi connectivity in central areas of Yerevan, buses on certain public routes, the metro, some railway stations, and several taxis.

Mobile 3G service is widely available, covering 90 percent of the country (excluding mostly unpopulated mountainous regions).^[1] Operators continued rolling out faster 4G and 4G+ service, and speeds of up to 100 Mbps speeds were available in some large cities in 2017, including Yerevan, Gyumri, and Vanadzor and tourist destinations such as Dilijan, Tsakhadzor, Echmiadzin, and Jermuk.^[2] Internet service providers offer fixed-line broadband service through the telephone network (ADSL) and fiber-optic cables, as well as Wi-Fi and WiMax technologies.

The quality of service may be limited outside cities due to lack of competition between providers. In contrast to the diverse market in Yerevan, many villages have only one or two mobile broadband services from which to choose.

Restrictions on Connectivity

The government does not shut down internet access, and control of the internet infrastructure is decentralized. Armenian internet users enjoy access to internet resources without limitation, including peer-to-peer networks, voice and instant messaging services.

The Armenian government and the telecommunications regulatory authority, the Public Services Regulatory Commission (PSRC), do not interfere with the planning of network topology. Private telecommunications operators plan and develop their own networks independently. Moreover, the PSRC requires service providers to indicate any technological restrictions in their public offers.

Four ISPs maintain fiber-optic backbone networks which connect to the international internet via the Republic of Georgia. There is also a limited fiber-optic connection through Iran, which mostly serves backup needs.^[3] ISPs exchange traffic through a local exchange point operated by the ArmEx Foundation, a nonprofit organization (see "Regulatory Bodies").

In 2011, physical damage to cables in Georgia cut off internet access in Armenia.^[4] While there have been no major disruptions since then, the limited number of connections to and from the country present challenges in ensuring uninterrupted internet access.

ICT Market

The telecommunications market is reasonably diverse, with three mobile service operators and dozens of ISPs, 46 percent of which are foreign-owned.^[5] Armenia was one of the first post-Soviet countries to privatize the telecommunication industry, and ISPs are not required to obtain a license.

There were 89 ISPs in Armenia, according to the PSRC. However, four operators control 95 percent of the broadband internet market.^[6] These are Ucom with 39 percent market share, Armentel (Beeline) with 37 percent, Vivacell-MTS with 13 percent, and Rostelecom with 7 percent.^[7] Ucom is Armenian, while the other three are foreign-owned. Armentel (Beeline) is owned by Vimpelcom, one of largest mobile operators in Russia; Vivacell-MTS is owned by Mobile TeleSystems, another large Russian mobile operator. Rostelecom is also Russian-owned. Ucom acquired Orange Armenia from France Telecom in August 2015 instead of building up its own network. Vivacell-MTs is also the largest mobile service provider, followed by Armentel (Beeline) and Ucom.^[8]

Entering the market is comparatively easy. In 2013, amendments to the Law on Electronic Communication removed the need for internet service providers to obtain a license, instead requiring that they simply notify the regulator before providing services or operating a telecommunication network.^[9] Public access points such as cafes, libraries, schools, universities, and community centers must be licensed if they offer internet service for a fee; nonprofit access points are exempt, according to a separate law.^[10] The regulatory authorities in Armenia primarily focus on companies with significant market power.

Regulatory Bodies

The Public Services Regulatory Commission (PSRC), an independent regulatory authority, was assigned responsibility for telecommunications regulation under the Law on Electronic Communication in 2006.

Under Armenia's multi-sector regulatory model, a single body is in charge of energy and water supply as well as telecommunications. The PSRC's authority, mechanisms of commissioners' appointments, and budgeting principles are defined under the Law on State Commission for the Regulation of Public Services.^[11]

One of the weakest provisions of the Armenian regulatory framework is the absence of term limits. Commissioners are appointed by the president of Armenia based on recommendations from the prime minister. Once appointed, a commissioner can be dismissed only if he or she is

convicted of a crime, fails to perform his or her professional duties, or violates other restrictions, such as obtaining shares of regulated companies or missing more than five meetings.

The commission's operations in the telecommunications sector, however, are transparent and have generally been perceived as fair. Under the Law on Electronic Communication, all decisions are made during open meetings with prior notification and requests for comment posted online.^[12] The PSRC is accountable to the National Assembly in the form of an annual report, but parliament cannot intervene in its decisions.

Though industry self-regulation remains underdeveloped, three well-established ICT-related nonprofit associations have helped shape the sector. The oldest is the national chapter of the worldwide Internet Society (ISOC) network, which served as the primary internet policy advocate in the early stage of industry development in the mid-1990s. It has since ceded much of its regulatory role to the PSRC, but continues to maintain the registry of country-level domain names according to best practices recommended by ICANN, the nonprofit which manages global domain name systems. Though it lacks formal dispute resolution policies, therefore, the Armenian ICT market enjoys a liberal and non-discriminatory domain name registration regime. ISOC Armenia's board is composed of industry representatives.

A third institution, the ArmEx Foundation, was established by leading telecommunication companies, ISoc Armenia, and UITE, to create a local data traffic exchange point.

Limits on Content:

The Armenian government does not consistently or pervasively block users' access to content online. In an isolated incident, Facebook was reportedly briefly unavailable during clashes between police and armed groups in July 2016. The Armenian online information landscape was subject to some manipulation around the April 2017 parliamentary elections, with suspected bot and troll activity spiking in the lead-up to the vote.

Blocking and Filtering

In general, online content is widely accessible. However, in a first, Facebook was briefly inaccessible during the coverage period of this report, apparently as a result of an official intervention to curb violence.

In July 2016 armed political activists captured a police compound in Yerevan for two weeks, demanding the release of a radical opposition leader jailed the previous month and the resignation of President Sargsyan.^[13] The hostage takers surrendered on July 31.^[14] When police responded violently to their supporters gathering outside the compound,^[15] thousands more protesters mobilized using online tools (see "Digital Activism").

On July 17, during the initial assault on the police station, internet users reported that they were unable to access Facebook through major ISPs, including Armentel (Beeline) and Ucom. News reports said connectivity was restored within approximately 40 minutes.^[16] Facebook confirmed that "a disruption affecting access to Facebook products and services" had taken place in Armenia, coinciding with protests.^[17]

Observers took the outage as an indication that the authorities may be willing to block social media platforms during times of unrest. Law enforcement authorities have the right to block content to prevent criminal activity under Article 11 of the Law on Police,^[18] but cases of government-ordered blocking have been rare. The most prominent case of internet censorship occurred in 2008, when the government blocked some independent internet news outlets during a

state of emergency imposed to contain clashes following an election,^[19] which was followed by criticism from international observers.^[20]

Since then, blocking cases have generally been limited to locally-hosted content found to contravene laws on pornography or copyright. Article 263 of the criminal code stipulates that the production and dissemination of pornographic materials or items, including videos, images, or advertisements, is punishable by a fine of five hundred times the minimum monthly salary in Armenia, or imprisonment for up to two years.

Orders to block content can be challenged in court by the content owners, who may claim compensation if a judge finds one to be illegal or unnecessary. Since Armenia is a signatory to the European Convention on Human Rights, blocking can also be challenged at the European Court of Human Rights.

Content Removal

There are few reported cases of content removal, and no high profile incidents were documented during the coverage period.

International platforms rarely remove content that violates Armenian law, but at least one takedown has attracted controversy. In May 2015, an episode of a web series satirizing the police response to protests in Yerevan was removed by YouTube. Police had flagged the video for YouTube to take down on grounds that it included a clip of a news report that violated copyright, though observers argued this was a pretext to suppress content that mocked local law enforcement.^[21] The police later took the authors of the web series, SOS TV, to court, arguing that the video undermined the honor and dignity of the police (see "Prosecutions and Detentions for Online Activity").

Internet service providers and content hosts are shielded from liability for illegal content stored on or transmitted through their system without their prior knowledge.

Media, Diversity and Content Manipulation

Armenian internet users are able to access a wide array of content online, though online media outlets based within the country are subject to financial and political pressures. In some cases, both online and traditional journalists are not allowed to deviate from the editorial policy of online media outlets, which are often linked to one of the political parties. Such pressure has the potential to affect the overall situation of freedom of speech in the country, though online publishers and individual bloggers strongly resist self-censorship. Indeed, there is a wide diversity of opinion on social media, and virtual battles between supporters and opponents of the government are often observed. A variety of independent and opposition web resources provide Armenian audiences with politically neutral, or oppositional opinions.

In the lead-up to the April 2017 parliamentary election, observers noted attempts to manipulate the online information landscape. In March, Twitter users circulated a fake email which purported to show that the US government was attempting to meddle in the election with the assistance of local non-government-organizations (NGOs). The content, disguised as an internal email leaked from the U.S. government Agency for International Development (USAID), was swiftly debunked, but users continued to share it, including accounts that bore telltale signs indicating they were automated, or bot accounts.^[22] The accounts, all created at around the same time and little used, were tweeting similar content in Russian, which is understood by many Armenians though it is not an official language. Observers said the activity was reminiscent of a troll farm,^[23] or brigade of online commenters for hire, which were documented to be operating in Russia.^[24] It is not known

if the accounts were representing interests in Russia or Armenia, and it is unclear whether any candidates benefitted from the misleading information, though it may have had a destabilizing effect by undermining public trust in the election. Some of the same accounts had tweeted during 2017 anti-corruption protests in Russia, flooding hashtags used by protesters with irrelevant content.^[25]

Suspected bot activity on Twitter continued through to the eve of the election, when the accounts of four prominent, respected figures in the Armenian media industry were suspended for approximately two hours. The accounts, which belonged to two independent Armenian media outlets, independent journalist Gegham Vardanyan, and the director of a local NGO,^[26] were among the most active in the Armenian Twittersphere documenting unfolding election results and suspected election law violations;^[27] Vardanyan was among the first to tweet about the fake USAID memo. The suspended accounts were restored after users complained to the company and international rights groups.^[28] Vardanyan and other observers said the suspensions were likely triggered by bots reporting their target accounts to Twitter for violating the platform's guidelines, which can result in suspension pending further investigation.^[29]

Self-censorship on one sensitive issue improved in 2017. In April 2016, hostilities flared between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh territory. Freedom of expression online was undermined when the Defense Ministry appealed to citizens to refrain from discussing the situation on the frontline on the internet, for fear of revealing "war secrets" to the other side. Online commentators practiced self-censorship, and discussions online often turned hostile when publications or users were perceived to be publishing unfavorable information or figures about Armenia's standing in the conflict.^[30] Users observed that self-censorship became less prevalent once tensions in the region simmered down in May.

Digital Activism

Armenian protest movements rely on social media to mobilize citizens and gather support. During the coverage period of this report, internet users used digital platforms to share information about a standoff between police and radical activists in the capital, and to organize protests after police responded violently to unarmed supporters of the group who gathered nearby.

In July 2016, gunmen calling themselves the Sasna Tsrer (Daredevils of Sasoun) seized control of a police compound in Yerevan, taking several hostages. The group declared their support for Founding Parliament, a fringe political opposition movement whose leader, Jirair Sefilian, had been recently jailed on suspicion of planning to seize government buildings, and called on President Sargsyan to resign.^[31] The hostage takers held the compound for two weeks and killed three police officers before surrendering.^[32]

Facebook was an essential tool for locals seeking to stay informed about the confrontation, though access to the entire platform was briefly restricted (see "Blocking and Filtering"). The "Sasna Tsrer" Facebook group, for example, published real-time updates about the siege.

Opposition supporters who sympathized with the activists' goals gathered near the compound, but police used violent measures to contain them. In protest, demonstrators used Facebook and other platforms to mobilize thousands of people to take to the streets. Police violence escalated in turn,^[33] and several journalists broadcasting news coverage in real-time were attacked (see "Intimidation and Harassment").

In another example of digital mobilization, an activist group called "No Pasaran" (You Won't Pass It),^[34] campaigned between September and December 2015 against constitutional amendments,

fearing that the changes could strengthen the executive while weakening protections for fundamental rights.^[35] Activists relied on social media to spread their message, sharing informative videos and communicating via Facebook. The constitutional changes were ultimately passed in a referendum held on December 6, 2015, a move which was criticized by local and international observers amid suspicion of irregularities in the voting process.^[36]

Violations of User Rights:

There have been few cases of prosecutions against internet users or bloggers for content posted online. While Armenia eliminated criminal penalties for defamation in 2010, concerns over high financial penalties for defamation persist, though the number of cases and the fines have decreased in recent years. Journalists from online media outlets were subject to targeted violence while reporting on the July 2016 Yerevan police station siege. Most perpetrators were law enforcement officials.

Legal Environment

The Armenian constitution was amended following a referendum on December 6, 2015. Protections for online expression were unchanged. Article 42 guarantees freedom of speech to both individuals and media outlets, regardless of source or location.

Some laws threaten that guarantee, though they have not been widely implemented to suppress online speech. Armenian criminal legislation prohibits the dissemination of expressions calling for racial, national, or religious enmity, as well as calls for the destruction of territorial integrity or the overturning of a legitimate government or constitutional order.^[37] These laws apply to expression both online and offline.

Defamation has been used by Armenian politicians to restrict public criticism in the past, though it was recently decriminalized and does not significantly curb oppositional viewpoints or media independence. In May 2010, the Armenian National Assembly passed amendments to the administrative and penal codes to decriminalize defamation, including libel and insult, and introduced moral damage compensation for public defamation.^[38] In November 2011, the Constitutional Court ruled that courts should avoid imposing large fines on media outlets for defamation, resulting in a decrease in the number of defamation cases.

Armenian laws on pornography and copyright infringement generally align with European legal standards,^[39] and companies have not been held liable for illegal content shared by users (see "Content Removal"). The act of downloading illegal materials or copyrighted publications is not subject to prosecution unless prosecutors can prove the content was stored with intent to disseminate it. Armenia is a signatory to the Council of Europe's Convention on Cybercrime, and Armenian cybercrime legislation has followed the principles declared in the Convention.

Other laws governing digital news media are viewed as largely positive. Armenian criminal legislation grants journalists certain protections related to their profession. According to Article 164 of the criminal code, hindering the legal professional activities of a journalist or forcing a journalist to disseminate or withhold information is punishable by fines or correctional labor for up to one year. The same actions committed by an official abusing their position is punishable by correctional labor for up to two years, or imprisonment for up to three years, and a ban on holding certain posts or conducting certain activities for up to three years.^[40] However, neither criminal law nor media legislation clearly defines who qualifies as a journalist or whether these rights would apply to online journalists or bloggers.

In 2003, Armenian media legislation changed significantly with the adoption of the Law of the Republic of Armenia on Mass Media.^[41] One of the most positive changes was the adoption of unified regulation for all types of media content irrespective of the audience, technical means, or dissemination mechanisms. Content delivered through a mobile broadcasting platform or the internet is subject to the same regulations.

Prosecutions and Detentions for Online Activities

Users are not often sanctioned for their expression online. However, in March 2017, an Armenian court ordered the administrators of a YouTube channel, SOS TV, to apologize to the police for damaging their honor and dignity. SOS TV had posted videos satirizing police behavior (see "Content Removal").^[42] The administrators refused to apologize and said they would appeal.^[43]

Defamation suits can be brought for moral damages, and several cases have been recorded since the compensation was introduced in 2010 (see "Legal Environment").^[44] In 2016, the Committee to Protect Freedom of Expression, an Armenian NGO tracking free speech issues, documented 17 new court cases involving mass media, including 14 insult or defamation charges, though it's not clear how many of them relate to online speech.^[45]

Surveillance, Privacy, and Anonymity

The Protection of Personal Data law, which came into effect on July 1, 2015,^[46] protects the right to personal privacy with respect to the processing of personal data, bringing Armenian law in line with European standards and international obligations. The law created the Agency for Protection of Personal Data, which has the authority to appeal decisions of state agencies where they violate the right to privacy with regard to personal data.

Under the same law, government and law enforcement bodies are allowed to collect an individual's personal data, but only with a court order in cases prescribed by the law. Government monitoring and storage of customer data is illegal unless it is required for the provision of services. Only data obtained according to the narrow legal requirements may be used as evidence in legal proceedings. Nonetheless, the courts support most data requests from law enforcement bodies. Armenia's judiciary lacks independence from the executive, and is one of the least trusted public institutions.^[47]

Anonymous communication and encryption tools are not prohibited in Armenia; however, the use of proxy servers is not very common. Individuals are required to present identification when purchasing a SIM card for mobile phones. No registration is required for bloggers or online media outlets.

Armenian legislation does not require access or hosting service providers to monitor traffic or content. Moreover, the Law on Electronic Communication allows operators and service providers to store only data required for correct billing. Cybercafes and other public access points are not required to identify clients, or to monitor or store personal data or traffic information.

Intimidation and Violence

Multiple journalists faced violence in the performance of their work in the past year, and several appear to have been targeted because they were broadcasting online.

Law enforcement authorities targeted journalists during the two weeks that the Yerevan police compound was under siege from armed activists in July 2016 (see "Digital Activism"). According to a report by Armenian NGO Committee to Protect Freedom of Expression (CPFE), police used

violence against nineteen journalists while attempting to disperse antigovernment protesters who gathered in support of the raid.

Many work for online news outlets and were using digital livestreaming tools to broadcast the events in real-time. Mariam Grigoryan, a journalist for the news website *lin*, told CPFE that police intentionally gathered journalists in one place in order to obstruct their work. She was injured by a flash grenade thrown by police officers. Another *lin* journalist, Davit Harutyunyan, reported that police officers beat him, causing bruising across his body, and broke his equipment after he continued broadcasting live footage of police attacking journalists.^[48]

President Sargsyan publicly apologized to journalists for the violence, and several police officers were sanctioned for their participation in the incidents.^[49]

Sisak Gabrielian, a journalist working for *RFE/RL*, was assaulted near a Republican Party of Armenia campaign office by government loyalists while investigating potential voter fraud during the April 2017 parliamentary elections. Gabrielian reported receiving minor injuries.^[50]

Technical Attacks

Technical attacks target both government websites and civil society groups in Armenia. A large number of email users, many of them civic activists and independent journalists, reported hacking^[51] and phishing^[52] attempts on their accounts, particularly in the weeks preceding the April 2017 parliamentary elections. For example, prominent commentator Babken DerGrigorian, received a notification from Google a day before the election indicating that government-backed hackers had tried to compromise his Gmail account.^[53] The timing of these attacks may indicate attempts to disrupt independent coverage of the election. The origin of these attacks remains unclear.

Government websites are also periodically targeted by cyberattacks. Most of the attacks are believed to originate in Azerbaijan. For example, in August 2017, a large number of Armenian websites were hacked by groups which news reports said were based in Azerbaijan. The hackers also targeted state websites, including the sites of various Armenian embassies.^[54]

Notes:

1 This information was derived from reports published on several mobile operators' websites, including MTS ([Mts.am](http://mts.am)), Beeline ([Beeline.am](http://beeline.am)), and Orange Armenia ([Orangearmenia.am](http://orangearmenia.am)).

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12 Article 11 of the Law of the Republic of Armenia on Public Service Regulation Commission.

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21 SOS, Facebook Page, <http://on.fb.me/1PuqZin>.

22 DFR Lab, "Fakes, bots, and blockings in Armenia," April 1, 2017, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/fakes-bots-and-blockings-in-armenia-44a4c87ebc46..>

23 "Manipulating elections via Twitter in Armenia," *Coda Story*, April 6, 2017, <https://codastory.com/disinformation-crisis/information-war/in-armenia-a-snapshot-of-digital-manipulation-ahead-of-the-election>.

24 "The real paranoia inducing purpose of Russian hacks," *The New Yorker*, <http://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/the-real-paranoia-inducing-purpose-of-russian-hacks>.

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