

Azerbaijani-Armenian Media Wage Virtual War

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Heightened tensions lead to online battles, disinformation and website takedowns.

The recent spike in violence around Nagorny Karabakh has been accompanied by an upsurge in information warfare as hackers attack websites in both Armenia and Azerbaijan and news outlets are recruited to spread disinformation.

The web attacks came as localised clashes – and casualties – increased on the front line around Armenian-controlled Karabakh and on the border between Azerbaijan and Armenia. Both sides have expressed concern about breaches of the 1994 ceasefire that ended the Karabakh war but has never led to a formal peace deal. (See **Azeri-Armenian Conflict Fears as Death Toll Rises**.)

“From July 27, when it was already clear that the situation was evolving further and that there was a chance of war, it appears that the media changed and went to war,” said Laura Baghdasaryan, director of the Region think tank in Yerevan. “All other issues faded into the background, and everyone discussed what was happening on the border.”

Edgar Chraghyan of Cyber Gates, an internet security company in Armenia, told IWPR that says that hackers in Azerbaijan disabled 15 Armenian websites over a period of two weeks. Armenians took down 13 sites in Azerbaijan, he added.

In one attack, on the Russian-language section of the news site www.tert.am, Azerbaijan hackers replaced an August 2 interview with Senor Hasratyan, a spokesman for the Karabakh defence ministry, with a press release purporting to be from the Armenian defence ministry. Hasratyan’s statement that his forces were in full control of Karabakh’s airspace were removed and in its place there appeared a fictitious news story of an artillery bombardment said to have killed 20 Armenian soldiers and injured 26. In fact, one died and one other was injured.

The website published a correction within minutes, but Azerbaijani news outlets had already picked up the fake report, and subsequently interpreted its removal as evidence of Armenian censorship.

David Alaverdyan, editor of the Mediamax news agency and a journalism lecturer at Yerevan State University, said the key aim for a government fighting an information war was to ensure that its point of view drowned out all opposing opinions.

He said that within Armenia, the defence ministry had more or less achieved that goal, and that its Azerbaijani counterpart, too, had been successful in dominating the narrative in that country.

To illustrate the point, Alaverdyan cited the case of an Armenian national who died after crossing the border into Azerbaijan. At first, Azerbaijan described the man as a civilian, but then changed tack and followed the defence ministry’s lead, calling him a saboteur.

A number of websites aimed at Armenians but backed by Azerbaijan published reports of the death of Armenian troops that turned out to be false. Given the source, most Armenians would realise this was propaganda, but they are more liable to believe stories that appear in the Russian media.

On August 12, when tensions had somewhat subsided following a meeting between Armenian president Serzh Sargsyan and his Azerbaijani counterpart Ilham Aliyev, chaired by President Vladimir Putin in Sochi, the Russian website www.politrus.com ran a story claiming that Azerbaijan planned to “buy” Karabakh for five billion US dollars.

“This is clear sabotage by Russian media,” said Baghdasaryan. “The article did not carry the usual byline, and just said it was by ‘politrus’. [Azerbaijani website] www.haqqin.az then reprinted the article, and it spread.”

On August 2, the Russian news agency Regnum published a story claiming that Azerbaijani armoured vehicles were advancing along the whole front line, and carried three photographs showing dozens of tanks.

Many Armenians panicked, believing the photographs were of tanks actually deployed in the field, whereas in fact they were taken last year when Russia delivered a shipment of armoured vehicles to Baku.

Samvel Martirosyan, who lectures on blogging and new media at Yerevan State University, says Armenian journalists have grown increasingly careful about sifting fact from fiction.

“An interesting thing has happened to the Armenian media, which are normally very poor at checking information. They have always happily accepted disinformation spread by Azerbaijan. But this time they have orientated themselves very quickly, and most of the media have been very careful about spreading information,” he said.

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