

Stefania Panebianco and Rosa Rossi

Winds of Democratic Change in the Mediterranean?

Processes, Actors and Possible Outcomes



Rubbettino

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Chapter 10

From Turmoil to Dissonant Voices: The Web in the Tunisian *thawra*

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Introduction

The anonymous Tunisian blogger *_Z_* foreshadowed the escape of Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali and his entourage in a prophetic cartoon. Close to the 2009 election, the Tunisian president's sleep was troubled by increasing popular resentment that led him to reinforce both propaganda and control (Anon. 2011: 56-58).

Tunisia was the first Arab country to oust its leader at the beginning of 2011, through what has been claimed to be "the first socio-political revolution powered by social networks." (Arnold 2011). Tunisia has actually been the first in several significant ways. It was the first country in the Arab and African world to be connected to the web in the 1990s; in a short time, Internet cafés (*Publinet*) blossomed, and private apartments were equipped steadily; accordingly, Tunisia became rapidly the first North African country for Internet penetration rate (34%) (OLPEC 2009; Freedom House 2011).¹ These figures reveal the remarkable effort made by the Tunisian government to improve the country's information and communication technologies and to support university education in computer science: a political boomerang against the Ben Ali regime.

The Tunisian lead in Internet use corresponds to its high adult literacy rate (78%) and Human Development Index (0.766) (Europa Regional Surveys of the World 2008). While citizens grasped immediately the potential of the web, the authorities were slow to realize the risks linked to its popular use. Over the years, a series of restrictive laws have been adopted, so that Tunisia

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1. See also Internet World Stat. [Online] Available at: <<http://www.Internetworldstats.com/stats1.htm#africa>> [Accessed 5 August 2011]. Bloggers, instead, are more numerous in Egypt, Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries than in Tunisia (Etling, Kelly, Faris and Palfrey 2009).

obtained another record, this time for harsh intrusion into the private sphere (OLPEC 2009).

In order to grasp the relevance of the Internet in the Tunisian uprising, this chapter has three sections. Firstly, attention is addressed to the sociological ripples of new technologies: the Internet has to be understood as a link in a technological chain that, in the hand of skilful users, may be an effective tool. The second part presents the political and social vacuum of Ben Ali's regime that made the Internet a *safety valve*: despite the superficial appearance of democracy, traditional institutions (parties, trade unions, mass media, associations, etc.) were not able to channel dissent due to strong governmental obstructionism. Finally, in-depth analysis of selected Tunisian websites and blogs highlights their position in the transition phase as a forum of challenge and iconoclasm: the Internet proves to be a medium more suitable to criticism and questioning than to consensus and agenda-setting.

New Technologies, Authoritarianism and Democracy

The role of technology and communications in the current political upheavals across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) is of interest for historians, scholars of international relations and observers of the socio-anthropological dimension of new technologies in contemporary society. One issue, in particular, is worthy of our attention: have new communication technologies played a decisive role in the protests that have overturned the political situation along the North African coast? While our answer to this question is affirmative, we also make two clarifications. Firstly, communication tools may encourage, facilitate and in some cases hinder uprisings, but they cannot *cause* them. The causes of these processes are always tied to the political, social and economic conditions of the milieu in which they occur. Secondly, the impact of what is happening in North Africa cannot easily be generalized. That is, on-line mobilizations do not always produce significant political and emancipatory effects off-line.

Close reading of news reports and first-hand accounts has highlighted the *threefold* role that new media have undoubtedly played in the advent and spread of rebellion in North Africa. The new media were used first as a platform from which to denounce corruption and poverty. Then, they were used to organize and coordinate protests. Finally, the new media have been used to record and document subsequent events. This last step has been especially crucial.

It should be noted that some observers take the contrary view that new media could not have played such a central role given the weak penetration of new technology in North African countries. This position is often supported by figures illustrating the low rates of Internet penetration in the region. According to this view, the figures show that Internet access and use are too low

to explain the widespread circulation of information and ideas that have set Tunisia, Egypt and Libya ablaze. This view is intrinsically reductionist. New media are not limited to the Internet alone. While the impact of the web (including its symbolic valence) is undeniable, the most significant technological and sociological aspect of the North African upheaval lies in the combined, intelligent and creative use of multiple digital technologies: mobile phones, video cameras (often in the form of camera phones), Internet, satellite TV and so on. We intend to illustrate that the role of new media (the argument, of course, is valid everywhere) must be understood in the light of two reciprocally interconnected processes that need to be evaluated. The first process is defined in literature as *spillover*². The second is labeled *crossmediality*³. In both cases, it is clear what is at work. New media are exponentially accelerating the trend for the boundaries between media to erode, leading to the current configuration of a unified media sphere. In the case of the North African uprisings, the protagonists were two mainstays of traditional communication, radically recast by the advent of digital technology, namely, telephones (mobiles) and television (satellite). More often than not, the Internet acted as a link (albeit an important one) in a much wider chain of communication designed to hybridize technologies and to spill information (in video, audio or text form) over from one medium to another.

In the North African context, characterized by widespread public distrust and wariness (especially on the part of young people) of traditional national media, the real chroniclers of the dramatic events that took place have been ordinary people, demonstrators, bystanders, or, indeed, in some cases, mistreated prisoners. Taking advantage of the ubiquity of the technologies available to them (and we are thinking here of cameras and mobile phones), and using mobiles, social networks and specialized sites⁴ for participatory journalism⁵, these veritable reporters on the ground made it possible for images and comments that were usually censored by traditional media to reach, or, perhaps more appropriately, to be *bounced into* our homes through Western satellite TV networks such as France 24, Al Jazeera, Al Arabiya and

2. This term is very dear to mass media experts and economists, and also to functionalism in political science; it evokes the idea of interconnections between systems.

3. The possibility of creating connections between different mass media, thanks to the development and spread of digital platforms. Information is released and completed through interaction between the various media; thus, we witness veritable communication performances in which the main means of communication interact, deploying information through and in various channels and formats.

4. By way of example, *Global Voices*: <http://globalvoicesonline.org/>.

5. Participatory journalism, also called citizen journalism or open-source journalism, is the term used to indicate a new form of journalism involving the *active* participation and contribution of readers, thanks to the interactive nature of new media and the collaborative opportunities provided by the Internet. For further discussion, see Maistrello (2010).

so on. It is worth pausing for a moment to recall that for some years now, in Arab countries, the real driving force behind a radical communications revolution has been satellite TV, and to a much greater extent than Internet (Della Ratta 2005; Valeriani 2005).

The figures claiming poor Internet penetration should also be read with caution, as they may well under-represent the real extent of the phenomenon. In the countries in question, Internet access is often shared: in universities, at Internet points, and in cafés, dozens of people may use any given single access point. According to the 2010 Arab Opinion Poll⁶, in the MENA region, 40% of the population use Internet many times a week (compared to 28% in 2008). The figure (percentage) reported rises to 45% for the under-35 range (very close to the Italian figure). 27% reported connecting to foreign language sites (the figure is 48% in Morocco). It would be very interesting to have an understanding of the social and relationship capital of frequent Internet users. Very often, these users – young, motivated, from the middle and upper social classes – become ‘opinion leaders’ capable of exponentially multiplying the spread of accessible information via electronic means (Hamam 2011). These processes, defined in literature as ‘multi-step flows’ (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955), are well known to sociologists and are studied across the world.

At this point, it would be legitimate to ask why the various regimes have tolerated the situation so far. There is a number of answers. In some cases, governments have systematically underestimated a technology which – while it was considered a safety valve for discontent among the young population – was held to have no significant consequences for the real world. It is worth noting how, in this case, the Arab elites have been victims of an ideological prejudice that is similarly resilient in Europe as well. All too often, in Europe, real and virtual have been viewed as distant and opposed worlds⁷. On the contrary, virtual rebellions take on meaning and strength when entwined with rebellion in the real world. Perhaps only Iran’s ‘green revolution’ succeeded in alerting Western public opinion to the importance of new media as possible boosters for political processes, while demonstrating all the risks and limits involved.

Another factor which may explain the lack of reaction on the part of Arab regimes towards the risk posed by electronic communications is that

6. This public opinion survey was carried out by the University of Maryland, Zogby International and the Brookings Institute in 2010. It can be consulted on-line at:

http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Files/rc/reports/2010/0805_arab_opinion_poll_telhami/0805_arabic_opinion_poll_telhami.pdf.

7. In more general terms, the virtual world does not stand in opposition to the real world, but rather the former is a specific realization of the latter (Maldonado 1994). On-line experiences do not exist autonomously, rather only insofar as they are entwined with the real and objective conditions of the off-line world.

it is difficult to censor the Internet totally. The Internet's headless structure means that it can only ever be blocked in part. Moreover, content is mixed and censors find it difficult to discern between the dangerous and the harmless. Blocking 'harmless' content generates malcontent and runs the risk of fuelling existing opposition in the country (Hamam 2011). Finally, wherever the Internet is blocked, significant economic loss ensues.

A Democracy Without Turnover: Blockages on the Road of Tunisian Opposition

The censor's scissors were well known by Tunisian cyber militants. *Error 404* appeared regularly on the screen to hinder surfing on the web, so revealing the zealous eye of the Tunisian Internet Agency (ATI). In defiance of the tight control, the Internet represented at first an arena for individual expression and dissent. Liberal aspirations converged on the web, gradually creating a vibrant network. Finally, the virtual community overflowed into the streets.

The role played by the Internet in Tunisia cannot be understood apart from the socio-political context. In comparison with the limited room for manoeuvre of institutions that in a real democratic system should act as mediators, the web worked as a refuge space, a relatively free arena and at last as a battlefield. The cyber activists have been in the vanguard of opposition to Ben Ali's authoritarianism, whereas officially recognized institutions were more complaisant toward the regime.

Political parties

The political system was dominated by the *Rassemblement Constitutionnel Démocratique* (RCD), as the *Parti Socialiste Destourien* was renamed after the coup of 7 November 1987. It was a tentacular organization monitoring society and distributing resources (Hibou 2006). With 2.7 million official members in a country of 5 million voters (Coupe 2011: 712) and a structure extending to peripheral areas, the RCD overlapped with State institutions.

Political pluralism was legally ensured by allowing 'domesticated' minority parties, such as the *Parti de l'Unité Populaire* and the *Mouvement des Démocrates Sociales*, to participate in elections since 1983. The Islamist opposition party an-Nahda was banned in the 1990s, as well as the *Parti Communiste des Ouvriers Tunisiens* led by Hamma Hammami⁸.

Shortly after the 1994 presidential elections, the candidate Moncef Marzouki, former president of the *Ligue Tunisienne des Droits de l'Homme*, was imprisoned for several months without going on trial. At the 2004 elections,

8. A long interview with Hamma Hammami is presented in the documentary movie *Plus jamais peur* by Mourad Ben Cheikh (2011).

the only real challenger to Ben Ali was Mohamed Ali Halouani, supported by at-Tajdīd, a left-wing party founded in 1993 out of the remnants of the *Parti Communiste Tunisien* (Kéfi 2004); after manipulation and various irregularities, but also a general consensus due to continued stability and economic prosperity⁹, Ben Ali obtained 99.49% of the votes.

Constitutional and legislative reforms are more insidious methods for foiling opponents. In 2008, a law decreed that every presidential candidate had to have been a party leader for at least two years: as a result, Mustafa Ben Jafaar, secretary of the *Forum Démocratique pour le Travail et la Liberté*, and Ahmed Néjib Chebbi, leader of the *Parti Démocratique Progressiste* (formerly *Rassemblement Socialiste Progressiste*), were excluded from participation.

The attempt to set up a presidency for life led several actors from across the political spectrum, including Islamists and secularists, to carry out common actions, as in the case of the 18 October Movement in 2005 (Ben Achour 2010). On another front, faced with the de-legitimization of traditional political parties, cyber activists created a party last September (*Parti Pirate Tunisien*); their attempt to legalize it failed due to the double nationality of the promoter, Chemseddine Ben Jemaa. All these initiatives show how the Tunisian revolution (*thawra*) has been the climax of a dissident crescendo, whose echoes could be heard beyond national borders.

The *Union Générale des Travailleurs Tunisiens* (UGTT)

In Tunisia, the historical counterweight to the government party is the national trade union, *Union Générale des Travailleurs Tunisiens* (UGTT). The general secretary Ferhat Hached, a prominent ally of the *Néo-Destour*, was assassinated in December 1952. The UGTT organized an impressive strike on January 1978, which degenerated into the Black Thursday, openly defying the authoritarianism of Habib Bourguiba. “The UGTT, which pretends to have 350,000 members from all ideological tendencies, is the ‘only force, along with the Rassemblement Constitutionnel Démocratique, with branches all over the country’”, as Chedli Laajimi declared (Anon. 2011).

Over the years, the UGTT has maintained an internal dialectic, admitting different trends and coming even to division. The trade union represented also a space for political mobilization in the absence of adequate political parties. In 2007, as reported by *Jeune Afrique*, on the occasion of the congress held in Monastir, “more political issues have also been tackled: democracy, respect of freedom, support to organized civil society, solidarity with Palestine, Lebanon, Iraq. ‘If the UGTT congress served to somebody as a political tribune, explains a (re-elected) member of the direction, it is because parties do not play, for the most part, their role’” (Barrouhi 2007).

9. This is what Béatrice Hibou calls the ‘security pact’ (Hibou 2011: 6).

In recent times, moderate demands for wage rise and social benefits have marked the trade union politics, less prone to a direct conflict with the regime. Despite the accommodating attitude of the trade union's leadership, the rank and file, especially in peripheral areas, appeared more responsive to popular discontent.

Civil society

Though the system was de-politicized and subject to tight control, a sizable and highly educated middle class favored the emergence of civil society in Tunisia. Detached from internal political parties, obtaining funds from external donors and cultivating cross-border ties, Tunisian associations centered their activity on the denunciation of authoritarianism (Feliu 2005: 369-372)¹⁰. It was impossible for them to contribute actively to design and manage policies. In search of a large consensus, in fact, the government alternated repression with elite cooptation.

Autonomous organisations were ceaselessly hampered by the government that, among other things, deliberately created official committees in defence of human rights. Therefore, in response to the stubborn activity of the *Ligue Tunisienne des Droits de l'Homme*, born in 1977, the regime founded the *Comité Supérieur des Droits de l'Homme et des Libertés Fondamentales* in 1991. Likewise, the *Union Tunisienne des Femmes Démocrates* was constantly forced to face what the chairwoman Sana Ben Achour defines as 'State feminism' (Ben Achour 2001).

The State took a similar interest in youth organizations. Whereas the *Union Générale des Étudiants Tunisiens*, students' trade union created in 1953, "exerted only minimal impact on the national political scene" (Perkins 1997: 179), the Tunisian president launched the Forum for the dialogue with young people in March 2008, and he suggested that 2010 be proclaimed International Year of Youth. These initiatives were considered with scepticism by the press and with irony by the bloggers: "We can legitimately ask – Baccar Ghérib wrote on *at-Tarīq* – if the goal of this step is a real dialogue or rather an opinion poll supported by an attempt to keep society at bay, in a less crude way than before" (Ghérib 2008). A year later, the author of *DÉBATunisie* observed sarcastically that, thanks to the agreement signed between Italy and Tunisia, the forced repatriation of Tunisian migrants should have allowed them to take part in the State-run *dialogue* (Anon. 2011: 69).

Against this bleak background, places such as the stadium acquired a political relevance. In order to increase his popularity, the President invested in the football team *Espérance*, led by Ben Ali's son-in-law from 1989 to 2004. In defiance of presidential purposes, the stadium became "an arena

10. See, for example, the interviews to two eminent leaders of pro-human rights associations: Moncef Marzouki (Anon. 2002) and Sana Ben Achour (Sassi 2009).

of mobilisation and critical expression” (Allal 2011: 57). Moreover, during clashes with the police, supporters experimented with strategies that proved to be successful during the barricades of the post-Ben Ali (Allal 2011: 57-58).

While cine-clubs increasingly disappeared, private salons remained relatively free places of discussion. Even if isolated, they were seen as spaces of resistance, as declared by Hélé Béji, founder of the *Collège International de Tunis*, promoter of French-language lectures: “When I came back from France, about fifteen years ago, I felt the need to create a public space of debate, which I called also a civil space, in the medina where I live.” In October 2009, in the middle of the electoral campaign, the College organized a congress entitled *Malaise dans la liberté*: “We have spared the monarch at this congress, but we have dealt with the deep reasons of the lack of freedom” (Deldique 2011).

Sometimes professional associations, such as the Tunisian Association of Young Lawyers and the Association of Tunisian Judges, joined human rights defenders in anti-government campaigns. In 2001 they rallied round judge Mukhtar Yahyaoui who had posted on the internet an open letter denouncing political interferences over the judiciary. Dismissed from his post, he promoted the creation of the *Centre Tunisien de l'Indépendance de la Justice* (CTIJ), thus encouraging nonaligned actions. It is worth noticing that the *spillover* mechanism assured a large audience to the letter that was first circulated by Zouhair Yahyaoui (nephew of Mukhtar Yahyaoui) in his web-site *TUNeZINE*, and then published by *Le Monde* (Anon. 2011a).

Traditional and new media

On the occasion of the World Summit on the Information Society that took place in Tunis in 2005, the tight grip over the mass media by Tunisian government came to the fore. On its side, in 2009 the *Syndicat National des Journalistes Tunisiens* carried out a campaign against political interferences in internal trade union's elections¹¹. Complaints and hunger strikes by journalists, such as Taoufik Ben Brik, or party leaders, such as Ahmed Néjib Chebbi and Maya Jéribi, against the closure of the opposition Arabic-language weekly *al-Mawkif* had an international impact, but did not undermine state control of the media.

Confronted with government stranglehold, independent media such as *Radio Kalima Tunisie*, run by Sihem Bensedrine and Omar Mestiri, found on the Internet a release valve. Forbidden just three days after its launch on the satellite Hotbird, on 26 January 2009, on charges of attempting a coup d'état, the radio continued broadcasting on the web (Sallon 2011).

11. Similar interference occurred with regard to the judiciary in 2005, when the authorities removed the elected executive office of the Tunisian Association of Magistrates after it called for more judicial independence, installing a pro-government leadership in its place.

Whereas traditional media have not dared to break through the red line drawn by the regime, opposition journalists found in the Internet a new free space. Meanwhile, other cyber-antagonists have launched on the net forums and e-magazines¹², such as *Takriz*, *TUNeZINE*, *RéveilTunisien*, *Nawaat*. At the beginning they were mostly based abroad, and included non-Tunisians; their contestation was explicit, direct, and even aggressive (they were critical also toward the 'traditional' opposition). Progressively, Tunisian bloggers were involved in the public sphere, even if through disguised critical messages (Lecomte 2009). All this activism contributed to give great magnitude to the denunciation, and the ceaseless blows dealt by the Tunisian police had a catalyst effect. Violent images of the repression in Redeyef, a Tunisian mining town where peaceful demonstrations took place in 2008, had, for example, a great impact.

Finally, in early January 2011, a wave of arrests struck influential figures, at least on the net, such as the rapper Hamada Ben Amor, known as El Général and author of a song against Ben Ali¹³, and Slim Amamou, blogger on *Nawaat.org* and promoter of *Sayeb Sala7*, a movement against Internet censorship. As a result, it is not a random coincidence that events gathered speed when the control over the Internet by the State strengthened. The indiscriminate blocking of websites caused widespread discontent and subsequent street protests.

The Internet has plugged a gap in Tunisia, offering a *networked public sphere*, not limited by State borders. Nevertheless, the web did not offer the arena where coming to an agreement over politics and leadership. Indeed, the convergence of dissent voices that was so successful in ousting Ben Ali has so far not produced a leadership. Slim Amamou was appointed Secretary for Youth and Sports, but afterwards he was criticized for his opportunism (Smiri 2011) and dismissed from the Tunisian Pirate Party. Bloggers and other famous web figures emerged from anonymity, but have not entered the political arena. The Tunisian Pirate Party, formed in September 2010 and headed at present by Salah Eddine Kchouk (Dasquié 2011), filed for recognition in May, but its request has not yet been approved. If, at the beginning, the Internet worked as a unifying force for mobilization, rivalries and fragmentation followed with about a hundred legal political parties and few leading figures (Ouerchefani 2011).

12. An e-mag is an electronic magazine that is open to readers' articles and comments.

13. Under Ben Ali's regime, rap musicians were used to bypass public censorship through social networks, especially Facebook (see the video reportage *Le rap, facebook et la révolution tunisienne*, *Afrik.com*, 9 May 2011. [Online] Available at: <<http://www.afrik.com/article22793.html>> [Accessed 4 August 2011]).

Cyber-Dissidence and Tunisian Revolution: the Invisible Hand of a Project

Blogosphere dawning: crossing the fear threshold?

Tunisian cyber-dissidence was born in 1998¹⁴, when two Tunisian students, *Foetus* and *Waterman*, created a mailing list called *Takriz*. Two years later the list became an e-mag with the support of the most active members. Using a slang language inspired by the Tunisian street, *Takriz* began to bring Tunisian youth to become aware of violations perpetuated by the regime. Shortly after, *Foetus* and *Waterman* were subject to a manhunt and because of this they decided to leave Tunisia¹⁵.

In July 2001, in line with *Takriz*, Zouhair Yahyaoui founded the site and forum *TUNeZINE*¹⁶. While *Ettounsi*, pseudonym of Yahyaoui, lived in Tunisia, the majority of members of *TUNeZINE* was part of the Tunisian diaspora (Lecomte 2009). *Ettounsi* could not escape the manhunt. He was imprisoned in June 2002 and released in November 2003. Weakened due to the harsh conditions of detention and suffering from a serious kidney disease, he died of a heart attack in March 2005 at the age of thirty-seven.

After *Foetus* and *Waterman*'s exile and *Ettounsi*'s death, Tunisian blogosphere looked like a self-made democratic arena, where the discussion among bloggers became heated. Romain Lecomte (2009) underlines this situation that he describes as a conflict between cyber-dissidents and *internauts modérés*. The discussion stemmed from a post by Sami Ben Gharbia on his personal blog¹⁷, where he denounced the absence of thorny issues and the excessive use of 'politically correct' by Tn-blog, an aggregator of Tunisian blogs administrated by Houssein, in Canada. Sami Ben Gharbia was also one of the creators of collective blog *Nawaat* which can be considered the first cyber alternative to *TUNeZINE* and *RéveilTunisien*¹⁸, where the overgrowth of activists living abroad was no longer tolerated by Tunisian bloggers.

This kind of rift generated a meaningful gap concerning the way the Internet could be used by the activists. Still now, *Takriz* declares to be extra-neous, far from Tunisian blogosphere, even if at first it was born as an e-mag.

14. Even if the story of *involuntary hacktivist* Marwan Ben Zineb is emblematic of controversial relationship between Ben Ali's regime and the Internet. An article is still consecrated to this story in *Horizon* 94(1), August 1993, pp. 11-12. [Online] Available at: <<http://www.tunisitri.net/actualites/actu7.htm>> [Accessed 11 August 2011].

15. More details can be found in the interview to *Foetus* by Afrik.com. [Online] Available at: <<http://www.afrik.com/article22996.html>> [Accessed 10 August 2011].

16. <<http://www.tunezine.com>>.

17. Sami Ben Gharbia is a Tunisian blogger based in The Netherlands. Co-founder of *nawaat.org* (which means 'the core' in Arabic), a Tunisian collective blog about news and politics, he is also the Advocacy Director at *Global Voices*.

18. Romain Lecomte describes *RT* as the serious e-mag, born in 2002, of the Tunisian forum *TUNeZINE*.

On the other hand, after 2006, Tunisian blogosphere grew up to 600 active blogs in 2009 and it served as a dynamic alternative forum for the practice of free speech (Freedom House 2009). At the end of 2010, there were 100 fewer blogs than in 2009 (Freedom House 2011). In actual fact, except for *Takriz*, activists who continued blogging set aside divergences and directed their attention to the regime, which every blogger declared to be independent from.

Tunisian thriving blogosphere dealt not only with political issues, but dared discuss taboo subjects, such as sex and religion (sexual tourism, aids, contraception, virginity before marriage etc.) Language also has been freely used, by blending French with Arabic and introducing neologisms. Picking mainly on Ben Ali and his entourage, the former president is called Ali Baba and his henchmen the forty thieves; the family name of his wife, Trabelsi, has become a synonym for 'stealing'; Ben Ali's supporters are named *mauvistes* due to the past president's predilection (obsession) for the color mauve. Irony is not spared towards the rapid ascent of Leila Trabelsi, a ladies' hairdresser who became first lady with a degree in law. She is depicted as a witch, a diabolic, dominant woman, who maneuvered a puppet president. Also sketches contributed to the irreverent representation of ruling class. The subtlety and talent as caricaturist of the blogger *_Z_*, the creator of *DÉBATunisie* were not overlooked by censorship and the press (Ghérif 2009).

Blogosphere and international connections: a shout for help

Lina Ben Mhenni, a Tunisian activist whose award-winning blog *A Tunisian Girl* reached international fame during Tunisian revolution, outlines a clear profile of Tunisian blogosphere as a compact community able to denounce regime's violations of human rights through virtual campaigns and real demonstrations (Ben Mhenni 2011).

Ben Ali's opponents were persuaded that support from transnational networks was essential for an effective impact. They may be considered actors of the *global civil society*, who advocate the defence of human rights through an active transnational network (Feliu 2005: 366)¹⁹. Thanks to the mastery of new media, Tunisian bloggers tried to draw foreign public opinion's attention. Yassin Ayari, a Tunisian network and security engineer, activist and blogger, wrote about his own experience few days before the 14 January:

"[...] I remember that in a night, I sent 600 fax [...] to all the media of the world, to push them to talk about what was happening [...]" (Ayari 2011).

19. Laura Feliu considers global civil society in the Arab world at an incipient state, especially in full autocracies such as Tunisia. It is evident, as we argued below, that, in the Tunisian uprising, 'loyalty to a space (a state or territory)' prevailed on 'loyalty to a time' (typical of a global civil society), when the projection on a future order based on human rights overcomes national interests (Feliu 2005: 373).

*Tunisia Prison Map*²⁰ by Sami Ben Gharbia caused quite a stir among sites and blogs all over the world. Besides illustrating the location of Tunisian prisons, the map gives information on political detainees, their protests and abuses of power. It was 2006 and bloggers had started to move into the same direction using the members of Tunisian diaspora as antennas.

The international dimension assumed an increasing role in supporting popular struggle in Tunisia, as elsewhere, and the use of French worked as a crucial *bridge*²¹. The Tunisian Pirate Party had joined the international pirate network. Likewise, Tunisian activists found virtual comrades in Wikileaks, whose cables exposed authoritarian and corrupt regimes. The Internet became a real global battlefield in Tunisia, when local cyber militants were helped by the international group Anonymous to bypass the Tunisian Internet Agency's censorship (Ryan 2011).

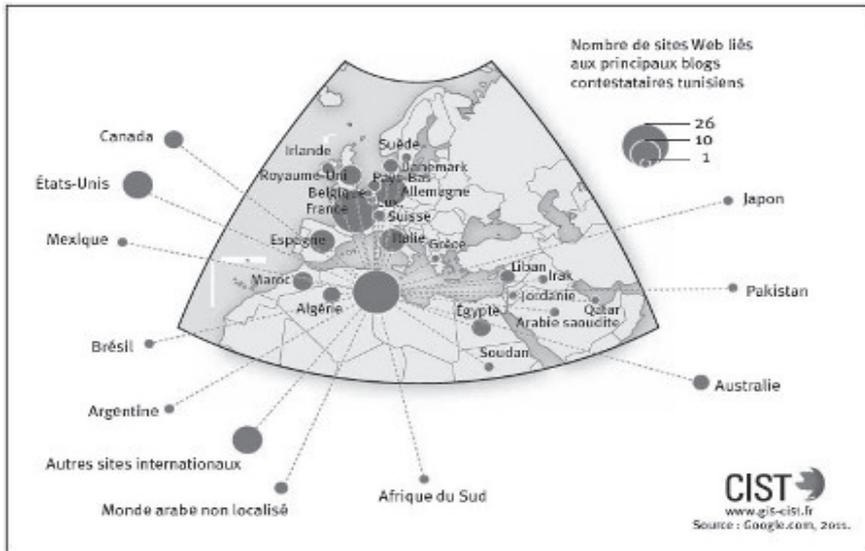
Marta Severo (2011) observes similarities, comparing the Tunisian diaspora data with connections between foreign bloggers and networks of Tunisian bloggers. Once outside from Tunisian borders, bloggers felt free to express their frustrations. Far from the censorship of *Ammar 404*²², they started denouncing the regime. During international meetings of bloggers (for example, in Lebanon in 2009) connections became real. The activists who could not go back to Tunisia met bloggers living in Tunisia. This exchange was a base for upcoming collaborations on the net, for international collaboration intended as inside-outside connections. Connections with Arab countries are weaker because of censorship in these countries (Severo 2011).

20. [Online] Available at: <<http://nawaat.org/tunisianprisonersmap/>> [Accessed 20 August 2011].

21. Bloggers writing in English or French in the MENA region are depicted by Etling, Kelly, Faris and Palfrey (2009) as *bridges* between the Arabic and Western blogospheres.

22. In the derisive, irreverent style of bloggers, 'Ammar 404' personifies censorship: 'Error 404' is the typical notice that appears on the screen when access to websites is forbidden.

FIGURE 1 – NUMBER OF WEBSITES LINKED TO THE MAIN TUNISIAN DISSIDENT BLOGS



Source: Giraud (2011).

TABLE 1 – NUMBER OF TUNISIANS LIVING ABROAD

Region	Total
Europe	911,378
Arab World	154,714
Sub-Saharan Africa	1,279
America and Australia	29,718
Asia	1,123

Slim Amamou is another Tunisian blogger part of the group of activists which faced Ben Ali. He writes his posts in French. This is emblematic of the provenance of readers: not just Tunisians or Arabs in general. On 17 October 2009, he posted this provocation on his blog:

“On 2024 I will vote for X. And I will set only one condition to this X: that it will not be part, near, far or by alliance of the actual president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali’s family” (Amamou 2009).

Amamou expressed his discouragement about a change of Tunisian political status-quo. This position was common among Tunisian bloggers.

They never asked openly Ben Ali's resignation, trying even to start a public dialogue with government as the manifestation of 22 May 2010 proves:

“The event is independent from any political party or association. It will be peaceful. Its purpose is to seek the permanent cessation of the Internet censorship and the reopening of all censored sites.

PS: Please, do not bring flags or music that can give a political or religious sense to the event” (Anon. 2010).

‘Apolitical and not religious’ is a background useful to involve people having different ideas of society during the regime. It will reveal its weakness after the *Kasbah 2*, the permanent sit-in before government ministries to demand the ousting of the old guard. The manifestation was forbidden by the regime. Slim Amamou and Yassin Ayari were imprisoned and obliged to record a video where they cancelled the event. In spite of all, protests took place in Tunis, Montreal, Paris and Bonn where activists dressed a white t-shirt at the same time, as demonstration, causing the anger of Tunisian police (Ben Mhenni 2011: 10).

Censorship spurred activists to prove their strength also six months before, when Fatma Rihai was arrested. Fatma, a theatre professor, blogged in Arabic under the pseudo of *Arabicca*. On Tuesday 3 November, three Security officers escorted her to her house in Monastir (160 km from Tunis), to conduct a search for evidence that she could be hiding behind the pen-name of the Tunisian cartoonist *_Z_*, author of the blog *DÉBATunisie*. In less than two hours Tunisian bloggers created a blog, a Facebook group, as well as a Twitter profile to denounce the arrest:

“Fatma, they try to cut your wings, they try to muzzle your mouth: Fatma, I have never seen our blogosphere so united as I see it today” (Ben Mhenni 2009).

Even if the blogosphere was an arena to protest and denounce, the majority of population was outside from this virtual space. Not just logistically, but also from a cultural point of view.

Virtual forums usually increase power of inner circles. International vocation of Tunisian bloggers revealed a weak connection with the majority of Tunisian people and this was a great limit for this hypothetical inner circle.

The capital role of anonymity: *Takriz*

At this point, a clarification is needed. Since independence, and particularly during the regime of Ben Ali, the incapacity of trade unions and political parties to offer a shared perspective to their members, along with the sprawling control over the public space by the State, generated Tun-

sia's current social galaxy, commonly indicated by the term 'individualism' (Bouzouita 2011).

Moudhafer Labidi, a young leader of the social movement that faced the police in Redeyef in 2008, expresses on his personal blog his point of view about the role of the leadership of trade union UGTT in Tunisian revolution:

"UGTT, after decades of honeymoon with the regime of Ben Ali, supporting politically the regime, its economical policies, [...], today wants to embezzle from the revolution of Tunisian people" (Labidi 2011).

Labidi's anathema concerns the national direction of UGTT. According to him, the trade union local direction in Redeyef is influenced by a dissidence culture that lays its roots in liberation movements which fought against the colonizers.

Internet played a crucial role in the break-up of the individualism underlined by Bouzouita. While bloggers signed their entries with real names, denouncing the regime using even personal feelings to describe their persecution (Etling et al. 2009), a network of contacts and ideas was growing behind the shield of anonymity:

"Personally, a very limited number of people knows my real identity, in such way that if one catches me, I exactly know who I have to beat up. This peculiarity of the anonymity in TAK, forces me to a particular epistemological modesty. I am only if related to *Takriz*. In other words: TAKRIZO ERGO SUM" (Ganjaman 1998).

Takriz was a virtual network utilized by the first activists to share their ideas about political situation in Tunisia. As said above, it was founded by two Tunisian students, *Foetus* and *Waterman*. Anonymous still now, they have a meaningful relationship with *curvas* of football stadiums²³. The stadium was the only arena to shout against the regime and the police. Even on Facebook and Twitter pages of *Takriz*, the language used is typical of football stadiums. The movement arrived where Tunisian bloggers could not arrive with their way to communicate to people: on the street. Once mobilized, the Ultras were on the front line and did not retreat in the face of police tear gas and gunfire, whereas other protesters melted away²⁴. Céline Braun (2006) underlines *Takriz*'s role as an 'anti-political party'. In these years of dictatorship, it offered young people an alternative to a system where they could not have any role or place. Moving from the idea that football stadiums were logistically useful to spread slogans and symbols, *Foetus* and *Waterman* contacted

23. Rabrov *Takriz*, discussion on *Takriz* nature and *curva*'s role in the organization of protests. [Skype call] (Personal communication, 13 August 2011).

24. More details about the relationship between *Takriz* and football ultras can be founded in the interview to *Foetus* and *Waterman* by Pollock (2011).

curvas' leaders and entered one of the few places where chores against police and regime were tolerated. Tunisian stadium *curvas* are usually composed of boys from the same area. Club Africain's ultras are from Bab Jdid, EST's ones from Bab Souika. In daily life, ultras have shared time and space since they were children. This strong solidarity among young people of the quarter is at the base of the barricades that faced police during the days of Tunisian revolution. Ideas were diffused in the stadiums and lived in the quarters.

After the revolution

From January onwards, the absence of censorship in public spaces has redefined the role of the Tunisian blogosphere. The process of citizens' *empowerment*²⁵ arguably strengthened. Several bloggers (Amira Yahyaoui, Riadh Guerfali, Mehdi Lamloum, Tarek Kahlaoui, Slim Amamou, Yasmine Ayari) run for office in the Constituent Assembly on independent lists. Numerous appeals to the ballots circulated as veritable call to arms. Taking the floor is a mark of re-conquered dignity (*karāma*) and commitment, and the egalitarian nature of the Internet "allows the weakest actor to appear as vociferously as the most powerful state." (Pappé 2010, 301) New websites have been created, such as the English-language Tunisia-live.net, which interestingly looks for digital journalists capable to use digital video equipment and smart phones²⁶. Significantly, the Third Arab Bloggers Meeting has been organized in Tunis (3-6 October 2011). The event showed how cyber-militants intend to maintain an active participation to the public sphere and improve their mastery of new technologies: training for citizen journalists, countermeasures against censorship, misinformation and manipulation have been widely debated.

The uprising has been an occasion for experiencing national cohesion, reasserting national identity and recovering a feeling of collective pride. The Tunisian flag waved on the street and is still displayed on the web. Every nation has its martyrs, and on the net some pages resemble to mausoleums. The website *TUNeZINE* not only chronicles regime's victims, but also posts mourning messages, mementoes, photos, and tributes to the late Zouhair Yahyaoui. The new media feature in contemporary society as the press for the emerging national consciousness in Europe in the late 19th century (Anderson 1983).

25. Empowerment is a process of increasing control and transition from a state of powerlessness. This process may involve also social groups. Many theorists, such as Giddens (1991), refer to empowerment to describe the process of gradual social re-embedding of activities, skills and practices that have been uprooted by modernity through the development of abstract expert systems. Re-skilling/appropriation empowers people giving them the chance of a better control over the environment and decision-making in which groups, organizations or communities participate.

26. <http://www.tunisia-live.net/2011/07/08/digital-journalist/>.

The constructive phase has started from the base. Instead of tackling economic problems, even if urgent, collective values and national identity have been given priority. The past, even the more distant past, is unearthed in order to redefine the Tunisian identity, to grasp the meaning of 'tunisianity'. Nevertheless, Tunisians are not unanimous about the legacies of the past. Someone emphasizes the Islamic and Arabic tradition, while others recognize themselves in the reformist, liberal, and secular heritage. The cleavage is compounded by differences between littoral cities and impoverished hinterland. The coexistence of these opposite elements brings bloggers to depict Tunisians as 'schizophrenics'.

Polarization emerged in several occasions, all widely emphasized by the media, and reechoing on the net. The article 1 of the 1959 Constitution – stating that Tunisia has been an Arab State and Islam its religion – has been under discussion, as well as the family code of 1956. A strong focus has been addressed on an-Nahda, whose potential and program aroused fear. Demonstrations in favor of secularism (*lā'ikiyya* or *'ilmāniyya*) were countered by attacks from conservatives on the streets (as in Sousse in March 2011), and after resentful bloggers denounced the indifference of the police. Islamists, on their side, advocated moral regeneration, and Salafistes went as far as protesting for the closure of a brothel in Tunis downtown (February 2011). Antagonism was particularly violent when the film *Ni Allah ni maître* by Nadia El Fani was screened at the cinema AfricArt in June 2011. It criticized the incoherent attitudes of Tunisians during the Ramadan. Nessma TV's broadcasting of *Persepolis*, by Marjane Satrapi, raised protests because of the cartoon's portrait of God (October 2011).

Worries about the future could explain the popularity of Habib Bourguiba, the first Tunisian president whose merits – as pointed out by Mustapha Kraiem – are indeed counterbalanced by his dictatorial rule (Kraiem 2011). Tunisian surfers seem still in search of a leader who can guarantee stability and prosperity. Lacking of perspectives, the past is nostalgically rediscovered also for the models it seems to offer.

Finally, voices on the net increasingly mirrored the political effervescence in the country. Nevertheless, the task of setting a common agenda after decades of oppressive control produced cacophony. After the common target of ousting Ben Ali was achieved, individualism and competition reappeared. Slim Amamou is criticized for being appointed as Secretary for Sport and Youth of a compromised transitional government; Yassin Ayari makes a stand on Tunisian Army after his father's death, a general killed as a consequence of a clash against alleged members of *Al Qaida du Maghreb Islamique*; Fatma Arabicca and Lina Ben Mhenni are insulted for their positions against fundamentalism. The Tunisian blogosphere is now slightly compromised by ideology and politics, and has lost its cohesion.

Conclusion

There is an enduring issue of general relevance concerning the alleged capacity of the new media to displace or replace traditional means of mass communication in the principal public sphere wherein citizens may compare and contrast their own political opinions in a free and rational manner, according to the classical model of Jürgen Habermas. The optimistic 'vulgate' holding that new media are 'intrinsically democratic' is a simplification. The impact and relevance of any given technology depends on the specific social context in which that technology operates. We would be well-advised to avoid generalizations and, instead, analyze specific socio-historical cases. It would be unduly simplistic to hail with enthusiasm the advent of a new era of electronic democracy. A disenchanted observer such as Morozov (2011) strikes a warning note: Gaddafi loves WikiLeaks; Chavez uses Twitter; the Chinese government blocks Google; Putin promotes a 'school for bloggers' and goes after the NGOs. Ahmadinejad is one of the many dictators around the world who have co-opted clever hackers to carry out propaganda and counter-information.

From this standpoint, we have chosen to focus on the Tunisian revolution and observe the role of the Internet through an analysis of international and local press, websites, blogs and interviews on Skype. After highlighting in general terms how different elements of the media sphere are connected, the Tunisian situation allowed us to show how the blogosphere has progressively become an arena for dissent in a stifling atmosphere. The web has initially voiced a sense of uneasiness, later becoming a tribune for attacks against the regime. Initially an on-line minority, the protests overflowed into the streets thanks to new technologies and networks on the ground such as groups of soccer fans.

Do the new media represent a new arena in which to develop free and democratic debate? Events in Tunisia reveal that the technical conditions of digital communication may foster mobilization and agitation in the *destruens* phase (as happened in North Africa), but they also exhibit greater difficulty in the long-term re-establishment of an effective 'public opinion'. This much has been historically confirmed through the ability of traditional mass communication means to order, organize and hierarchize – in accordance with established priorities – information, issues and interpretative frameworks, defined in literature as '*agenda-setting*' (Shaw 1979). New media, on the other hand, tend to push towards a cacophonous segmentation of channels, issues and voices that may hinder the long-term definition of a public sphere.

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