Independent Study Project (ISP) Collection   SIT Study Abroad

Fall 2014

Social Media & Revolution: The Importance of the Internet in Tunisia's Uprising

Aamna Dhillon
SIT Study Abroad

Recommended Citation

Social Media & Revolution:

The Importance of the Internet in Tunisia's Uprising

Aamna Dhillon

SIT Fall ISP 2014

Mounir Khelifa and Raja Boussedra

December 8, 2014

Our world has entered a digital age, where technology has made leaps and bounds and is accelerating in development. With this digital age came the widespread use of the internet and the emergence of "social media"—online platforms for communicating with others. Though the initial use of these social media platforms was to stay connected with friends and family, a sect of users have used the platforms to share news and important information. In the past few years, people have come together to demand change in their countries by protest and eventually even revolution, all of which is said to have been enabled by social media which allowed people to connect in a way previously impossible. Social media has now become a topic of debate with its importance to these movements, with one side arguing that social media only leads to "slacktivism" while the other side argues that social media is essential to modern-day uprisings, networking, and activism.

I will be utilizing this ISP as part of my undergraduate thesis, which will be on the relationship between the emergence/use of social media and the awareness/spread of human rights, as well as the reaction of governments to the utilization of social media. In the case of Tunisia, I wish to look at the revolution through the *lens* of human rights. The main question I would like to answer is: To what extent did social media influence the demand for human rights and uprising during, before, and after the revolution?

I have split up my research into three categories: technology usage before the revolution, its use during the revolution, and its use after the revolution. For each category, I will be looking to answer several questions. Concerning the utilization of social media, I will see to what extent social media was truly used, if there are statistics for the number of youth on social media services at the time of the revolution, and seek to answer if the youth here believe that it was used in a largely impactful way. I have also researched how the internet was controlled before the revolution, what occurred right before and during the revolution in terms of government policies, and if there were attempts to hide violations of human rights. I will seek to answer if social media was or is a prime source for other media (such as

international) to gain an understanding of what was occurring in the last decade. I will also seek to answer if people treat the revolution as involving human rights issues and thus took to cyber activism to spread awareness. All of the above will also be categorized into before, during, and after the revolution to analyze and catalog how social media was used, is being used, and how it will be used in the future.

To gather data and information for this project, I performed Interviews, analyzed literature and theory of social media, as well as gathered statistics on utilization. I interviewed those who partook in the revolution through social media such as bloggers (cyberactivists) and those engaged with civil society. I observed how social media is again being brought in to deal with the elections and discussed with activists how social media can be utilized in the future in relation to human rights.

Social Media in Tunisia

The "Arab Spring" has become a household term after a wave of protests spread throughout the Middle East in 2011, the international community watching as people fought to be rid of oppressive regimes that ruled over their countries. More than three years later, the results of these uprisings have been rather mixed, with the majority of cases resulting in less-than-favorable conditions from military coups to civil war. Tunisia, where the revolutions all began, has been heralded as the one "success story". After mobilization—mainly of and by youth—and unrelenting protests, Tunisians were able to depose then President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali from power and are now in the process of transitioning to a stable democracy. Unlike uprisings of the distant past, technology has become a prime tool for political and civic engagement, with social media at the forefront of networking and organization. Western journalists and observers have named the uprisings of 2011 "Facebook" or "Twitter Revolutions" due to the extensive use of social media, which included not only the aforementioned social networking sites but blogs and content communities as well. The question, however, is how

important was social media truly to the revolutions? Does it deserve the recognition and importance it has received or could the revolutions have occurred without the use of these online platforms?

Social Media Theory: Proponents and Skeptics

Those who have studied the use of social media for civic engagement have fallen into one of two categories: those who believe that social media is essential or important for modern-day political and social change and those who do not. Malcolm Gladwell is a known skeptic of social media's importance, arguing that social media promotes "slacktivism"—activism with weak links and ties that rides on people feeling important by simply "liking" or "retweeting" (Joseph, 150). Gladwell believes true political and social change can only succeed if there are strong ties and prominent leaders, all which social media fails to formulate. Evgeny Morozov, another skeptic and scholar, argues that the internet is used largely for entertainment and thus a very small percentage actually use it for political or social reasons. Morozov goes as far as to say that the trivial uses of the Internet can in fact subdue and prevent political and social engagement online (Joseph, 151). Cynics like Gladwell and Morozov argue that while social media can allow for quicker and louder conversations, those conversations can easily be replaced by the next big event and thus are temporary and shallow.

In contrast, Clay Shirky, a professor at the New York University, argues that social media is indeed integral to forming and promoting political and social discussions (Joseph, 152). The advantageous aspect of social media is that it is free if you have access to the Internet, thus making it widely accessible. Social media allows for citizen journalism and breaks the boundaries of traditional media such as newspapers or television reports. Information can spread to a much wider audience and the plethora of unfiltered information allows for more people to form political opinions not influenced by state media. Cyberactivists can also work together to keep the international community updated on

events occurring under oppressive regimes, a difference from the past where the outside world could be completely clueless to crises occurring in an authoritarian state. Furthermore, social media and the World Wide Web allow for mass conversation and debate, which is crucial to creating change. Social networking sites are primarily for connecting with others and having conversation online, which activists and others can utilize for deeper discussions. An interesting theory presented by Ethan Zuckerman is that activists profit from the mundane uses of the Internet---that is, it is necessary for there to be people who are only or primarily interested in watching videos of "cute cats" and reading entertainment gossip. If governments were to shut down online sites where these trivial activities occur, it could aggravate a population that was previously apathetic to the situation in the country as well as allow them to find proxies that could in turn lead them to otherwise censored sites (Joseph, 156).

This debate of whether social media is crucial or not to change in the modern world is why studying Tunisia as a case is essential. As mentioned before, Western media was quick to label the Tunisian revolution and the subsequent uprisings in the Middle East "Twitter revolutions", but such a title is shunned by numerous activists and those that participated in the unrest. In order to understand the role social media actually played in Tunisia's revolution it is necessary to address the history of technology in Tunisia and how social media was used before, during, and now after the revolution.

How Ben Ali Created His Own Demise

One reason Tunisia is known for its utilization of social media and the internet during their revolution is that the nation was one of the most advanced in the field of technology in all of North Africa. Ben Ali was an avid fan of technology and wanted to advance Tunisia's technology sector as much as possible, and Tunisia was the first Arab country to connect to the Internet back in 1991 (Ziccardi, 18). In 2005, the second phase of the World Summit on the Information Society was held in

Tunis, a Summit that was sponsored by the United Nations. This summit included talks of a "global village" as the international community discussed how to best connect in the digital age, with Ben Ali giving an opening speech where he stated:

> "*Keen as we are on building an information society guaranteeing the individual right of access to information and ensuring the free flosw of information and knowledge, without restrictions or constraints, we consider it necessary to set universal ethical standards that will stand as a rampart protecting our societies against negative uses of modern communication means*." (WSIS)

The irony of the statement is that Ben Ali's regime was censoring the Internet at this time, with a special division set up primarily to shut down those who critiqued his regime---The Tunisian Agency of the Internet (French: ATI). Movements had been occurring a month previous to the Summit in France in an attempt to bring awareness to Tunisia's heavy censorship policies, but it was not enough to force Ben Ali to break the illusion he had presented to the rest of the world (Ziccardi, 303). Even his wife, Leila Ben Ali, was nominated for an award from the United Nations in 2007 for "Enabling Technology Excellence" due to her apparent work with technology and those with disabilities (TunisiaIT). Ben Ali's family was keen to promote an image of embracing the digital age and technology while also stifling any dissenting voices that could now be present in the virtual world. Indeed, Tunisia benefited from the regime's love of computers—in 2009, broadband penetration was 24% in Tunisia in comparison to 7.4% in Egypt and 12% in Morocco (Ghannam, 30). By 2011, one-third of the population used the internet whether from home, work, or internet cafes, with 2.4 million people owning Facebook accounts (Honwana, 49). With technology already having a strong hold on the population, it made it easier for people to connect online and begin sharing ideas—some of which gave way to resistance to the regime.

Before the Revolution: Combating Censorship

Before Ben Ali's regime was toppled, cyberspace in Tunisia was full of activity from normal, every-day usage of the internet to bloggers and cyber dissidents critiquing the regime. In an effort to dissuade unrest, the video sites YouTube and DailyMotion were blocked while other networks like Facebook had periodical blackouts. The government knew from their critics that the people were capable of connecting and spreading messages of distrust in the regime to others, causing bloggers to be targeted and waves of heavy censorship at a time. In February 2003, nine youths were arrested and accused of being terrorists though their only apparent crime was trying to access blocked sites. In April 2010, the government carried out a censorship crusade that blocked over 100 blogs and other sites (Honwana, 50). Activists coined "Ammar" or "Ammar Scissorhands" as the name for the cause of 404 error pages that appeared due to blocked sites, though *Ammar* was easily beat by using proxies. When not struggling with filtered internet, tech-savvy youth used social media and the Internet in creative ways, such as tracking Ben Ali's private jet which revealed that his wife would often go to Europe on expensive shopping trips (Joseph, 158).

A quiet yet active cyber war was being waged between the youth and the government, with internet users finding ways to bypass state censorship and the government finding ways to hit back. Two known cyberactivists, Slim Amamou and Aziz Amazi, planned a protest in Tunis in May 2010 as part of the "*Sayeb Salah* (Give Me a Break)" anti-censorship campaign that had been started by young activists. Photo-shopped images of Mark Zuckerberg, founder and CEO of Facebook, appeared with him carrying a sign reading "Sayeb Salah"—an indicator that activists saw Facebook as crucial to their campaign. Videos that could not be uploaded to sites like YouTube could be uploaded to Facebook, which quickly had become a platform for organized protest, and thus cyberactivists were able to share news that the state-media would not. Cybercafes, which were filtered and and run by the government, were still able to

become places where people participated in the cyberwar by using proxies, even at great risk (Ziccardi, 202).

Despite going through all the legal means in order to hold the demonstration, Amamou and Amazi were detained and forced to release a video to call off the protest. Regardless, on the 10th of May peaceful protestors still came out sporting white shirts with slogans against censorship not only in Tunis but also France, Canada, New York, and Ghana in flash mobs. This only agitated the government further, with ATI beginning to hack into accounts and slander those who dare raised their voices against the regime. Lena Ben Mhenni, another popular cyberactivist "A Tunisian Girl", had returned home on more than one occasion to see it had been raided by police. In April 2010, her computer, cameras and other items had been taken, which made it clear that the secret police were targeting her (Honwana, 56). She was not alone, with other bloggers being arrested and detained for days to weeks at a time, some mentally and emotionally tortured. Zouhair Yahyaoui, a cyberdissident who founded a satirical site "TUNeZINE", suffered a fatal heart attack after being weakened from torture and hunger strike while in prison for his activism and efforts to create a democratic forum which criticized Ben Ali's regime. Jolanare, a blogger whose focus has been on women's rights and sexuality, recalled how she had friends arrested and taken in, one of her friends being mentally and emotionally tortured. Pseudonyms were in great use (Jolanare being one of them) but the government had its ways of tracking down the dissidents. Cyberactivists were by no means safe and sound behind their computers, facing real and actual threat from the government desperate to silence to them.

The use of social media and the internet allowed for Tunisian cyberactivists to connect with an international audience. *Anonymous*, the now world-renowned "hacktivist"—hacker activists—joined in, making an alliance with Tunisian cyberactivists—like Takriz, an anonymous network of dissidents—and

assisted them in battling the government crackdown on the Internet. They carried out "denial-of-service" attacks on non-essential government websites, posting messages and videos that showed their solidarity with the Tunisian people and demanding that the Tunisian government no longer infringe upon the "right to free Internet access". The government reacted by preventing their sites from being accessed overseas, which was circumvented by Anonymous training those inside the country how to carry out the massive denial-of-service attacks themselves (Honwana, 52).

In the days marking the beginning of the revolution, Facebook itself noticed an irregularity in their security, realizing that a "malicious code" was recording Tunisian users' log in information which would allow the government to hack and shut down everyone's accounts (Madrigal). The company stepped in, rerouting Tunisian users through an *https* server—which encrypts information and thus is not affected by Ben Ali's malicious code—and making users identify friends in photos as a security test before allowing them into the account. Though apolitical and merely a move to ensure their users safety, the Facebook security team was able to shut out Ben Ali's government from further stealing personal information of users. The regime was beginning to run out of tricks to keep the cyberspace void of dissidents.

During the Revolution: Change of Focus

When Mohammed Bouazizi self-immolated himself on the 17th of December 2010, he probably did not realize the movement that was to follow. Young people of impoverished Sidi Bouzid had taken to the streets demanding change, frustrated with their current state of life and the way the government and police had been treating them. The cyber war between online activists and the government escalated, with cyberdissidents---most of whom were middle to upper class—joined with the working class that protested in the streets in late December. High unemployment rates for a largely educated

youth was the root cause for anger, not government censorship. Under Ben Ali, the youth population

had little to no opportunities with the economy in shambles, the youth unemployment rate in 2010 at

29.5% (Chekir). This anger along with the growing resentment for the corrupted regime had been

simmering for years, the public display of Bouazizi's burning body serving as a catalyst as the anger then

poured out into the streets. Further exacerbating the situation was the WikiLeaks' cables which

presented the true level of corruption in the government and the West's complacency of it (Joseph,

158). *Nawaat.org*, a collective blog for discussing oppression and politics, had actually published the

cables before WikiLeaks on *TuniLeaks* and continued to consolidate information from across social

media in order to present it in one space (Ziccardi, 21). This collective blogging outfit became a source

for international media, aiding the connection between citizen journalists armed simply with

smartphones and the world at large. Prominent cyberactivists like those aforementioned joined

protestors on the street, demonstrations showing solidarity with the people of Sidi Bouzid occurring in

Tunis which were broadcast live due to mobile phones recording the event. Kasserine, another

struggling city, also held protests and demonstrations that were only being covered due to materials

being posted on social media. Videos were posted to Facebook and then quickly circulated, the hashtag

#sidibouzid making its rounds on Twitter with over 13,000 tweets linked to the hashtag (Howard, 10).

Bloggers, who had been the most critical of Ben Ali's regime, continued to communicate and rally

supporters of the uprising as they shared photos, videos, and sound bites with the Internet.

International news networks such as Al Jazeera, CNN, and BBC picked up these materials that were

coming out of social media and broadcasted it to the world, completely shattering the illusion of stability

and prosperity that Ben Ali had created for Tunisia.

The cyber world was no longer waging a war against censorship but one against the regime in

whole, uniting the desire for freedom of speech and liberty with the cries for social justice by working-

class citizens who were on the streets, not merely online. Anonymous continued to support Tunisian dissidents, with hundreds of veterans of revolution movements collaborating on the "*Guide to Protecting the Tunisian Revolution*" which they disseminated both in print and by video online. The Guide covered how to deal with violent riots to first aid to safety when dealing with authority. Activists who had never met each other in person banded together for a common cause, promoted the need for demonstrations and continued protests amid risk of violence, and kept Tunisians and others around the world informed of what was happening inside the country's borders.

A question that comes up, however, is whether all that comes out of social media can be trusted. Manipulation and bias of media is the human problem within the spread of information. We will be quick to believe photos and videos as evidence, but such materials can be altered. Tweets from people on the ground may give an idea of what is occurring, but one has to be cautious of misinformation being spread. A downfall of social media is the lack of legitimacy, as every-day citizens are not held accountable like professional journalists and reporters. Just as social media can connect and spread awareness of certain issues, it can also easily be used to distort information and manipulate the masses. Bahia Nar, co-founder of the Social Media Club of Tunisia, said that even now "No one really knows what happened with Bouazizi." Media blackout at the time made it difficult to see what the true story was and what was not, with mass circulation of events on social media prone to small manipulations and changes that resulted in varying stories. She believes that while social media was an important tool to the revolution, it was not the defining trait and had its share of problems. When asked if social media did more good or more harm, she responded: "It helped, but I hate when people refer to it as revolution due to social media. It was due to people who went out, put their fear away, went to the streets, and faced the bullets." Nar is not the only one who had qualms with the term "social media

revolution", with a range of activists finding that such a term simplifies actual events and takes away credit from the Tunisian people themselves.

Yasmine Akrimi, a young activist who is on the Board for the Tunisian International Model United Nations (TIMUN), has a slightly different take. She believes that social media was the key to the uprising and that the name "social media revolution" is apt—"Social media *was* the revolution", she said. In an interview, Akrimi stated that the Tunisian revolution could not have been possible without social media, as it was due to Facebook that people were able to unite. It was due to social media that people were able to see the true injustices that were occurring all over the state. Under Ben Ali, Akrim recalled, most did not know how great the income inequality gap was and those in the cities did not even realize poverty was an issue in the country due to the regime's propaganda. "People were tortured for years and years and you could be walking above them every day….and we knew, but we could do nothing without being arrested and tortured ourselves," she said. In the realm of human rights, the explosion of social media usage to retaliate the oppression of the government allowed for a brand new awareness of the variety of issues plaguing the country. Social media not only united people for the revolution, but further fueled the anger as the reality of the situation came to light.

While it is obvious that the Internet was a vital tool for the revolution, it is necessary to remember that the uprising did not start with social media. It was by the working-class, unemployed youth of poor regions like Sidi Bouzid who took to the streets. What sites like Facebook and Twitter helped accomplish was connecting these marching youth with those in the coastal, more affluent cities, and then connecting the people of Tunisia with the rest of the world. Social media served as a bridge over the previous disconnect of these youth, uniting them for a similar cause. The Internet has been able to build links and relations among strangers that previously could not have united together in-mass, which in today's uprisings and demonstrations has become essential to spread a message.

Dhillon 12

One interesting facet to observe in the field of social media activism is gender—did the sex of a person play a role in how they interacted with the movement? The answer, it seems, is no. "In fact, I think it was better to be a woman than a man on social media," recalls Bahia Nar. Tunisia's conservative society has its difficulties with women's equality in the physical realm, but there was no parallel in the digital world. The question of parity was no issue, and social media was in fact being extensively used by young, urban *women* to discuss political issues even prior to the start of the revolution (Howard, 2). Forty-one percent of Tunisia's Facebook population is female (Howard, 6), and the internet has made it easier for women to engage in these conversations versus the still masculine-dominated conversations occurring offline. This is reflected in that of the three interviews I was able to obtain, they were all with female activists who are still very engaged in political and civil society. When asked if they were ever treated any differently for being a woman or if they observed increased harassment, the answer was "No". The added usefulness of social media is that by being disembodied avatars speaking to one another, additional prejudices or challenges can virtually disappear. Of course, this is not necessarily true across the board, as around the world women who engage in online activism have faced targeted harassment and have not been taken seriously due to their sex. In Tunisia, however, it seems that such a problem does not exist—an interesting development when put in juxtaposition with the conservative part of Tunisia's society.

After the Revolution: Continuing to Engage

As Tunisia transitions to a stable democracy, the use of social media has not faded. It has been used largely in the elections campaigns of 2014, with parties addressing the populace through Facebook and Twitter as they tried to gain supporters. While parties and presidential candidates went to and organized physical rallies, a considerable amount of campaigning was conducted online. Ennahda, the moderate Islamist party, seemed to have utilized social media the best with three separate twitter

accounts—one in Arabic, one in French, and one in English. They were also consistently posting on their

Facebook page while other parties tended to lag in the social media department. The people, too, were

utilizing social media to respond to the current political process taking place. On the day of the

legislative elections on October 26th, photos spread on Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter of polling

stations and voters championing their blue-stained fingers. The population observed along with

watchdog organizations what was occurring, noting down any irregularities and problems at poll

stations. Discussions were occurring about Tunisia's democratic transition and how it seemed to be, so

far, a success. Activists from other nations like Egypt and Yemen also watched on and utilized social

media to give their support to Tunisia's process, hoping to one day see their own nations witness such a

change.

As co-founder of the Social Media Club, Bahia Nar believes social media is a powerful tool in all

fields and that its importance did not lie just with the revolution. Her organization is hoping to conduct a

number of trainings, ranging from helping people understand social media—from their security to what

they can and cannot do—to assisting youth with finding job opportunities. "People don't know how to

communicate," she said. "People will argue and fight instead of having a discussion." Nar wishes to

change that, believing social media can be used to great lengths as a communication tool—it's original

purpose. She hopes that this would also fight against manipulation of information and propaganda, as

people are quick to take what they see on social media and treat it as verified material. More open

communication and knowledge of the virtual space can lead to better decisions and a more-informed

virtual experience. It can also be of assistance in smaller ways, as she told me it was thanks to animal

organizations on Facebook that allowed her to adopt two cats who needed a home. Tunisian

organizations from all walks of life have opened pages on Facebook in order to engage with others,

whether it be about fashion trends to underground culture to environmental protection. A trend I have

noticed is that even businesses in Tunisia will be more likely to have a Facebook page than their own individual website, which highlights the high usage of Facebook among internet users in the country.

Yasmine Akriri is eager to use social media for issue campaigns, primarily promoting those of the United Nations. As External Affairs Manager of TIMUN, she spoke of the current campaign which is focused on violence against women. She along with TIMUN will be actively using social media to spread awareness on the issue of domestic violence and general violence against women in the next month, from promoting the "Wear Orange" initiative for solidarity to creating a video with messages about such violence. TIMUN is one of innumerable organizations around the world that have seen the benefit to including social media in their work, as it allows messages of these organizations to reach a much wider audience. At the time of writing this, Amnesty International has a campaign of their own, "Write for [Human] Rights", which has been promoted here in Tunisia as well, an "Event page" on Facebook calling for all interested Tunisians to gather on a date to contribute. It is with no doubt that social media is seen as an essential tool for advocacy and networking among human rights and social justice organizations alongside corporations and subculture groups.

Jolanare will continue to blog about women's rights, politics, and sexuality—"I blog about everything," she stated. Having started her blog in 2007, it wasn't until 2013 when she faced a problem with censorship. Her blog had been blocked, despite it now being after the revolution. Not allowing that to deter her, she quickly reopened on another platform (Wordpress) and continued business as usual. I asked her if she ever felt like her freedom of expression was limited or if there was a line that should not be crossed, to which she responded that other than the blocked blog incident, she had never felt restricted and believed it was important to continue to discuss issues such as women's liberty in a society that still faced challenges to overcome.

The flaws of social media are by no means to be glossed over. In fact, it is essential to

understand these flaws so that people can use social media to its greatest capacity. Akrimi said that for

her, a problem was the tendency to focus on one subject or trend at a time. "The bad thing now is that

people, corporations and civil society are all involved in the political process," she said. "So for example

if you want support or a mention from corporations or the state, right now isn't the right moment."

Jolanare echoed a similar sentiment, recalling: "Before the revolution, you couldn't talk about politics

but you could talk about everything else. Now you can talk about politics but other issues like religion…

[not without receiving increased attention]." With Tunisia's current political battle on the dichotomy of

secular v. Islamist, it is no surprise that topics dealing exclusively with the issue are treated with more

scrutiny. When asked what she saw as other main problems today with social media, Jolanare said: "The

issue now is that, for example, for presidential candidates…more people are concerned talking about

the candidates and saying good or bad things instead of actually focusing on political issues." Such a

problem reflects back to Morozov's argument that the Internet is used more for entertainment than

political discourse and thus is not necessarily a hotbed for revolution.

As mentioned earlier, social media can be utilized just as much by oppressive governments as it

can be by activists, and thus it can always be used by negative forces in contrast to positive. Bahia Nar

brought up the problem of cyber bullying, with several cases the world over of young people injuring

themselves or committing suicide due to harassment faced online. Social media can be a mobilizing

force for good, but it can also be open to the opposite. When discussing the importance of social media

in any context, it is important to observe all sides and to be prepared for the problems and issues for

which social media can be susceptible. The digital age has brought upon an entire new world and ways

of communication for us, and thus we must approach it in a critical manner in order to develop it in the

best possible way. If we allow it to be treated as superficial, as critics of the younger generations and social media tend to do, the importance and significance the Internet can hold will be lost.

Conclusion: Was it a social media revolution?

Was the revolution a social media revolution? There is an inherent problem with the question as it paints the events of Tunisia's revolution and the history behind it as black-and-white. To say that the revolution and ousting of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali was solely due to social media would be false, but to say it could have happened without social media would also be false. As sociologist Zeynep Tufekci argues, the offline vs. online argument is nonsensical as the online world is part of the world at large (Ingram). The cyberwar that existed before the outbreak of protests and demonstrations against the regime had served as a time for cyberactivists to become more experienced and to wear down the government retaliation. Had there not been cyber dissent before December 2010, the outcome of the uprising could have been different. Cyber dissent prior to the revolution allowed Tunisian activists to connect with international bodies such as *Anonymous* and connect internally with each other, creating a network of individuals who shared a common goal. Had these connections not been made, Ben Ali's regime would have most likely found it much easier to quell and silence the activists. As Bahia Nar told me, there had been protests previous to those of 2011, but they had been shut down and covered up due to the government's strong grip, the majority of people having no knowledge of them. It took time for those active on cyberspace and in the blogosphere to connect which allowed for the mass movement in the Tunisian revolution.

One error that can be found in the reporting of the Tunisian revolution and social media is the constant reference to *Twitter* as the championing platform. In the days leading up to the 14th of January of 2011, journalists and reporters were already thinking on whether what was occurring in Tunisia was a "twitter revolution", social media quickly being highlighted as a significant player in the uprising. The

Dhillon 17

micro-blogging site had a small user-base in Tunisia (less than 1000 users) and although utilized heavily

by those on the platform, it was not the main avenue of online political and civic engagement. With over

2 million users in the country, it was *Facebook* that was heavily used. In fact, within the first two weeks

of January 2011 there was an 8% increase of Tunisians registered on Facebook (Joseph, 159). Videos that

could not be shared on YouTube due to censorship could instead be circulated on Facebook,

photographs and stories were able to be posted by ease. The face that the government was trying to

delete and shut down Facebook accounts (rather than just block the site) reflects the force that the

social networking site had in Tunisia. It still is the most popular social media site, with even professional

means of communication occurring on what was initially a platform to connect in informal ways.

The answer to the looming question is: Yes and No. There is no solid, right answer to whether

the revolution was a social media revolution. As Tufekci goes as far to say, posing such a question is like

asking "Was the French revolution a printing press revolution?" (Ingram). Social media was an essential

tool in speeding up communication, uniting strangers under the same banner, and bypassing state

media that would have otherwise simply resulted in media blackouts for days. The revolution was also

people on the streets, facing police and authorities, putting themselves at risk of being injured or hurt. It

was first people who came out to the streets to protest and organize, then social media that latched

onto the movement and amplified it so that the entire nation and the world could see and hear. Social

media was then utilized after the revolution to continue to spread information about politics and

culture, with no sign of social media fading to the background. It is less a question of whether or not

these revolutions of 2011 were "social media revolutions" and more a question of how integral social

media and the digital world has become in all of our lives. If social media was of no importance and wide

use in the rest of the world, the international connectivity component to the Tunisian revolution would

have been far more insignificant. If social media and the internet were not a linking and connecting

force for people across borders, people of Egypt, Yemen, Bahrain, and other Arab Spring nations would

not have drawn inspiration from Tunisia to stand up and fight themselves. In our world today, you can visit almost any country and find people on sites such as Facebook and Twitter. The question now is not whether the revolutions could have occurred without social media, but whether or not our society could function in the same manner without social media. Social networking sites are online communities, but these online communities exist within an offline one. Over the years, the line and boundaries between the two realms have been diminishing with near "hyper-connectivity". Photos taken will be uploaded to the likes of Instagram and Facebook without second thoughts and people will take to Twitter to express their current thoughts in 140 characters or less. Perhaps the fascination with the question of whether or not the Arab Spring revolutions were "social media revolutions" stems from our fascination with social media itself.

With more time, this question can received a further fleshed out answer. A challenge I faced with my research was time constraint especially as I was trying to contact various people for interviews to obtain a more primary source, with literature on the subject tending to arrive to similar conclusions and thus not providing ample enough data. As I plan to utilize this research as part of my larger thesis, I will be revisiting this topic and expanding on ideas already expressed in order to provide more cohesive findings. I will continue to try and contact others who were involved in the revolution or are active on cyberspace by ways of activism or journalism to obtain a more diverse point of view. I will also be researching further into the history of technology in Tunisia in comparison to its neighboring countries, as it can provide clearer answers and connections to Tunisia's past, present, and future with online activism.

Bibliiography

AbuZayyad, Ziad K. "Human Rights, the Internet and Social Media: Has Technology Changed the Way We

      See Things?" *Palestine-Israel Journal of Politics, Economics & Culture* 18.4 (2013). Web.

"Anonymous and the Global Correction." Al Jazeera, 16 Feb. 2011. Web. 01 Dec. 2014.

Berger, Miriam. "Tunisians Take To Facebook To Protest Arrests Of Revolutionary Activists." BuzzFeed,

      25 Apr. 2014. Web. 02 Dec. 2014.

Ghannam, Jeffrey. *Social Media in the Arab World: Leading up to the Uprisings of 2011*. Rep. Center for

      International Media Assistance. Print.

Guide to Protecting the Tunisian Revolution: Part One. *YouTube*. Anonymous. Web.

      <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=imvfXtTkZv8>.

Howard, Philip N., Aiden Duffy, Deen Freelon, Muzammil Hussain, Will Mari, and Marwa Mazaid.

      Opening Closed Regimes: What Was the Role of Social Media During the Arab Spring?

      Working paper. Project on Information Technology & Political Islam, 2011. Print.

Ingram, Matthew. "Was What Happened in Tunisia a Twitter Revolution?" *Gigaom*. 14 Jan. 2011. Web.

      03 Dec. 2014.

Joseph, Sarah. "Social Media, Political Change, and Human Rights." *Boston College International &*

      Comparative Law Review 35 (2012). Web.

Lichtenstein, Jesse. "Egyptian Protests, Twitter, and Facebook: How Do Social Media Tools Enable

      Revolutions?" Slate Magazine, 2 Feb. 2011. Web. 02 Dec. 2014.

Lotan, Gilad, Erhardt Graeff, Mike Ananny, Devin Gaffney, Ian Pearce, and Danah Boyd. "The Revolutions

      Were Tweeted: Information Flows During the 2011 Tunisian and Egyptian Revolutions."

      International Journal of Communication (2011). Print.

Madrigal, Alexis C. "The Inside Story of How Facebook Responded to Tunisian Hacks." *The Atlantic*.

      Atlantic Media Company, 24 Jan. 2011. Web. 1 Dec. 2014.

"Mme Leila Ben Ali Reçoit Le Prix "Enabling Technology Excellence Awards"" TunisiaIT, 01 Jan. 1970.

Web. <http://www.tunisiait.com/article.php?article=3578>.

"Second Phase of the WSIS, 16-18 Novermber 2005, Tunis." World Summit on the Information Society.

Web. 30 Nov. 2014. <http://www.itu.int/wsis/tunis/index.html>.

Ziccardi, Giovanni. *Resistance, Liberation Technology and Human Rights in the Digital Age*. Dordrecht:

Springer, 2013. Print.

Zuckerman, Ethan. "The First Twitter Revolution? Not So Fast." Foreign Policy, 15 Jan. 2011. Web.