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# The use of social media from revolution to democratic consolidation: The Arab Spring and the case of Tunisia

## ABSTRACT

*This research assesses social media as a tool of popular mobilization and their role in supporting democratic processes using the case study of Tunisia four years after the revolution. Social media have been widely used during the Arab Spring in the MENA region; yet, their democratizing effects have not been thoroughly researched in countries that have recently undergone democratic transitions. Tunisia offers a unique opportunity to assess whether online democracy initiatives retain their credibility among the citizens and to what point they contribute in promoting and strengthening democracy. The research was conducted using a qualitative method through interviews with Tunisian activists and representatives of NGOs who use the Internet as a tool of democratization. It provides new evidence on the role of the Internet as a democratizing tool and to the potential dangers to political stability that it poses to countries in the process of democratic consolidation.*

## KEYWORDS

Tunisia  
revolution  
social media  
democratic transition  
democracy  
Arab Spring

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The year 2011 took analysts and scholars of the Middle East by surprise. The wave of popular discontent that swept through the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), commonly referred to as the Arab Spring, was an unexpected event. In search for plausible explanations for the extent of these massive and simultaneous explosions of revolutionary uprisings, scholars put forward a combination of factors. The revolutionary wave is attributed to a new generation of young Arabs who, interconnected through satellite TV channels and social media, share a sense of a common destiny. As the vast majority of the region's population is under 25 years of age, the effects of 'youth bulge' combined with tech-savvy skills account in part for this generational change and for the revolutionary zeal of the Arab youth. Indeed, the growth of frustration among large segments of MENA societies was accompanied by the increasing accessibility of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) and the role of the latter is often put forward as an explanation for a domino effect of unrest swaying through the region. Given these circumstances, the Arab Spring uprisings revived debates on the use and role of social media in popular upheavals and democratic transformations. Scholars researching the democratizing effects of social media became divided among cyber enthusiasts and cyber pessimists and those in the middle ground claiming the neutrality of social media as a tool that could be used by anyone and for any purpose. This study contributes towards the debate between cyber optimists and cyber pessimists. The author adopts the middle ground, and assumes that it is not technological determinism but human agency in specific economic, social, political and cultural contexts that determines the use of technology and its outcomes rather than the other way around. This article, using empirical evidence, aims to examine the use of social media as a tool in the Arab Spring uprisings overall and in democratic transition and consolidation, focusing specifically on Tunisia as the only country in the region that has so far accomplished the democratic transition.

Online and offline activism was remarkable in Tunisia and set an example for revolutionary movements in the MENA region (Cole 2014); yet it is not clear how social media continued to affect the democratic transition. While a number of studies highlighted the democratizing effects of the Internet such as greater governmental transparency (Best and Wade 2009; Groshek 2009; Howard 2011) and greater civic offline engagement (Boulianne 2015), among others, in civic dialogue (Coleman and Blumler 2009: 12), improving information dissemination and exchange between governments and other organizations and citizens (Tsagarousianou 1999), these effects were experienced in countries that were already at least partially democratic and proving a causal effect was difficult. As a result, the case of Tunisia may offer fresh evidence on the role of social media in these processes. This article aims to fill this gap by providing arguments to the debate on the role of social media in democratic transitions and consolidations. Indeed, in the aftermath of the revolution, the Internet encouraged youth participation in online exchange of ideas and coordination of projects aimed at directly shaping the outcomes of the Tunisian political transformation. Various initiatives were developed online to denounce corruption, promote transparency and oversee the electoral process; other web initiatives were deployed to monitor police, the performance of the Tunisian president, etc. This study aims to assess to what point social media can be applied to support democratic initiatives and whether the latter retain

their credibility among the population and manage to maintain their impetus and promote democracy or decline due to habituation and participants' fatigue (Reedy and Wells 2009: 162). Consequently, it will be a piece in the puzzle of the question of whether social media have a democratizing potential in countries that have undergone democratic transformations. These questions are essential to understand the continuity of political mobilization of populations in countries in the process of democratic transition but will also shed light on what Lynch referred to as 'a new kind of Arab public and a new kind of Arab politics' (2006: 2). Second, it will provide important findings related to the future outcomes of the democratic transition in Tunisia, which has set a precedent in the MENA region. Ultimately, this research will become part of a broader study of online democracy worldwide (Chadwick 2009). The importance of this study is thus multifold and the research is especially needed, given the shortage of literature on the subject in the Middle Eastern context and the constant evolution of Tunisia's political scene in the formative years of its democracy.

This article is structured as follows: the literature review of the use of social media during the Arab Spring paves the way for a discussion on the disputed role that they played in the hands of activists and MENA governments. The review established the relation between democracy, Internet, Arab Spring and, ultimately, the Tunisian context. These discussions lead to the methodology and data analysis section. The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with twelve Tunisian activists and representatives of NGOs who use social media in order to understand their perceptions of the use and effectiveness of social media during the upheaval and in the democratic consolidation with the aim of strengthening democracy. Furthermore, a theoretical overview of the possible benefits and dangers of the use of social media in democratic transitions and consolidations is presented. These issues are all the more important as recent research highlights the negative impact of social media on political transitions by escalating polarization, fear and uncompromising attitudes (Lynch 2015), or simply their limited scope to the cause (Khatib 2016: 123). Yet, Breuer and Groshek (2013) found that in the Tunisian context the Internet positively impacted offline participation in the parliamentary elections. The questions remain thus open and this article aims to fill in that research gap in order to understand the extent of the democratizing potential of the Internet.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW: DEBATING THE ROLE OF THE SOCIAL MEDIA IN POPULAR MOBILIZATIONS AND COUNTER-REVOLUTIONS**

It is assumed that the Internet can bring about change through the creation of new social ties that can be turned into lasting networks of relationships. Gibson emphasized that in societies that lack civil and democratic values, strong ties to family and the clan tend to be a prevalent form of association, 'inhibiting interactions with those outside the network' (2002: 188). The creation of weak ties in the form of social networks is important in order to make the spread of new ideas possible and to strengthen societal changes. This was visible during the Arab Spring, when the Internet provided a platform for debate, engaging citizens who felt that together they could influence the future of their country. The Internet increased the interconnectedness among citizens in a particular country but also the perception of a shared regional identity. A study conducted by the Dubai School of Government in 2011 concluded

that the perception of social media strengthened the sense of national identity through the creation of social links with fellow citizens, and regional, Arab Gulf or pan-Arab identity. In this way, social media complement strong ties that are always limited in number (Granovetter [1973] 1376), and evidence further shows that they can encourage social activism (Carty 2002; Danitz and Strobel 1999; Rheingold 2002; Wong 2002). Furthermore, real-time exchanges of information uploaded from protests can provide grounds for activism by creating shared emotions (Chebib and Sohail 2011), which are essential to motivate individuals into action (Jasper 2011). Drastic pictures, all instantly uploaded to web pages, serve to create what Jasper calls a 'moral shock' that should raise 'such a sense of outrage in a person that she becomes inclined towards political action, whether or not she has acquaintances in the movement' (Jasper 1998: 409). But Castells (2012) also highlights the feelings of sorrow, humiliation, outrage and hope for change shared online as factors that fostered activism worldwide.

In authoritarian contexts, social media can provide a tool for protest organization that, thanks to their anonymity and mass usage, may somehow shield activists from widespread repressions (Rohlinger and Brown 2009) and make it more difficult for governments to prevent their activism by arresting them in advance. Shirky, for instance, noted that '[e]ven if the government had the surveillance apparatus to know the identity of all the blog readers, it had no way of knowing which of them were planning to attend' (2008: 169). Such mobilization can occur at a relatively fast pace when new developments occur (Shirky 2008: 170). To capture this characteristic, Rheingold (2002) put forward the concept of the *smart mob* – a continually linked, easily congregated and disbanded group. In addition, activists believe that sharing information about the protests with the outside world may build pressure on their governments to refrain from the use of violence against the protesters and to pressure policy changes.

The assurance game provides additional clues for popular mobilization, which can be applied to social media. Given the fact that 'lone individuals are unlikely to go to the center of town and protest unless they believe a considerable number of other individuals are likely to do the same' (Karklins and Petersen 1993: 591), online declarations from activists about their participation in upcoming protests will increase the likelihood of others participating as well. In addition, data on revolutions in Central and Eastern Europe suggest that activism in neighbouring countries prompts mobilization elsewhere in the region through a domino effect, which was experienced during the Arab Spring.

These effects of social media should be analysed in detail. It is important to note that levels of Internet accessibility differed among the countries that experienced the Arab Spring. As of 2011, Internet penetration rates varied from 10% (Yemen) to 17% (Libya), almost 20% (Syria), 37% (Egypt), 68% (Tunisia) and 89% (Bahrain). Internet access was complemented by mobile penetration rates, which stood at 16% in Yemen, 58% in Tunisia, 63% in Syria, 91% in Egypt, 95% in Libya and 133% in Bahrain (Hussein and Howard 2013: 9), and by Internet cafes access, which is difficult to quantify. Despite these differences, as will be shown below, social media were used across the region in a similar way to expose the brutality of the regime forces and raging corruption, raise awareness and coordinate protests, and they contributed towards the diffusion of activism within and beyond the borders of particular countries. As a result, activists across the region chose to adopt the same

strategy of peaceful occupation of major landmarks and the identical slogans 'Irhal' (leave) and 'Al shaab yurid isqat al nizam' (the people want to bring down the regime) (Lynch 2012). Nonetheless, social media also proved to be a double-edged sword due to government attempts at Internet filtering, website blocking and at tracking dissidents.

Despite the fact that ICT alone cannot account for the Arab Spring, among a number of political, economic and cultural conditions for protest movements, an information infrastructure was a key ingredient in the emergence and success of the Arab Spring uprisings. MENA countries have experienced political protests in the past; yet lack of diffusion of information meant that such actions would die out without even reaching a countrywide attention. Such was the case of the six-month-long protests in the Tunisian city of Gafsa in 2008 that passed unnoticed by the rest of the country due to a seal on information (Gana 2013: 17–18). Internet provided an invaluable tool to bypass the governmental control of news and to connect activists on national and international scales. By fostering pluralism, it prompted the emergence of leaderless and anonymous activist groups, which were, in turn, difficult to control by the regimes. Internet thus provided grounds for the emergence of a collective nationwide activism. As a result, the story of self-immolation of the Tunisian protester Mohamed Bouazizi circulated widely through blogs and text messages creating a sense of sympathy and, most importantly, that of shared grievances. Real-time exchanges of information, which included graphics of Bouazizi's wounds, provided grounds for activism by fostering solidarity among Tunisian people, which was essential to motivate individuals into action and to forge a collective goal to depose the dictator. Indeed, Bouazizi's death was just a spark for collective activism that united the already existing army of bloggers, and online regime critics, while motivating the disgruntled silent masses to become politically active. In addition, ICT empowered the society by allowing citizens to record the wrongdoing of their leaders and post the evidence online, making other citizens equally aware. Advanced mobile phones with functions such as sending e-mails, receiving information, taking voice and video recordings and pictures helped the emergence of citizen journalism. Interconnectivity facilitated by social media led to a shift from occupation of virtual spaces to occupation of public spaces. Thanks to social media the protests that originated in Bouazizi's hometown Sidi Bouzid spread to other Tunisian towns before reaching the capital Tunis. Once Bouazizi's images circulated beyond the borders of Tunisia, they generated international sympathy and a sense of similar grievances in neighbouring countries. Bouazizi's act sparked self-immolations in Egypt, Algeria and Morocco, among others, while the coverage of the Tunisian movement broadcasted through Al Jazeera channel and social media encouraged a wave of similar protests across the MENA region. The latter intensified when the Tunisian movement successfully ousted the president Ben Ali after only a month of countrywide protests. In Egypt, online activism has already taken roots as the protest movement grown from the web page 'We are all Khalid Saeed' organized five silent protests from June to August 2010, involving thousands of Egyptians, and used an iconic figure for identification against the authorities (Ali and Fahmy 2013). Wael Ghonim, who was the administrator of this Facebook page, called his followers to protest in January 2011 following the success of the Tunisian Revolution. The Egyptian April 6 Youth Movement established in 2008 has also used social media in the past to create an information network. With the deposition of Ben Ali, its members, notably Asma Mahfouz, called for protests on Tahrir Square through

a Facebook viral blog that was later uploaded on YouTube (Gelvin 2015: 51). Consequently, social media helped generate the Egyptian uprising and subsequently, they were used to coordinate and to document the protests that led to the deposition of Hosni Mubarak. Bahraini activists joined in the Arab Spring protests, scheduling the Day of Rage on 14 February 2011. While, thanks to high Internet connectivity rates, the online activism of the Bahraini opposition political associations and religious networks predated the Arab Spring, their online presence was soon overshadowed by anonymous Facebook and Twitter activists who took the lead in mobilizing mass protests. Various youth networks gathered under the umbrella of the 14 February Youth Coalition and the movement also gained prominence in organizing and coordinating demonstrations through its online web pages. The web page 'February 14th Revolution in Bahrain' established in January 2011 quickly gained popularity. The activists remained anonymous but posted several demands with respect to reform of the political system, release of political prisoners, guarantee of freedom of speech and evaluation of the politically motivated naturalization of foreigners. Social media were subsequently used to document the protests, given the international media blackout surrounding the uprising, similarly to social media in Syria. Despite lower Internet penetration rates, the use of ICT in Libya proved extremely important as opposition groups announced the formation of an alternative government on social media. Libya's diaspora activists also used social media to support the movement through Facebook and other websites such as Feb17.info and Libyafeb17.com.

All in all, social media transformed the region, allowing the flow of information and the spread of revolutionary zeal across MENA. Social media provided country leaders with a measure of social sentiments and made them take pre-emptive steps and carry out reforms. Yet, Axford stressed the fact that in terms of revolutions, social media's role relates more to 'the ways in which controls on the flow of information have been weakened and the consequent freeing up of democratic, or at least popular, energy, than about directly toppling regimes and, in their aftermath, securing democratic rule' (2011: 628).

Despite these advantages for collective activism, some scholars emphasize the negative side effects of Internet usage. Instead of freeing the masses, the elites in power get to control new technologies, only to oppress the masses further (Nye 2006; Morozov 2011). Apart from allowing governments to spy on citizens and track down dissidents to arrest, the Internet can be used by political leaders or organizations to spread propaganda and gather support (Gunitsky 2015). The latter may be disguised in the form of public grassroots movements, a process known as astroturfing. Furthermore, the Internet replicates already existing social inequalities (Preston 2001: 17), besides creating a gap between those who have access to new technologies and those who do not. The question of online versus offline activism is also subject to debates, with some authors suggesting the passivity of online users in real-life activism (Bennett 2004) and others seeing both forms as complementary. In addition, if interactions are limited solely to the Internet, users are unable to individually identify other users, which may in turn limit the trust necessary for collective activism (Postmes 2007: 172). The existing online activism, the attempts at controlling and penalizing users and resistance to these practices all clearly demonstrate that ICT can equally well have a liberating effect or act as a tool of mass control. MENA governments used a variety of techniques to control the flow of information in and out of the country by filtering Internet content, blocking web pages that challenge the regime, slowing the Internet down,



monitoring the users and using the sites to track opposition activists. With the advent of the uprisings, the governments in Tunisia and later in Egypt attempted to ban Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, etc. Nonetheless, mobile phones provided an alternative to social media, while activists used proxy servers and international hackers restored the access by overcoming the governmental firewalls. The Tunisian government attempted to prevent the protests by jailing a group of bloggers in early January but to no avail. However, in countries where the uprisings failed and social conflicts deeply divided the society, social media were used to track down dissidents. Such was the case of the Bahraini Facebook page 'Together to Unmask the Shia Traitors', which posted pictures and videos of protest participants, asking fellow citizens to identify their names and addresses. Social media thus provided the much-needed information infrastructure for collective activism despite the attempts at governmental control; yet these advantages could prove equally useful to the regime in case of prolonged conflicts.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a qualitative in depth-interviewing methodology. Twelve Tunisian activists who have used social media to support democratic changes in Tunisia since at least 2011 were interviewed between May 2015 and January 2016. The very first five interviews were conducted during the 2015 Global Forum on Modern Direct Democracy in Tunis in May 2015, which is a major international gathering of direct democracy supporters, practitioners and scholars. Subsequently, other activists were contacted and interviewed using the method of snowballing. The interviews targeted activists from the most important NGOs and associations that use social media to promote democracy such as I Watch Tunisia, Al Bawsala, OpenGov.tn, Nawaat and Pirate Party. The researcher was able to interview representatives from all of these groups apart from the last one. In addition, individual bloggers who have a wide online presence and strive to promote democracy were also interviewed. Given the fact that the sample included major figures, among others, managing directors and regional coordinators of these organizations, the sample was considered sufficient for the study. Qualitative case studies cannot be generalized over the whole population, and yet the deep involvement of the interviewees in social media warrants the importance of the findings. In addition, as will be shown in the analysis, interviewees come to similar conclusions in their observations on the processes taking place in Tunisia.

The participants came from a variety of backgrounds and were between 25 and 60 years of age. They were either professional employees or university students at that time. Five of the interviewees were involved in social media long before the revolution due to various, professional or individual reasons; some clearly stated that their aim was to circumvent or to combat governmental censure. The remaining participants became involved in the years 2010–11. The interviews were semi-structured, allowing the interviewees to share additional insights whenever they felt comfortable. The majority of the interviews were conducted in French, and some in English, depending on the preference of the interviewees, and were subsequently transcribed. The purpose of qualitative interviewing is to gain a better and deeper understanding of the interviewee's thoughts, opinions, experience, perspectives and conceptualization about the social phenomena under study (Patton 2002: 341). This method was given preference due to the fact that individual experience could

get the researcher access to personal perceptions, and interpretations of social phenomena, something that can hardly be identified by observation alone and may be diluted by quantitative studies.

#### **4. DATA ANALYSIS: DEBATING THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN DEMOCRATIC PROCESSES IN TUNISIA**

The Tunisian case is particularly useful in gathering new evidence since in the aftermath of the revolution, Tunisian activists embraced the social media and established initiatives such as drafting the constitution collaboratively on PiratePad, denouncing corruption through online and offline activism of I Watch Tunisia, Al Bawsala, OpenGov.tn and that of other NGOs that mushroomed in 2011 (Chomiak 2011: 78), and monitoring the work of the elected politicians through sites such as jomaameter.org (subsequently, essidmetre and sebsimetre) and Marsad.tn.

The analysis of data stemming from interviews provides interesting findings. Almost half of the interviewees were involved in social media long before the revolution due to various, professional or individual reasons; some clearly stated that their aim was to circumvent or to combat governmental censure. The remaining participants became involved in the years 2010–11. The latter stressed that they became involved at that time since ‘Social media was the only credible source of news’, which also allowed them to connect and debate with others. The story of one of the interviewees summarizes well the push for direct engagement:

Shortly before 14 January 2011, like many Tunisians, I began to hear about what was happening in Kasserine on the web site Nawaat.org: police repression, murders of those who organized the social movements. Thanks to using a proxy I started expressing my ideas about what was happening [...], I participated in various discussions on Facebook and blogs and ultimately, I started sending my articles to social media.

The interviewees observed a clear evolution of the use of social media since the deposition of Ben Ali. Initially, during the uprising they served as sources of information, political mobilization and exchange of information. Yet, the participants also highlighted that offline actions of those ‘who went to the streets risking their lives’ were crucial for the uprising and the social media served only as ‘a tool of communication’. After Ben Ali left Tunisia, social media continued to be used to put pressure on the elected representatives; yet some pointed out that social media are now one of the means of doing so among many others. Yet, the interviewees observed that the political processes moved to the Internet: ‘All political ideas were formed on social media. The examples are Kasbah 1 and 2 that brought Ennahdha to power. Another example are the Bardo demonstrations after the killing of Chokri Belaid’. Consequently, social media have become a tool of political campaigning; ‘the apogee of the social media and their influence was during the last parliamentary and presidential elections. The electoral campaign took place on social media and the war between Marzouki and Caid Essebsi was a war on social media’. Indeed, the expression ‘war’ is informative of the political transformation that also brought problems of its own: ‘Social media users used to be united against tyranny, however after the revolution they become divided and sided with different political parties and started to attack each other online’ as stressed by one



participant. Other interviewees asserted that counter-revolutionaries through their propaganda created a climate of disinformation, confusion and violence. Propaganda pages written by hired bloggers aim at discrediting opposing candidates by posting their shameful pictures, often faked for the purpose. Another participant added that political parties bought Facebook pages with several followers, for instance, football, music, etc. to use them for their political gains.

As a result, when asked about the growth or decline of the political use of social media after the revolution, the vast majority of the interviewees saw a sharp difference between the period of the democratic transition and the second parliamentary elections in 2015 marking the passage to democracy, as stated by one participant:<sup>1</sup>

till the last elections people remained active. Each party wanted to assert more supporters and whip more votes. Social media was used in electoral campaigns. But now after the elections and since sustainable political institutions were established people become less concerned.

The political conflict between Nida Tounes-Ennahdha increased political participation online because 'two models of society clashed'. After the elections as the two parties 'got closer [in terms of political ideology]',<sup>2</sup> online participation decreased. Interviewees stressed that after the overthrow of Ben Ali there was a growth of online political activism since the media became free and there was no fear of using it; as a result, they became a 'public space' to discuss citizens' views on politics and other topics, often using fake names. In addition, groups emerged to monitor the activity of the newly elected officials such as Al Bawsala. Yet, with time, people became tired of the political debates as 'you can't sustain the interest of all population'. Another interviewee added that the decrease of the security in the country and what follows, the feeling of discouragement added to this phenomenon of lower online engagement of citizens. Further, another participant explained that the decline in participation is also due to the fact that 'there is much less at stake in terms of unifying political or social projects'.

Despite the negativity that ultimately resurfaced from the interviews, the activists shared a number of online initiatives strengthening democratic practices. One of the interviewees was proud to say:

In I Watch organization and we launched several websites concerning the democratic transition in Tunisia. We observed the legislative and presidential elections in 2014 and for that we launched the site e-observation.org (won the Tunisian best website award 2014) [...].

Another one mentioned the successful action SAYIB EL TROTTOIR that was a collective, national initiative that aimed at denouncing the illegal use of public sidewalks by merchants. The following participant highlighted the achievements of the group OpenGov (created on Facebook in 2011), which promotes transparency and open access to data. Among the most successful were the campaigns sarra7 and 7ell that, respectively, pushed for governmental officials to declare their revenues and forced the parliament to publish verbal proceedings of its commissions. In addition, some interviewees highlighted the fact that in the process of legal changes taking place in Tunisia that aim at modifying laws to become aligned with the Constitution, social media users mediate

1. The researcher follows the minimalist definition of democracy coined by Przeworski that stresses the procedural aspect of democracy as a regime in which those who govern are elected by the population through meaningful elections (2000: 15). Hence, after the second democratic parliamentary elections Tunisia will be considered a country that entered the stage of democratic consolidation, which according to Przeworski occurs 'when under given political and economic conditions a particular system of institutions becomes the only game in town, when no one can imagine acting outside the democratic institutions, when all the losers want to do is to try again within the same institutions under which they have lost' (Przeworski et al. 1996: 26).
2. An evolution of the Ennahda party is indeed visible, among others, in the fact that its leadership announced moving away from the label of 'political Islam' and highlighted the separation of religion and state (Wilson Center 2016).

the process. Such was the case of the Conseil Supérieur de la Magistrature, the independent judicial authority, when social media pressured the parliamentarians to reconsider their position and change their views. Furthermore, another interviewee described the successful campaign led by the youth on Facebook, twitter and YouTube to put pressure on the government to provide Tunisians with the access to international bankcard. The government had to negotiate under pressure from the society and fulfil the demands of the citizens. Another interviewee also stressed the importance of OpenGov and OpenData for the success of the democratic transition. Their importance lies in the fact that Tunisians should participate in decision-making processes but for that to happen, they should have access to the necessary information. The principle on which both platforms are based is to ensure that inclusive debate takes place and no citizen is excluded from the process. Similarly, another interviewee shared a successful initiative 'Mahdia-Smart city', thanks to which civil society representatives signed an agreement to create a participative budget that the community decides on.

Accessibility to social media may, however, be an impediment in the democratization process. Half of the participants of the study highlighted the unequal distribution of social media users who remains concentrated in the cities. According to the interviewees, in terms of Internet use, the electronic divide between the city and the countryside is a major one in Tunisia. Otherwise, all age groups (starting from youth till 55 years of age) and genders are well represented online overall. The necessary improvements would thus be initially better accessibility to Internet, although one participant stressed that in villages 'there are other problems: lack of electricity, gas, water and work [...] Internet and social media are far away from being their preoccupations'. Another interviewee stressed the fact that rural youth was at the forefront of the revolution. As a result, their expectations and their current disappointment with the state of affairs in Tunisia were the highest. Full inclusion of the inhabitants of the rural zones and their participation in social media in strengthening democratic values is a must.

In order to improve the participation of Tunisians online to strengthen the democratic processes, participants recommended more debates and discussions with people of different mindsets and interests. So far, the participants had seen social media often grouping likeminded people who, when confronted with other ways of thinking, indulged in aggressive behaviours rather than discussions. This was especially visible during the presidential elections, when social media inflamed the divisions and Tunisia 'was at the brink of implosion'. Constructive dialogues and actions seemed to be shared among participants as a major task ahead of Tunisians: 'I believe it is mainly through participating into groups of common interest like the OpenGovTn Group, which lead Tunisia to be in the OGP program and also helped in spreading awareness about transparency'. Also of high importance were 'expressing opinions online, following high officials' activities and ministries Facebook pages, circulating the news, whistle blowing online (and becoming the source of news) to eradicate corruption'. The latter was an especially important task in light of the economic development of the country:

holding politicians accountable to reinforce the economy because democracy can only be valid with a strong economy [...] in order to do

that me and my friends in I Watch launched web meters to observe the government activities and to receive corruption complains from citizens all over the country.

In addition, some participants mentioned that online activism should be followed by offline activism, especially engaging with local and national governments.

## 5. DISCUSSION: DEMOCRATIZING EFFECTS OF THE INTERNET?

In light of the results of the study, it is clear that Tunisian social media activists do consider Internet as an important tool in democratization of Tunisia's politics and in instilling democratic values in the society. Current research also suggests that Internet can play an important role in accelerating and strengthening the democratic potential of a society (Hacker and Dijk 2000: 1; Howard 2011: 198; Dahlberg 2001; Graham 2009). Tunisia seems to be a perfect ground to reap the beneficial role of Internet as studies stress that such a phenomenon is contingent upon a moderate to high level of Internet penetration in a given country and at least a partially democratic government, the conditions that Tunisia meets. Indeed, a recent research found that the Internet may help democracy flourish if it has already started to grow (Nisbet et al. 2012). The potential for the Internet to, among others, lead to public opinion formation that can hold decision-makers accountable has already shown important achievements in the Tunisian context as shown in the interviews. Yet, based on an extensive research in Arab countries, Howard (2011) was clear that social media are limited to fostering incremental change rather than radical transformations. The issue boils down to the users of social media: 'What ICTs can accomplish for any particular political system will have very much to do with what members of particular communities, individually and collectively, determine to do with such technologies in particular contexts' (Shane 2004: xii). Researchers put forward an array of online practices that may improve democracy that have been already used in Tunisia as mentioned in the above interviews such as blogging, collaborative document creation, community-based (and community-creating) discussion forums with collaborative filtering, and open government and community filtering initiatives (Froomkin 2004).

Yet, it is also clear that democracy presupposes a public sphere of rational communication and is based on deliberatively constituted consensus, 'rather than upon the aggregation of independent instrumental interests' (Dahlberg 2011: 860; see also Dryzek 2002). For this to happen, the existence of a civic, participatory culture is necessary (Almond and Verba 1963). The impediments to its emergence include lack of civic education, which contributes towards negative aspects mentioned by the interviewees such as aggression instead of tolerance and seeking consensus. In addition, citizen apathy towards the democratic processes that the interviewees mentioned is on the rise due to fatigue but potentially also due to political parties appropriating the virtual space for their own use and benefit and largely replicating online the power structures of the real world (Margolis and Resnick 2000: 111) and the disconnection between citizens and their representatives (Hale et al. 1999). These factors led two of the interviewees to pull out of social media networks during the presidential elections. Indeed, the consolidation of democracy resides not only in the citizens having access to information that various initiatives

3. Western countries issued warnings to their citizens not to travel to Tunisia after the attacks.

discussed previously showed but above all, participation in decision-making processes (Lourenco and Costa 2006). It comes as no surprise that various initiatives described above aim at bridging that gap through inciting citizens to directly participate in direct decision-making.

It is also very significant to bear in mind that social media may act as a double-edged sword and while initially pushing a given country towards a democratic transition, they may undermine its consolidation at a later stage. Lipset (1960) stressed that apart from economic development, the effectiveness and legitimacy of the democratic system were key to its survival. Legitimacy according to Lipset is defined as the capacity of a system to engender and maintain public confidence in its efficacy. Lipset specifically pointed out the issues historically dividing the society as a factor for the extent to which a political system is considered legitimate. In case such issues are not resolved a crisis of legitimacy may unfold. Past studies confirm that in case of conflict social media strengthen social divisions (Melvin and Umaraliev 2011: 22). The gap between main cities and the countryside, but also greater Tunis area and the south of the country were mentioned by the interviewees as potential points of future discontent. The exclusion of population in the less developed parts of Tunisia may lead to further waves of disenchantment threatening the survival of the democratic system. Tunisia currently faces major terrorist challenges, with many of its citizens enrolled as ISIS fighters abroad and potentially many ISIS sympathizers in the country. Lack of economic opportunities, poor leadership and corruption and identity search are potent factors that draw ISIS recruits, a burning problem that needs to be tackled by the authorities. Indeed, what is also clear is that the increase in terrorist threats in Tunisia, with three bold attacks carried out in 2015 by ISIS affiliates in main tourist areas (Bardo Museum and a hotel resort in Sousse) and in the centre of Tunis targeting the presidential guards, has already put into question the effectiveness of the government to secure stability in the country in the eyes of many Tunisians and international public opinion.<sup>3</sup> The perceived weak police and security apparatus prevention and response to terrorist threat may also undermine the legitimacy of the government as it has occurred in other countries. The failure of legitimacy in this context is defined as 'the inability to promote the notion that the government, through its security apparatus, can act on behalf of citizens' (Crank et al. 2011: 68). In addition, the security measures taken after the attack in November 2015 with the declaration of curfew and a state of emergency may be perceived as limiting the ability of the civil society to act, especially if the situation is prolonged.

The democratic consolidation in Tunisia requires further efforts on the part of the citizens and the government. Drawing from their experiences, the participants of the study are well aware of the factors that support democratic practices and those that may undermine them. Yet, the vast majority of the interviewees continue using the social media to promote democratic initiatives in order to counter the negative social phenomena heightened by the Internet, which they perceive. The participation in the revolutionary changes in Tunisia has filled them with a sense of political empowerment that supports their continued activism through the feelings of ownership of the democratic processes. It remains, however, unclear how many Tunisians share the same feeling, testified by the fact that two of the interviewees became discouraged in recent months. The achievements of the Tunisian civil society are, however, noteworthy. NGOs have been able to carry out multiple initiatives despite the fact that at their beginnings many consisted of 'single individuals or small

groups of people working out of their homes' (Bush 2015: 194), and lacked expertise and professionalism. It comes as no surprise that the optimism remains unabated. In the last interview comments one participant noted: 'keep watching. It is just starting'.

The theories of communication and democracy highlight the requirements regarding communication in all types of democracies, namely, that citizens are well informed; citizens are interested in politics; citizens have equal rights to speak and participate in public decisions; and all decisions are submitted to public discussion (Splichal 1993: 5). Media in this regard are believed to play an important role in enhancing the democratic ideals. Indeed, from the point of view of communication, Coleman and Blumler (2015: 112) define democracy in terms of 'the ideal of collective self-determination' that is conducting public discourse in order to solve the problems of the community. They elaborate further the five purposes of the civic communication as follows: (1) to feed citizens' needs for surveillance of those parts of the political environment that matter to them such as family, political groups, etc.; (2) to uphold the norm of meaningful choice, i.e. clarification of what is substantively at stake in how an important issue might be tackled or a problem addressed over issues that determine how the community lives; (3) to provide an inclusive opportunity for all alternative views and opinions to be heard; (4) to foster the accountability of those in power; and (5). to encourage exchange and dialogue between citizens and ultimate decision-takers through which citizens could influence the latter. Although these five purposes are presented as ideals, the case of Tunisia demonstrates that the initiatives deployed by the social media activists uphold these important values, namely, by playing a watchdog function, increasing the access to information for all citizens, providing the option of meaningful choices of the decisions to be made in the society, encouraging dialogue among citizens and their daily engagement in the political processes.

On another note, it is important to highlight the limitations of this study stemming from the methodology adopted. The qualitative interviews cannot be generalized over the whole Tunisian population. In addition, the choice of interviewees, i.e., activists deeply engaged in the use of social media to encourage democratic initiatives may lead to biases in their replies. The activists may be, among others, overstating the role or the extent of the use of the social media in political processes in Tunisia. Their sentiments may not be shared by the general public, especially those living in rural areas, who find themselves cut off from the online networks. The numbers of Facebook followers of the organizations that the activists are part of offer some indication of their penetration in the Tunisian society of 11.4 million, although the measure is not fully accurate as Tunisians and foreigners may be part of their online followership. Facebook site of I Watch Tunisia has approximately 202,000 followers; Al Bawsala has almost 230,000 subscribers; and Nawaat reaches more than 850,000 people, while OpenGov.tn has gathered almost 12,000 followers. As a result, the data analysed offer the activists' perceptions of the impact of social media rather than the actual outcomes that are difficult to measure. Yet, their testimonies provide an in-depth look into how online activists' strategies shifted from using social media as a tool of revolution to a tool encouraging democratic attitudes and practices. The extent of their work is impressive in light of the novelty of the tools, on the one hand and the novelty of democratic practices and attitudes on the other.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The data analysis demonstrates that while initially social media were used as a tool of social mobilization and activism against a political regime, with time, Tunisian activists began to use them as a medium supporting democratic consolidation. The data analysis hints that social media have a democratizing effect; yet, these outcomes may be limited due to various impediments stemming, among others, from the limited access to such media and from the fatigue of the public and the deterioration of the public discourse online. Fraser (1987: 123) noted that social media have a democratizing effect when 'subaltern counter cultures' can access 'parallel discursive arenas' and engage in circulating discourses oppositional to the regimes. The growing number of competing publics encourages the quality of democratic discourse. At the time of a democratic consolidation, it seems, however, that social media may also become a tool of social polarization and may hamper the promotion of democratic attitudes if the quality of democratic discourse diminishes.

In addition, the analysis revealed that after the revolution, the use of social media has normalized and political parties and candidates use them in their political campaigns as they do elsewhere in modern democracies; yet, it is also important to stress the extent of the work of NGOs and activists online in order to strengthen the Tunisian nascent democracy. Their continued engagement in developing various initiatives around the country is a noteworthy achievement towards building a society with democratic attitudes and practices. It is clear that the use of social media and their outcomes depend on who uses them and for what purpose; their future efficacy in democratization thus lies with the Tunisian people. Future studies are needed in order to re-assess the extent and the effectiveness of social media in Tunisia in the years to come.

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