Overcoming the Digital Divide: The Internet and Political Mobilization in Egypt and Tunisia

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Abstract:

The potential of the Internet as a political tool intrigues scientists and politicians alike. Particularly in the Middle East, the most frequent narrative is that the mere availability of alternative sources of information will empower political actors that are marginalized by the traditional media controlled by authoritarian regimes. Indeed, the protest movements in authoritarian countries interact creatively with this new medium to get their message across in an environment marked by censorship and repression. Comparing the patterns of Internet use for political mobilization in Egypt and in Tunisia, this article shows how the Internet as a relative free space can be a vital factor in opening windows and expanding the realm of what can be said in public. However, the Internet as such appears not to be sufficient to radically transform the society as a whole. Instead, the case of Egypt shows how traditional media such as the press can serve as a bridge to the general public sphere, helping to operate results of discussions online and to transform the newly acquired space of discussion into actual power on the street.

The use of Internet tools for political protest in the summer of 2009 in Iran, the so-called "Twitter revolution," appears to have conceded a point to Internet enthusiasts, who praise the Internet as a space of unlimited freedom and a venue for the organisation of political actions. Since then, uncensored access to the Internet has been promoted as a means to guarantee free access to information and freedom of expression by American politicians such as Hillary Rodham Clinton. Comparing current censorship of the Internet with the oppression of dissent in dictatorships in the Eastern Bloc, she evoked how non-violent political speech online mirrors the distribution of small pamphlets, which according to her "helped pierce the concrete and concertina wire of the

Iron Curtain." (Rodham Clinton 2010) Analyses of the impact of the Internet in the Middle East have taken a similar line. In the context of rapid adoption of digital communication technologies by developing countries, scholars have voiced hopes that the digital transformation will result in fissures in the foundations of authoritarian rule. These expectations were moderated over time due to the realisation that the Internet does not solely represent opportunities for new discussions in cyberspace, thereby destabilising traditional state power, but quite on the contrary can also enhance state power, notably through the tight control of the Internet by the filtering of undesired content.

In a first study breaking with the mantra of Internet enthusiasts, Shanthi Kalathil and Taylor C. Boas deplore that the impact of the Internet on authoritarian rule has often been treated in an anecdotal and impressionistic fashion, giving in to the conventional wisdom that the Internet is an agent of change without further in-depth investigation (Kalathil and Boas 2003). The comparative method is in their opinion best suited to avoid the danger of conventional wisdom and instead acquire a systematic vision of the phenomenon by putting it into the concrete political context of the country in question. Responding to this call, this article will address the political potential of the Internet in two Arab countries, Egypt and Tunisia, in a systematic examination of evidence for the political impact of political activists' use of the Internet in a most similar case study design. The two selected cases are both considered 'enemies of the Internet' by Reporters without Borders, albeit for different reasons: Tunisia heavily censors the Internet and has sentenced to jail numerous "cyberactivists," while Egypt solely resorts to the latter form of repression.(Reporters without borders 2010). Most importantly, although both countries are often presented as models of political liberalisation, Egypt and Tunisia both feature rigid political regimes in a context of relative resource poverty and rising unemployment rates among the educated youth. Both countries' Presidents, Hosni Mubarak and the former Zine El Abidine Ben Ali have been in charge since 1981 and 1987 respectively, and both regimes attempt to give an appearance of democratic processes while actual

power remains in the hands of few. Given these authoritarian structures, to what extent is the accessibility of the Internet a sufficient condition to generate political activism in the context of political authoritarianism?

In theory, if the Internet is indeed an agent of democratisation as it is claimed by Internet enthusiasts and several Western politicians, a higher Internet connectivity should entail a higher potential for online dissent. Egypt and Tunisia have invested heavily in Internet infrastructure in the hope of attracting foreign investments. The number of Internet users has grown steadily in both countries. Egypt features roughly 21 percent of its population with Internet access, while Tunisia even features 33 percent of its population online. Despite Tunisia's advance in terms of connectivity, it is Egypt that witnessed a first wave of protests organised over the Internet. While online censorship in Tunisia is part of the answer to the question, it is not a sufficient explanation because it can be easily circumvented by simple technical manipulation.

The framework of this study

This study is based on semi-directive interviews with Egyptian and Tunisian bloggers and *Facebook* activists living in their respective countries or in Europe, as well as on online observations. In a first theoretical part, the article will examine the technical features of the Internet that have contributed to a social imaginary of the Internet as an inherently free space, and the Internet's potential for reinserting the lost social aspect into the Habermascian public sphere, and its relation to the traditional media. For this, a recent article by Carola Richter applying Dieter Rucht's linkage of theories of the public sphere with social movement theory to the case of Egypt has induced me to verify her argument in comparing the Egyptian case with Tunisia (Richter 2010). The Internet has witnessed the advent of blogging, which opened up a novel space of discussion and introduced new political actors. More recently, popular interactive Internet applications such as *Facebook* and Twitter are being combined to give way to actual political mobilisations.

The Internet as Playground of the "Netizens"

Forgotten are the days when one could assume that the use of the Internet was nothing more than a temporary fashion, limited to Western young men addicted to novel technologies. In the last decade, we have assisted the democratisation of this communication tool, and for many people in the West the Internet has become an integral part of everyday life. The rise of this new technology and its penetration into almost all spheres of life - together with its clear emphasis on 'textual' representations - result in the fact that the Internet has become the emblem of postmodern society. As a means of communication, the Internet is particular insofar as the connections between various Web resources are not ordered in any hierarchical manner. It is *a priori* technology open to anyone wishing to add new content to it, and this hypothetical equality of all Internet users - as reflected in the construction and the design of the Internet and its endpoints - is an important aspect in explaining why the optimism concerning the transformative power of the Internet is more than a vision of Western politicians, but rather is firmly rooted in the libertarian worldview of the developers and early users of the Internet. (Tuomi 2002) Early adopters like John Perry Barlow saw it as a revolutionary development that does not require the support of state institutions: "the global social space we are building to be naturally independent of the tyrannies [governments] seek to impose us." (Barlow 1996) Its technical features also induced the Internet pioneer John Gilmore to his oft-quoted statement, that "the Net interprets censorship as damage and routes around it." (Elmer-Dewitt 1993) The Internet was presumed to be inherently flexible and amendable, ready to accommodate new forms of social interaction.

The inherent flexibility of the early, relatively anarchic Internet has created a social imaginary of the web that stresses its "control-frustrating" features, although in reality the Internet nowadays largely accommodates government and corporate control (Boas 2006:362). This social imaginary has been integrated into the dialogue of a substantial part of current Internet users, especially by those whose spread information that is usually hard to

come by, for example in authoritarian countries. Web applications such as blogs are argued to remedy at least a few dilemmas of current mass media all over the world, notably the entrustment of the agenda-setting to media professionals. Setting up a blog neither requires much seed capital nor particular managerial skills. In this sense, blogs and webzines resemble other non-mass media such as alternative, grassroots or community media whose production relies on citizen participation. It is even more so in this case because in theory everybody can be a publisher or manage one's own TV station (Downey and Fenton 2003:185). This feature approaches the Internet in terms of the Habermascian public sphere, according to which it is "a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed. Access is guaranteed to all citizens" (Habermas 2001:102).

While the question of universal access to the Internet remains problematic in practice, it can be argued that the Internet as an inherently interactive medium can reinsert the lost social aspect into Habermas' public sphere, meaning that individuals engage in direct, critical dialogue (Norris 2001). This claim rests on the assumption that the Internet's audience is radically different than that of the mass media, that Internet users are the rational, debate-loving citizens characteristic of the public sphere. However, studies have pointed to shortcomings of the Internet, mainly in terms of universal access and unrestricted discussions, because access tends to be dependent on the economic situation, education and ethnicity (Cheeseman Day et al. 2005). In addition, the Internet is far from radically changing the media consumption habits of its users because Internet publishers often post mass-media content (Cavanagh 2007:62). Furthermore, Internet enthusiasts struggle with the fact that the Internet still has a strong elitarian bias, especially in developing countries.

While the Internet has become increasingly widespread in the Western world, ten years ago it used to be characterised by a "strong bias toward affluent males with a high degree of cultural capital," and therefore this new public space was considered to be highly elitist (Dahlgren 2001:47). In its exclusive character, the early Internet is actually close

to the Habermasian prototype of the bourgeois public sphere. However, while limitations for participation in Habermas' model are supposedly temporary, conceptions of online life as an "online citizenry" is not supposed to be universal and is synonymous to an intellectual vanguard (Katz 1997). This category of Internet users is politically aware and actively involved in online communities using the Internet's interactive and participative tools. Since the Internet access in developing countries is even more restricted to an elite than in Western countries, the conception of the netizen as an avant-garde might be even more accurate. However, while Katz points to values such as libertarian ideals, individuality, materialism, tolerance, anti-authoritarianism and a belief in rational debate, nowadays groups with anti-liberal positions such as radical Islamists know very well how to use the Internet for their purposes. For example, the Muslim Brothers have recently started to use 'wikis' to document their own history on the Web[1] (Morozov 2010). If the once praised "new middle class" in authoritarian Arab countries clings to their political positions, the massification of education in the contemporary Muslim world and elsewhere has led to the emergence of new actors and the Internet provides them with a platform to express their beliefs outside of established authority structures (Anderson 2003:47; Eickelman 1992).

Contentious Politics and the Media

Developing countries have witnessed a massive adoption of Internet use while regimes openly aim to discard non-conforming actors from the 'official' public sphere. Fast-growing social network sites like *Facebook* have attracted the attention of media scholars because of their ability to facilitate the formation of *ad hoc* interest groups, whose fellowship can rapidly expand when their concerns are well framed. Therefore, online social networks are not only useful for existing organisations as an instrument to reach an audience, but these websites develop a proper dynamic. Their virtual outreach is often much greater than that of more institutionalised movements. The dynamism of the Internet cannot be ignored by authoritarian regimes, but sometimes leads to erratic reactions. For example, after having called for a boycott of Twitter, the Venezuelan

President Hugo Chavez has now himself acquired a Twitter account "in order to fight the battle in this medium" (Carroll 2010). However, if the Internet offers new voices a rather elitist space of discussion, the question remains how results of discussions online can influence the whole society and transform the newly acquired space of discussion into actual power on the street. To solve this puzzle, the German sociologist Dieter Rucht points to the importance of the reflection of the struggle between the regime and a social movement in the traditional media in an attempt to link theories of the public sphere with social movement theory (Rucht 1994). Social movement theory stresses that the study of social movements has to go beyond the assumption that social movements occur when masses emotionally react to situations outside their control. On the contrary, social movements are rarely spontaneous but rely on careful organisation and resource mobilisation. In order to attract an increasing number of supporters, social movements develop claims that "resonate" with a larger audience. In addition, certain political contexts provide windows of opportunity, favouring potential social movement activity (Wiktorowicz 2004).

Rucht adds to these observations that the reflection of a struggle of a social movement in the media is crucial its success. Authoritarian regimes depend on traditional media such as newspapers to confer on them a minimum of public legitimacy, albeit to a lesser degree than democracies. Even though most traditional media are tightly controlled in authoritarian regimes and therefore often lack credibility in the population, their reaction to confrontations between a regime and a social movement can be seen as an indicator. The battle for public opinion is the "life-blood" of social movements to mobilise followers and to acquire supporters. In a sense "a movement that is not reported does not take place" (Downing 1996:22; Raschke 1985:343). While the Internet can be a first communication strategy to reach usually inaccessible audiences because of restrictions to the freedom of assembly in many authoritarian countries, resonance in the traditional media outlets is necessary to reach a larger portion of the society. In democratic societies, an actor's presence and activities online can attract the media's attention and coverage. In authoritarian countries, a

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liberalisation of the media sector can provide an opportunity structure for new actors using the Internet to form coalitions and attract attention.

The following analysis examines the outcomes of distinct approaches of the state towards the press in Egypt and in Tunisia, which have resulted in different opportunity structures. Both countries have witnessed a massive increase in Internet use over the last years and the development of vivid 'blogospheres' defending their right to freedom of speech and increasingly contesting the authoritarian regimes in their countries. Up to the moment of the writing of this article in July 2010, however, only Egypt had witnessed the translation of this new public sphere in actual protests in the Egyptian streets, while the public sphere remained sealed in Tunisia despite efforts to pierce the wall of silence that dominated its public sphere. In January 2011, a protest movement forced Tunisian president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali out of office, and Egyptians have taken to the streets in millions to end the rule of Hosni Mubarak. Internet tools such as Facebook and Twitter have played a role in the protest, but their significance in supporting the movements remains to be assessed. This article might elucidate certain trends in Internet activism visible in Tunisia and Egypt before the respective regimes fell. For the sake of conciseness, the article will first examine the benefits of blogging in restricted public spheres, and recent attempts of Internet activists to tap into existing social networks using online tools such as *Facebook*.

The Internet as a Tool for Resistance to Oppressive Regimes

The advent of the Internet in semi-authoritarian countries like Egypt and Tunisia has triggered different developments. Both countries have invested heavily in Internet infrastructure and emphasised the importance of information and communication technologies for their economic development. In countries like Egypt and Tunisia, the cost of accessing the net have been reduced considerably so that at least the economic argument does not effectively limit Internet use to a tiny minority anymore. However, although Tunisia is better connected to the Internet than Egypt by official numbers (33 percent versus 21 percent in Egypt), it is the latter that has

witnessed an increased prominence of bloggers beyond the blogosphere and the first anti-Mubarak demonstrations ever.
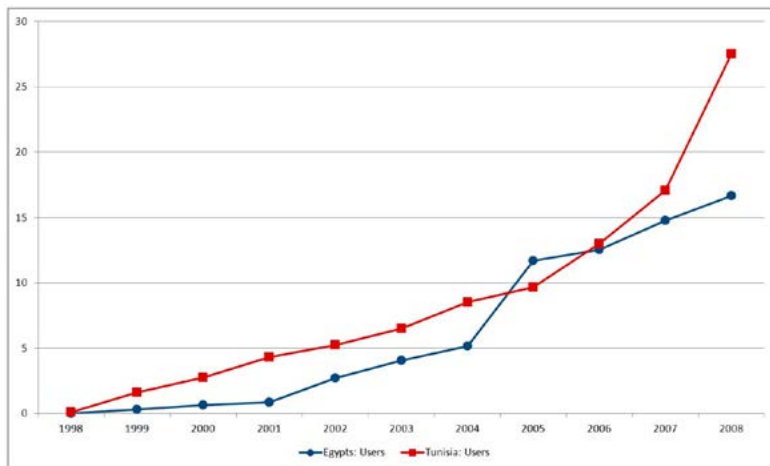

Fig. 1. Development of the number of Internet users per 100 inhabitants. Since 2007, Tunisia (red) is largely ahead of Egypt. (Data: ITU)

This apparent paradox is directly linked to the space the respective governments have allotted alternative voices in the general public sphere. While Egypt has permitted limited liberalisation these last years, which has led to a certain freedom of expression, the Tunisian regime continued to tighten its grip on its society.

Blogging - Enlarging the space for political debate

Egypt's blogosphere is one of the best documented in the Middle East, and activist blogging has had an impact on Egyptian politics, albeit on a small scale. Blogs in Egypt have permitted ordinary citizens not necessarily affiliated with a political party to voice their opinion and to bring issues usually ignored by traditional media due to actual state censorship or journalists' self-censorship to the attention of a wider public. To "spread the word" is the often cited intention which has turned into a veritable slogan. Egypt's best known blogger, Wael Abbas, considered one of the

Most Influential People in the year 2006 by the BBC, has published videos revealing abuse of people in official custody on his blog at *Misr Digital* (Egyptian Awareness) (Abbas, n.d.). Abbas also covered demonstrations calling for change in Egypt, sit-ins and workers strikes, and published videos exposing election fraud and police violence against peaceful demonstrators or pro Mubarak demonstrators. Noha Atef's blog Torture in Egypt (*Al-Tatheeb fi Masr*) is another example of a website aiming at documenting and spreading awareness about human rights abuses in Egypt. Abbas and Atef are examples of bloggers that have challenged traditional journalism through their coverage of otherwise unpublicised events, but the Internet has also itself become the venue for a new form of protest and activism. At the same time, this new space is far from being conflict free. Both in Egypt and Tunisia, different "generations" of bloggers have opposed each other, and occasional gross insults online show how the Internet makes some people lose their inhibitions, which is contrary to Habermas' vision of rational discourse. While the blogosphere cannot live up to Habermascian ideals of rational-critical discourse, the main achievement of political bloggers is to have taken the lead in a new engagement with politics by Arab citizens (Lynch 2007).

Egypt - The Virtual Coffeehouse Takes to the Street

The advent of blogging in Egypt is tied up with the *Kefaya* movement (Egyptian Arabic for "enough"), which gained momentum in 2005 as the first social movement in Egypt that actively used the Internet to organise its events. It set a landmark in organising the first anti-Mubarak demonstrations ever expressing the protesters' anger, featuring the tearing down and the burning of Mubarak posters. This natural symbiosis between Egypt's early core bloggers with the movement has given new popular attention to the Egyptian blogosphere, and bloggers have used their skills to help organise campaigns independently from classical Egyptian opposition politics. Technology-savvy bloggers have also been central in extending the ability of existing political movements to organise, thereby contributing to the formation of an all-encompassing youth movement united by the wish to prevent President Hosni Mubarak from cementing

his rule and installing his son as his successor, paralleling similar umbrellas of diverse political trends linked to Ukraine's Orange Revolution and Poland's Solidarity movement.

Bloggers have also driven internal debate within established political organisations like the Muslim Brotherhood by giving the youth a prominent uncensored platform and thereby upending traditional age hierarchies. Muslim Brotherhood bloggers developed a sub-sphere of the Egyptian blogosphere, but they quickly became activists under the Kefaya movement. In fact, bloggers invest considerable time into their activity and are therefore committed to their chosen field. Political bloggers therefore tend to also be activists and more politically influential than the average citizen, they are opinion-leaders in the Lazarsfeldian sense, which means that they are active media users who interpret the meaning of media content for lower-end media users (Katz and Lazarsfeld 2006:316). These opinion-leaders are long-term activists; Wael Abbas for example hosted an email listserv to spread political information before starting to blog (Isherwood 2008:4). It seems that the Egyptian government tolerates political blogging as a way to let off steam. However, the regime intervenes when certain red lines (religion, the army) are crossed, or when online protest is transformed into protests on the streets. In Egypt, in addition to online protest itself, traditional media such as newspapers have played an important role in alerting the whole population to the youth's actions.

As Carola Richter points out, the Egyptian phenomenon of blogging has grown in importance in conjunction with a timid liberalisation of the printed press and has become known outside the limited space of the Egyptian blogosphere (Richter 2010). There has also been a significant overlap of journalists and bloggers. Some journalists use blogs to write about issues they cannot easily write about in the papers or personal issues, and therefore are themselves an integral part of the blogosphere. Through the publication of firsthand accounts of harassment and torture, bloggers like Malek Mostafa, Wael Abbas and Noha Atef have contributed to an augmented visibility of sensitive topics. Thereby, bloggers challenge the official narrative presented by Egypt's state-run media. On the other hand, communications

technologies have allowed journalists to work in parallel with bloggers and to benefit from the direct contact to activists. The liberalisation of the press in the early 2000s has encouraged the development of the so-called independent media in Egypt. Since 2004 over a dozen independent newspapers have been granted local licenses, but the new broadsheets cannot challenge the traditional governmental-owned newspapers in terms of distribution, since *Al-Ahram*, for example, circulates up to one million copies a day, while the entire independent press together prints less than 200,000 copies (McGrath 2010). While this increased diversity of the Egyptian media landscape has led to more investigative journalism on the whole, covering certain stories remains difficult, since editors fear defamation charges. Therefore, it is not uncommon for journalists to slip information and pictures to bloggers when their own newspaper refuses to publish it because it crosses one of the known "red lines", specifically religion, sex, or the army. There have been co-operations and flows of information enabling bloggers to publicise stories newspapers would self-censor, and some blogs such as Wael Abbas' *Misr Digital* have become must-reads for bloggers and journalists alike (Radsch 2008). In conjunction with the Kefaya movement, bloggers have been further empowered through access to international human rights organisations and international media outlets. In international human rights organisations like Global Voices, bloggers from all over the world associate and form a community. Due to this active networking and the shared Arabic language, the relative success story of Egypt has been transported to other countries in the region. The Tunisian *Yezzi Fock Ben Ali!* campaign (Enough is enough, Ben Ali!) launched on the occasion of World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) hosted by the Government of Tunisia in November 2005, is a clear example of internationally aware Tunisian bloggers using a similar concept.

Tunisia - An Online Community Thwarted by a Repressive Government and a Frightened Society

While Internet activists in Egypt can count on sensationalist national non-governmental media to report their activities, blogging in Tunisia lacks the bridge from an elitist medium to the general public sphere and their impact

remains limited. The Internet is highly censored and traditional media are brought in line with the government. The fight against censorship online and in the real world is the main occupation of Tunisian political bloggers, since they suffer from the fact that Tunisian readers can only access their websites through the use of proxies. Since censorship can be circumvented with relative ease, it certainly constitutes a nuisance and aims at discouraging bloggers, but it cannot disrupt the flow of information completely. Although online discussions and social websites are very popular in Tunisia, national politics are rarely discussed on the popular websites, due to the fact that legal liability for what is consulted and published online is spread over multiple levels, including the national telecommunication agency ATI, Tunisian Internet Service Providers, managers of Internet cafés, administrators of forums and bloggers. As such, charters of Tunisian forums usually stipulate that discussing national politics is banned and bloggers choose to delete "sensitive" commentaries posted by a fellow blogger on their blogs.

Furthermore, bloggers struggle with the fact that they cannot communicate their concerns to a wider audience because the general public sphere is locked. The governmental media deny opposition parties and independent non-governmental organisations coverage and ignore cyberactivism at best, if they do not condemn these initiatives as sponsored by foreign governments. As a consequence, the difficult situation and the sheer impossibility to set up truly independent media have forced established journalists to adopt the cyberspace as a place of refuge. The most prominent example for this development is *Radio Kalima*, led by Human rights activist Sihem Bensedrine, but also the newly founded online magazine *Kapitalis* of former correspondent of *Jeune Afrique* and editor in chief of *L'Expression*, Ridha Kéfi, a news portal specialised in, but not limited to economics, promising to present "the news differently" (Mekki 2010). Since dismissal from *L'Expression* in 2008, Ridha Kéfi has continued to write for magazines such as *New African*, *African Business* and *African Banker*, and will start to write for *La Revue* recently launched by the founder of *Jeune Afrique*, Béchir Ben Yahmed. All these publications are published in Paris. As such, he is an example for high quality journalists who cannot properly exercise their profession in Tunisia and therefore resort to freer spaces such as foreign publications and the Internet, since at least there

is no necessity to acquire a legal visa to launch a magazine. However, the retreat of independent journalists to the Internet indicates that they cannot serve as a bridge between the elitist space of the Internet and the general public sphere.

The growing migration of critical voices to the Internet in Tunisia is problematic insofar as it becomes increasingly difficult to assess their impact. For example, information websites countering the rampant misinformation through governmental media are prominent in the Tunisian web. *Tunisnews*, a former mailing list and now a website that re-publishes Internet news, articles, analysis and information that are deemed relevant to the public in Tunisia by a team of volunteers since late 1999, admit themselves on their website that they "have no clear idea about the scope of [their] audience" (Tunisnews – FAQ 2010). It is difficult to measure to what extent material published on this listserv is actually printed out and spread inside the country. Given the fact that the regime encourages an atmosphere of fear and favours quietism, it is doubtful that communiqués published through *Tunisnews* reach beyond an already "converted" intellectual elite. Furthermore, since the team of *Tunisnews* consists of many exiled Islamists, some accuse them of an ideological bias. The problem of blogs in general is that an average Internet user rarely stumbles upon them while browsing through the net and this is amplified in Tunisia through censorship by the state. Therefore we can assume that many Tunisians are not aware of critical blogs, while *Tunisnews* has at least built up a web presence for 10 years. Contrary to the situation in Egypt, where a freshly liberalised media serve as an amplifier of revelations launched by the blogosphere, a public discussion of Tunisian government policies does not take place, whatever domain they touch, and given that Tunisian censorship is tacit, it is nearly impossible to discuss it even in the most liberal Tunisian mass media outlets like *Réalités*.

The Internet as Refuge for Political Dissent

Whereas some independent local Egyptian newspapers mention the alarming videos of torture and mistreatment of ordinary citizens at police stations, similar stories in Tunisia remain untold. In a statement issued in

December 2009, the National Committee for the Defence of Freedom of Expression and the Press in Tunisia proclaimed that the measures implemented by the authorities had established "unilateral, stagnant and backward media," who acted as a "tool of totalitarian propaganda" (Arfaoui 2009). Occasionally the Tunisian government sets examples to show that pursuing investigative journalism is hazardous[2] (Hunt 2009). In fact, the Tunisian government has succeeded in pushing liberal Tunisian journalists to migrate to the Internet. The most prominent example for this development is *Radio Kalima*, led by Human rights activist Sihem Bensedrine. *Kalima* was originally intended to be an independent newspaper, but Bensedrine was unable to obtain the official permission to publish *Kalima* in Tunisia. It was therefore established as an independent Internet-based news site, but later expanded to broadcast via satellite to reach those without computers. Moreover, Ben Ali has recently indicated that his government seeks to introduce legislation regulating online journalism. While some applaud this initiative because it will enable online journalists to acquire an official accreditation and to be represented in the Tunisian Journalist Union, others fear that the state will use this tool to bring online journalism better under control. In a sense, both regimes' attitude toward Internet sites is similar to their stance towards traditional media. Egypt rarely shuts down newspapers and it rarely exercises prior censorship. Instead it uses subtle ways to punish dissent, such as the harassment of families of dissidents, the arrest of targeted journalists, and smear campaigns co-ordinated by the government press. Tunisia also practices these subtle repressions, but it does not allow the mere voicing of dissent in the public sphere, be it in newspapers or online.

Given this very different initial situation, blogging has had a very different effect in Egypt and Tunisia. While in both cases it allowed new, often young, voices to be heard, its impact was by far more limited in Tunisia since the sheer possibility of occasional visitors is reduced by the Tunisian approach to Internet blockage. The advent of social network sites promised to remedy the poor reach of blogs because social networks attract a growing number of Egyptians and Tunisians due to the network effect. The presence of over 12 percent of the Tunisian population on *Facebook* promised to be

a resource which activists want to tap, since the Egyptian experience had already shown that organising protest over *Facebook* can be highly effective. A *Facebook* group calling for a general strike in solidarity with the workers in Mahalla had rapidly accumulated more than 70,000 members in a span of two weeks at a time when there are only 800,000 active *Facebook* users in Egypt, and "the eerie emptiness of the normally teeming streets of Cairo" was newsworthy and therefore widely publicised (Slackman 2008). The Egyptian regime reacted by arresting key activists like George Ishak, and Esraa Abdel Fattah, the 27-year old who originally started the *Facebook* group ahead of the planned rally. On 5 April 2008 the Egyptian Minister of the Interior threatened "immediate and firm measures against any attempt to demonstrate, disrupt road traffic or the running of public establishments and against all attempts to incite such acts" (Makary and Singer 2008). The reaction of the Egyptian government showed that the potential for mobilisation over social network websites created resonance beyond the sphere of social network users. As Faris puts it, "April 6th was the day when organising toll (Web 2.0) met political reality to create elements that were strong enough to form storm clouds on the regime's horizon" (Faris 2008). However, if the solidarity strike received substantial media coverage because of its exceptionality, the subsequently emerging April 6 movement proved to be much less effective. Because the movement failed to propose a coherent agenda or to present outstanding personalities supporting their goals, the media attention declined. In addition to the absence of elaborate frames, the Egyptian regime cracked down on the organisers of the strike, thereby setting an example showing that activism is bound to bear individual cost.

Protest at the Fingertips – The Potential of Facebook Activism

Facebook has provided an unprecedented opportunity for activists to reach a wider audience than that is usually reached by blogs. On the other hand, the solidarity strike of April 6, 2008 and a demonstration in Tunisia for freedom of expression online point to the weakest aspect of protest organised via *Facebook*. The initiative of "une manifestation réelle pour une liberté virtuelle" (real protest for virtual freedom), scheduled for May 22, 2010,

a reaction to an increasing number of critical blogs banned during April and May 2010, was the first attempt to bring online protest onto the streets of Tunisia. The campaign, called "Seyyeb Saleh" (traditional curse in Tunisian dialect, meaning "leave me alone") started on *Facebook* and Twitter before establishing its own website. By the time of the demonstration, groups like "Le "404 Not Found" nuit gravement à l'image de Mon Pays" (The "404 Not Found" seriously damages the image of My Country) and "'Aridha li 'ashar alaaf tonisi dhid al- riqaba al- Eliktroniyya wa al-hajb" (Petition of ten thousand Tunisians against electronic control and filtering) gathered 7,777 and 11,457 followers respectively. In addition to the demonstration in Tunis, solidarity protests were planned in Paris, Brussels, Bonn, New York and Montreal. The organisers declared that the event was independent of any political party or association, and the sole demand was the abolition of Internet censorship and the reopening of all sites censored. However, the demonstration in Tunis was called off when the organisers were summoned to the Ministry of Interior. To the deception of protestors, Tunisians chose to stay home, and a reinforced police guard was crisscrossing Avenue Bourguiba and surrounding streets to prevent any attempt to rally (Associated Press 2010). This episode indicates the main challenge of *Facebook* activism, namely rather low commitment of participants.

While *Facebook* features useful tools to organise an event and combines these tools with the characteristics of social networks, the actual events were frequented by much less people than foreseen. While the general strike in Egypt proved to be relatively effortless and riskless because people were only asked to stay at home, the aborted rally in Tunisia makes the low commitment of *Facebook* users for public turnout evident. Eventually, clicking on a button is an easy form of proclaiming approval. The reason why Tunisians seem apparently more risk-averse than Egyptians may be related to the mechanisms of repression that reign in the country and have eclipsed most extra-governmental assistance programmes available in other countries (Hibou 2006). Another explanation might be that the critical mass of contention has not yet been reached, so people are still too scared to engage in politics. However, the recent wave of indiscriminate censorship affecting a great number of bloggers and not

anymore targeting the very dissent and political blogs and websites has shaken the Tunisian Web. This indiscriminate censorship might be the reason why the frames proposed by freedom of speech advocates find a greater echo now than before. Contrary to previous waves of increased blockages, this time even more mainstream websites were touched than before. Since April 23, 2010, Tunisia was blocking both platforms in line with the opposition party *Ettajdid* (former communist party, authorised) blog "Friends of Attariq" and the weekly online *Attariq al-Jadid* (The New Way). But with the blocking of websites such as *Flickr*, censorship touches more Web 2.0 tools than ever before. According to Lina Ben Mehenna, professor at Tunisia's April 9 University and writer for *Global Voices*,

> Past campaigns against censorship were mainly sponsored by elite politicians and rights activists as the blocking was mainly directed at political and news websites, but it has now moved to websites that have nothing to do with politics, including photo, video, and music sharing websites, cooking websites, and even those dealing with arts and theatre. (Dbara 2010)

This has resulted in an unprecedented form of protest, which can already be considered a success insofar as even this minor form of protest is deemed to be risky. While *Facebook* was intended to reproduce a network of 'offline' friends, *Facebook* activists usually attract a large group of followers they do not necessarily know in person. As *Facebook* is supposedly infiltrated by agents of the state, many Tunisian activists anxiously investigate the background of a new person among their other "*Facebook* friends." This is particularly true for activists like Liopatra who seek to preserve their anonymity (Interview, Tunis, July 13, 2009). The use of *Facebook* as a tool for mobilisation in authoritarian regimes is therefore not without its challenges. It is therefore not a sufficient means of organisation, but other factors such as increased attention of traditional media can contribute to create a climate facilitating political mobilisation.

"We Use Whatever Medium is Available to Us"

Contrary to Tunisia, Egyptian initiatives like Kefaya and the April 6 movement have received a considerable media echo in the country. Although these movements suffered from internal dissent and a lack of clear-cut frames, the phenomenon of cyberactivism has acquired a certain notoriety. It seems that Egyptian cyberactivism has achieved a critical mass, making protest an accepted action, albeit online. It remains to be seen how many of the roughly 230,000 online supporters of ElBaradei, former Director General of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and a prominent advocate for a constitutional reform, is going to engage in further campaigning. This number, however, has become an unprecedented indicator of discontent of the youth with the current state and their hope that ElBaradei could bring about change. While Egyptian newspapers conspicuously note the growth of the group and speculate about its significance, Tunisian media take note of general figures like the total number of *Facebook* users, warn of possible dangers to society and ignore political initiatives when they touch Tunisian politics and, for example, not Palestine. Furthermore, in light of the extensive monitoring of the web by Tunisian authorities, cyberactivism remains costly. Ordinary Tunisians might fear that joining a group online could be monitored and entail negative consequences. Yet, a major advantage of *Facebook* as opposed to blogs resides in the difficulty of censoring it. While Tunisia blocks even selected *Facebook* sites, the activities of the blocked person or group remain in the 'newsfeed,' and the dissemination of information cannot be cut entirely. Furthermore, censorship inside *Facebook* is particularly obvious compared to the general cyberspace, since all websites inside *Facebook* are automatically linked with each other, making broken links very unlikely. This obvious censorship might in time anger even apparently apolitical users, who see themselves confronted with an increasing number of blocked websites. The temptation to tap into this reservoir of discontent youth is great. At the same time, some activists point to the risks of increasingly invading the private space with politics. Activists such as Selim Ben Hassem are concerned that this invasion of the private sphere could, after a short period of curiosity for this new way of political dissent, result in

a further retreat and alienation of the general population. (Interview, Paris, April 18, 2010) In order to attract usually 'apolitical' Tunisian Internet users, the anti-censorship campaign was framed as a one-issue campaign and does not address general political issues.

Campaigns such as Kefaya, April 6, Yezzi and the unprecedented Internet campaign against censorship in Tunisia clearly indicates the need of fresh air for a youth suffocated by authoritarian regimes. The Internet has been chosen as a venue for the organisation of protests because it is, despite attempts to limit its reach, a relatively free space, in the context of the impossibility to legally assemble large groups. While organisers risk bearing the costs of their political engagement, the Internet has allowed ordinary citizens to acquire information formerly inaccessible to them. The phenomenon of blogs, which used to be marginal, has become commonplace in Egypt, and increasingly so in Tunisia as well (Radsch 2008). While Egyptian young activists contribute their share in the building of an opposition movement headed by ElBaradei, Tunisian activists want to resist an increasingly oppressive regime. In what is often said to be apolitical societies, young people are dissatisfied with the regime and find an outlet in the Internet where they can first voice their anger, sharpen their arguments, and eventually organise political protest, creatively using all the tools at their disposition to push their cause. The recent successful overthrow of President Ben Ali, after 23 years in power, has shown that the Tunisian population was capable to transform their anger from quiet discontent to virulent opposition to the regime.

Conclusion

Internet enthusiasts have nourished high hopes that the accessibility of the Internet will promote the emergence of a space of expression free of governmental intervention. In the context of authoritarian regimes, the Internet is seen in line with other media as driver of political modernisation. Indeed, despite the attempts of authoritarian governments to prevent the emergence of challengers through the Internet, the medium has the potential to provide a space for opinion exchange between young, well-

educated actors, who are often excluded from the political realm. While censorship remains an issue of great concern, governments have not been able to stifle the expression of dissent online and to prevent the increasing use of technology to strengthen communication and co-ordination among opposition and civil society activists. Blocking access to certain websites serves to channel the mass of average users away from unwanted content, but it does not deter those desirous to voice dissent, since they can find ways to avoid official control with relative ease. Political activism remains risky, but this is true for both cases, Egypt and Tunisia.

The assumption that the uncensored accessibility of the Internet encourages the struggle for democracy has to be differentiated. At first sight, the case studies seem to confirm the statement, since Egypt, featuring a usually uncensored access to the Internet, has witnessed mass mobilisations organised over the Internet while Tunisia had not. However, the mere availability of freely accessible Internet is not a sufficient condition insofar as mobilisations in Egypt took place when a relative small portion of the population had Internet access and, on the other hand, mobilisation witnessed a decline between 2005 and 2008 although the number of Internet users rose during the same period. As there is no direct correlation between increased Internet use and political action organised through this medium, we have to assume a more complex relationship. A successful social movement seems to need more than a virtual space of debate to be successful, although such a space can be an important complementary factor in opening windows and expanding the realm of what can be said in public.

A political movement revolves around a core of key actors, and "netizens" qualify for this task. The Internet also features a variety of tools that facilitate the organisation of events. However, to be successful, social movements need more than a well-organised campaign. In Egypt, we witnessed an important interaction between print and online media, between the representatives of a relative elitist medium and the traditional, more accessible print media. A social movement needs to provide frames resonating with grievances of the public coupled with periods of increased public attention to politics in order to create opportunity structures.

To further transport their message and to attract supporters, a reflection of the struggle of the movement with the government in the "classical" media such as newspapers and television channels is necessary to give the movement momentum outside the Internet context.

In the Tunisian case, Internet censorship is a mere symptom of a generally highly constrained public sphere. Online mobilisation had failed to gain greater support until the writing of this paper because the frames proposed to the public were not powerful enough and the risks associated with political activism are perceived to be high. The frame provided by the recent freedom of expression campaign created a greater echo because censorship has become pervasive. However, in light of the Egyptian experience, the Tunisian campaign might have needed the dead of Mohamed Bouzizi to create a frame resonating beyond Internet users to attain a critical mass sufficient to encourage more citizens to join their cause without a reflection of their struggle in the media.

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Notes

[1] Wikis are allows the collective creation and editing of interlinked web pages.

[2] In December 2009, a Tunisian court sentenced Zouhair Makhlouf, editor of the opposition newspaper and organ of the Democratic Progressive Party Al-Maoukif and news website Essabil Online, to three months in prison for publishing a damaging interview without consent. Makhlouf was doing an investigative documentary about environmental pollution in the industrial area of Nabeul in northeast Tunisia.