

PhD in Media and Communications  
Goldsmiths, University of London

**SOCIAL MEDIA AFTER THE REVOLUTION:**

**New political realities and everyday network practices  
in the context of Tunisia (2011-2013)**

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**Declaration of Authorship**

I, Cyrine Amor, hereby declare that this thesis is the result of my own work and effort and that it has not been submitted anywhere for any other award. Where other sources of information have been used, they have all been acknowledged. This thesis or parts of it cannot be copied or reproduced without permission.

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## **ABSTRACT**

This research examines issues raised by social media's depiction, over recent years, as source of civic empowerment and radical socio-political change. The intensely publicized role of social networking sites at the onset of the 2011 Arab uprisings has served to support at times overly linear perspectives on the relationship between new media technologies and socio-political change. Debates in the field have been limited by an over-emphasis on strategic and instrumental use of social media by political and cyber-activists to achieve pre-determined political outcomes. Less is currently known about the perspectives, experiences and motivations of more ordinary users as they learn to navigate politicised online spaces and to participate in the production, mediation and dissemination of content on social media. This research revisits Tunisia, the country where the Arab uprisings first started, to provide an inter-disciplinary exploration and contextualization of these questions, and of how everyday social media practices may relate to users' knowledge of, engagement with, and participation in a shared public and political world. The study focuses on developments in the country between January 2011 and December 2013, with specific focus on the social networking site Facebook, as it dominates social media use in Tunisia during this transitional period. By juxtaposing qualitative analysis, quantitative elements, and a chronological dimension, research findings highlight the complexity of social media's rapidly evolving role, from perceived source of civic empowerment, to contributor to social tensions and political polarization in the country. The research argues that the communicative conditions provided by social media, in this context, facilitates civic encounters and political communication, but equally that, by making individual and collective socio-political identities and positions more publicly visible and fixed, social media use also reinforces differences and undermines sociality, engendering complex negotiation processes and adaptive participative practices over time.

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*In memory of my father, Abdelfattah Amor (1943-2012)*

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## INTRODUCTION

In January 2011, Sihem, Ahmed, Sarra and numerous other Tunisians posted videos, photos and comments on their Facebook profiles, connected to dozens of new people and sources in their online networks and spent most of their waking hours either participating in street protests or on their social media accounts at home. Although many of them had been using social media<sup>1</sup> for years, the nature of their online activities radically changed during this period. For most of them, this was the first time in their life that they were openly expressing their views and positions on the social and political situation in their country, communicating their dissent, and collectively participating in the production and dissemination of alternative representations of their shared wider public world.

Sihem, Ahmed and Sarra do not know each other and their lives have little in common. At the time of the revolution, Sihem was a student in her early twenties who loved Arab poetry, watched American television series on her flatmate's laptop and was looking forward to spending the winter holidays at her parents' in the North Eastern region of Kasserine. Ahmed was in his late twenties, a father of two who worked as a salesman in the town of Sousse and had found in religion a new balance in his life after years of a self-professed lifestyle of excessive drinking and partying. Sarra, who was also close to thirty, was an unemployed medical graduate who had recently married, and lived with her husband in the capital Tunis.

None of them were political activists, and their knowledge and perception of their common socio-political world was limited by the strict censorship and media control in the country. They were not used to discussing opinions outside of the occasional hushed exchange between relatives or friends in private; their encounters with representations of the Tunisian political sphere were dominated by images of former president Ben Ali, whose portraits filled public spaces, and offered shopkeepers, taxi drivers and media outlets relative immunity from trouble with the police. This dissertation follows Sihem, Ahmed, Sarra and a number of other ordinary social media users in Tunisia as they discover, communicate about, and engage with the new socio-political context in their country after the revolution.

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<sup>1</sup> The term 'social media' will be used throughout the rest of this work as a shorthand to designate commercial social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter that are the focus of this study.

Since the start of the revolution in December 2010, developments in Tunisia have been framed by a number of competing narratives. The country was first hailed as the birthplace of Facebook and Twitter revolutions, and of democratisation through social media in the Arab world (Howard and Hussain, 2011; Khamis and Vaughn, 2011; Shirky, 2011; Radsch, 2011). These techno-deterministic discourses were gradually - and rightly - countered with more contextualised and historically-grounded perspectives that highlighted the underlying social, economic and political factors and processes leading to the popular movements (e.g. Aouragh and Alexander, 2011; Lynch, 2012; Fuchs, 2012; Achcar 2013; Zayani, 2015). These further challenged the framing of populations in Arab countries as inherently passive and mutely accepting of authoritarian rule for several generations, and pointed instead to an evolving civic and political culture, to alternative forms of resistance that citizens performed in their everyday lives, as well as to a number of protest attempts that preceded the 2011 uprisings (the specific context of Tunisia is discussed in detail in Chapter 1).

Despite these more nuanced appraisals of the pre-revolutionary context, an overly positive narrative of citizens' emancipation from oppression, and of their relatively linear trajectory towards democracy, prevailed in post-revolution commentary. As the situation in other Arabic speaking countries such as Libya, Syria and Egypt became increasingly unstable after the political upheavals of the so-called Arab Spring, Tunisia's case became entrenched as a democratic exception among countries either sliding into civil conflict, or reverting to authoritarianism (Beau and Lagarde, 2014; Ayari, 2015; Daoud, 2015). Although the deadly attacks against tourists in Tunisia in March and June 2015 served to undermine this image of the country, these events were swiftly repositioned within the narrative of a nascent democracy at war with terror. And yet, the post-revolution period in Tunisia provides a far more mitigated record of democratic transition, one marked as much by the experience of, and experimentation with, new civic, social, religious and political freedoms, as by a context of continual social inequalities, economic uncertainties, political crises and rising violence. Similarly, the first few years of the transitional period showed mixed results in terms of the reform of institutional structures and political practices that served to sustain decades of centralised and opaque decision-making processes and abuses of power (see Chapters 1 and 6).

This context and the competing discourses and interests surrounding it, raise important questions about the role of symbolic and communicative resources available to citizens in

making sense and influencing their new socio-political reality. My own partially Tunisian background, and my personal experience of frequently travelling between Tunisia and the United Kingdom and following a number of Western and Arabic media outlets since 2011, provided me with a particularly acute awareness of the competing forces shaping the post-revolution narrative, as well as of the discrepancy between the theory and practice of change. Having closely followed stages of the revolution period in Tunisia, I started the project with a broad question in mind. Although I did not adhere to simplistic perspectives on Facebook or Twitter revolutions, I was intrigued by the extraordinarily politicised nature of communicative content on social media during this period in Tunisia. I wondered what role – if any – social media could continue to play after the revolution in relation to supporting political involvement and a political culture in which voice – the “agency to represent oneself and the right to express an opinion” (Tacchi, 2012) – seemed to now be relevant. I was particularly interested in assessing those social media dynamics which had apparently played a crucial role in informing, coordinating and mobilising a number of Tunisian protestors at the beginning of 2011, and how they would evolve in a fractured, pluralised political context in which a common target of dissatisfaction was no longer easily definable. Some other wide-ranging questions also informed my initial approach to the project. Was a new form of politics emerging in Tunisia, and was this sustainable in the longer-term? Would formerly politically inactive citizens continue to use social media in their everyday lives to engage with socio-political issues and voice their opinions?

Markham (2014) identifies – in his review of a literature on social media and the Arab uprisings - a teleological tendency to attribute political agency and progressive political spaces to social media. He supports a reading that acknowledges the role played by different social media platforms during the Arab uprisings, but warns against reading too much or too little into this. There is evidence of politically-oriented discourse as well as more trivial content on social media. Whilst Markham clarifies that non-political content is not necessarily apolitical and that the boundaries that separate different types of discourses are porous, he argues that it would nevertheless be mistaken to differentiate social media content from other everyday discourses in the Middle East and to presume that social media platforms may be conducive to new political subjectivities. He critiques academic framings that tend to associate such platforms to discourses of empowerment and liberation, and to connect such subjectivities to social media, rather than to changing contexts and gradual processes anchored in (always already) existing structures (Markham, 2014). The discourses denounced by Markham can also be seen to reflect and revive a “modernization paradigm” and produce

“essentialising assumptions” about the Arab world, as Dina Matar points out (2012). The perception of political affairs in the region being fundamentally static was suddenly undermined, only to be reasserted under a “neo-developmental” (Thussu, 2009, p.15) prism of new media’s purported positively destabilising effect on an otherwise passive, disempowered or under-achieving ‘other’.

As discussed, the prevalence of specific framings of social media’s transformational capacity in the Arab world need to be overcome in favour of more complex reappraisals. In order to achieve this, a grasp of how such discourses are constructed and sustained is necessary. To overcome this, Markham contends that it is important to provide more historically-grounded analyses, in which to inquire “how politics is experienced at the level of the everyday – as social as well as serious, laborious as well as creative, banal as well as imaginary” (2014, p.102).

Social media cannot be singled out as primary contributor to the development of alternative communicative dynamics during and after the revolution period. Assessing social media in isolation risks reinforcing the “wall of idealism” (Horst and Miller, 2012, p.8) that accompanies much inquiry into digital media. However, this does not preclude focusing on social media within a specific media ecology and wider context. Indeed, social media is worthy of particular scrutiny because it provides geographically dispersed citizens with the opportunity to mediate their own representations of the public world on an everyday basis, to advance and negotiate their interpretations of the social and political order, and to digitally and collectively perform a new civic and political culture. In this sense, it marks a radical shift in the construction of, and delineation between, private and public space.

This dissertation is not aimed at providing a comprehensive assessment of the revolution or post-revolution period. Nor is it, per se, an analysis of media’s contribution to democratic change. It does not adhere to any singular narrative framing of these developments and does not make any pre-determined claims about social media’s role. Rather, it is interested in understanding users’ divergent experiences, practices, and reflections on social media’s provision of a communicative space within a broader and changing political context that is open to redefinition. Their reading of this space, of its influence, and of its relation to the wider world they imagine as shared, matters not *because* social media makes a difference, but *in as far as* they attribute meaning to their interactions within it. The thesis thus seeks to assess, through the perspectives and practices of the sample group, the political dimensions

of everyday social media use by Tunisian citizens in this setting, between January 2011 and December 2013. Broadly speaking, it asks what difference social media may make to their relationship with the shared public and political world they inhabit. More specifically, it is concerned with developing insights into social media's role in supporting the formation of public knowledge and opinion about the public world (and their place, as citizens, within it), and into the engagement with, and participation in, the public and political world linked to this knowledge.

The mediation of public expression on social media infers a shift in paradigm from a framing of symbolic power as primarily confined to the production and large-scale distribution of representations of the public world by the media, to alternative perspectives that can account for seemingly less hierarchical and more diffuse forms of networked power online, whilst also taking into account how these relate to wider political, economic, social and media contexts. As Fenton (2012) stresses:

While social networking forces us to recognise the destabilisation of the producer and the consumer and the blurring of the social and political public spheres, to be fully understood it must be considered contextually (p.142).

A number of approaches have emerged in recent years to address these shifts, but it continues to be an area in need of further exploration. This thesis resultantly taps into debates at the intersection of political theory, media sociology and anthropology on the transformative characteristics of networked communications. I query in particular the multiple theoretical personas that the social media user embodies as engaged citizen, participant in and through media, member of a wider public, media producer and distributor, member of an audience as well as online witness of the self-representations of other citizens. Social media users shape a representation of themselves and their relation to their shared public world through their social media practices and, vice versa, the meanings they attach to these practices are in turn constructed in and through such representations, and through individual as well as collective identity performances. A shift is consequently necessary away from the familiar framing of media audiences (news audiences in particular) and their engagement in interpretive activities, to embracing alternative approaches that capture social media users engaged in "audiencing" activities (Fiske, 1992), as well as participants in the production and distribution of media content and in the symbolic construction of particular representations and meanings as more legitimate than others within a given socio-political order.

New media has challenged the use of the term 'audience', previously widely applied in relation to mass media. Whereas some have considered the term obsolete in the new media age (e.g. Rosen, 2006), others have contended that the term poorly fits the "variety of modes of engagement" with new media (Lievrouw and Livingstone, 2002, p.10) that extend beyond what audiences were traditionally understood to consist of, or to 'do' in relation to media. Instead the term 'user' has been privileged to better capture the diversity of activities, and the turn to more active engagement, rendered possible by new media. Nevertheless, as Carpentier et al. (2014) contend, 'user' is also problematic, because it tends to stress the distinctive (and seemingly mutually exclusive) character of audiences and users, and their respective association with (negatively-framed) passivity and (positively-framed) activity. Furthermore, as they highlight, this shift in terminology also intensifies the somewhat artificial distinction between offline space (characterised by mass media reception activities) and online space (that of user participation), which often results in commentators either dismissing online reception, or leaving the issue under-explored.

In this thesis, I adopt the term 'user' in relation to social media, but I take into account the important points raised above and I employ the term in its broader sense that seeks to take into account, as Lievrouw and Livingstone note (2002), the "variety of modes of engagement with new media" (p.10). I also seek to avoid the stark contrast between activity and passivity, online and offline, and reception and participation. Instead, the thesis explores different facets of these activities and the meanings that 'users' (for want of a better word) associate with, and attach to, them. Furthermore, I argue that in order to better understand the difference in audiencehood and/or usage that the online environment may give rise to, it is important to explore these activities within a given and wider context, as well as to contextualise different activities undertaken online in relation to each other.

Paralleling this approach, I have devised an empirical methodology that aims to capture the communicative content that social media users produce and are exposed to, as well as the evolving meanings they attach to their media practices and to their position as citizens in the post-revolution Tunisian context. To achieve this, I conducted two sets of interviews with the same sample of Tunisian social media users at different points in time during the research period. Additionally, I have assessed the social media content they produced on their social media profiles, and undertaken a content analysis of a sample of publicly accessible Facebook pages they interact with. A total of thirty participants were recruited for this study. My

strategy has been to prioritise access to social media users who, like Sihem, Ahmed and Sarra (referenced above) had limited experience, prior to the revolution, of expressing their socio-political opinions 'publicly'. Within this criteria, I sought a variety of levels of civic and political involvement post-revolution, of ages, and of socio-political identifications within the increasingly polarised transitional period, between the beginning of 2011 and the end of 2013. These included government supporters and opponents, as well as those who did not find in either position a point of reference. My sampling approach prioritised the achievement of this range of perspectives and everyday social media practices, placing less emphasis on political and cyber-activists whose use of social media was arguably more strategic, being aimed at the achievement of pre-defined political goals (a point further elaborated in Chapter 2).

## **OUTLINE OF CHAPTERS**

The discussion above highlighted several problematic issues and shortcomings with a number of recent academic perspectives and empirical explorations of questions relating to the correlation between social media and socio-political change. Whilst adopting a broadly chronological structure, the remainder of this thesis will seek to account for the issues raised. Expressly, it will address the need to set social media's usage within local political and media contexts; to differentiate between - as well as juxtapose - different types of activity enabled by social media (media reception and production in particular); and to provide insights into social media practices within longer-term historical processes and an evolving political culture. This approach is outlined in more detail below.

Chapter 1 provides a broad overview of the historical and political background of Tunisia since its independence from French colonial rule in 1956. It highlights the complex imbrication of factors that formed the basis of a rise in social and political contention in the years leading up to the revolution movement of 2010/11. The chapter also examines the backdrop of ideological and political outcomes that were to mark the early transitional phase that this thesis focuses on. Most importantly, in terms of the objective of the thesis, it charts the development of the media landscape in relation to the unfolding socio-political scene of the country, in order to contextualise, in particular, digital media's evolving role before and after the revolution.

Chapter 2 discusses the methodological approach to the empirical study, which is based on a constructionist epistemological perspective, and inspired by the turn to practice theory in media studies. It further explores the ambiguities relating to researching online phenomena, and discusses the adequacy of ethnographically-inspired terminology and methodological elements in this regard. The chapter argues for the importance, in the context of this study, of accounting for the perspectives of ordinary social media users and their everyday media practices, rather than more strategic activist use, which has been over-emphasised in social media research relating to political questions. The chapter further discusses the implementation of the research and the challenges encountered in adapting to a rapidly-evolving research setting.

Chapter 3 explores the shift to politicised social media usage during the revolution by starting with an assessment of study participants' recollections and reflections on their media habits before this turning point. By drawing parallels with explorations of media's role in other countries with an authoritarian system of government, the chapter highlights the different sociological and political dimensions to media consumption in a heavily censored national media landscape that lacks credibility among the general public, and it further delineates the consequently ambiguous positions that audiences frequently develop in relation to media and news consumption habits. This exploration serves as an important background to understanding new media practices under authoritarian or illiberal forms of government. The assessment further supports the analysis and its conclusions, in the second half of the chapter, of the radical changes to media practices which occurred during the revolution period, from which a highly politicised social media space emerged after the revolution.

Chapter 4 joins theoretical and empirical enquiry into media's role in supporting public knowledge and opinion formation, and the questions that arise in relation to these dynamics in the age of social media. The chapter focuses this exploration around the post-revolution period at the end of 2012. It discusses in detail what it means, for the participants, to be informed in this drastically transformed political and media landscape, and what their media exposure to offline and online media sources - and their media habits - are informed by, in a context marked by the multiplicity of representations and interpretations of the public world. Social media's role within these processes emerges as particularly central.

Chapter 5 considers in turn questions of media and participation in theory and practice. It is interested in assessing how this knowledge relates to involvement in political participation offline, as well as in mediated participation on social media. Furthermore, it explores the new opportunities provided by social media for public and political communication and interaction, and queries their participative dimension. Similarly to the previous chapter, the empirical dimension of this chapter focuses on these questions in the transitional context at the end of 2012. It approaches these questions with a particularly broad framing of what participation may entail, and it is concerned in particular with examining social media users' own perspectives on, and experiences of, different participatory activities and their expected outcomes.

Chapter 6 outlines developments in the political situation and in the media landscape in Tunisia in 2013. It describes the increasing socio-political and ideological polarisation in the country, divisions starkly reflected on social media. The chapter then revisits the questions assessed in the previous two chapters. It empirically explores changes in media – and social media – practices one year after the initial research was undertaken. The chapter contrasts content reception and production/distribution activities on social media, and the relation between changes in these activities and the evolution of the political situation in Tunisia.

The thesis conclusion revisits the research question in light of these different findings, stressing the complexity of the dynamics at play and the continually evolving nature of the meanings constructed in relation to social media practices in this context.

## CHAPTER 1

### THE TUNISIAN REVOLUTION IN CONTEXT

This chapter delves more deeply into the Tunisian context, outlining some key recent historical and political turning points and examining the media landscape that has arisen in conjunction with these developments. It sketches out the political background to the revolution, in which nearly five decades of largely authoritarian rule shaped Tunisian citizens' relationship with the public and political realm, and briefly looks at the country's complex relationship with the colonial period, under French rule, against which different conceptualisations of socio-political life evolved (Voll, 1997). In the aftermath of decades of close control and censorship of the public realm, the ambiguities and contradictions accompanying these issues became central to the social and political contentions during the initial post-revolution phase that this research explores.

#### 1. The Bourguiba era

##### 1.1. The complex foundations of political culture and modernisation post-independence

Tunisia is a small country compared to its immediate North African neighbours - Algeria and Libya - with a fairly cohesive territory, and relatively homogenous ethnic and religious<sup>2</sup> demographics. Although possessing limited natural resources, it occupies a strategically important position – it is close to the centre of the Mediterranean basin, and is the northernmost tip of the African landmass. At its closest point, it is less than a hundred miles from Sicily. Throughout its eventful history, its territory successively fell under the influence and control of various foreign powers<sup>3</sup>. The last of these colonial rulers was France, who governed the country as a French protectorate between 1881 and 1956. Although French colonial rule arguably left a less overtly traumatic legacy than that of neighbouring Algeria, the experience nevertheless continues to play a role in shaping contemporary national

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<sup>2</sup> The population is ninety-nine per cent Sunni Muslim (US State Department, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> See for example Cherif (1975) for a detailed summary; Laroui (1977), Naylor (2009) for more in-depth explorations.

identities and the fragile balance between traditional and modern discourses which exist in the country (Perkins, 2004; Willis, 2012).

Habib Bourguiba was a key figure in securing Tunisia's independence and establishing the foundations of its first republic, proclaimed in 1957. As the country's first president, he initially enjoyed a relatively high degree of popular approval and was regarded by many Tunisians as national hero, an image increasingly honed and developed in later years (Krichen, 1992). A charismatic leader who frequently addressed the nation through public broadcasts (in his first years in office this took the form of a weekly radio broadcast), he embarked on a political project that sought to integrate a Western-inspired ideology of progress and rationality with elements of a more traditional Tunisian identity. His objective was to lay the foundations of a modern and secular - yet religiously anchored – state that was to define what is often referred to as Tunisian specificity (Ghorbal, 2012) or Tunisian-style secularisation<sup>4</sup> (Chouikha and Gobe, 2015, p.18). Among his priorities were the country's economic development, improving access to education<sup>5</sup>, and supporting women's rights. The latter aims were partly achieved through what has often been seen as one of his most significant legacies; the promulgation, within the first few months of independence, of the “code du statut personnel”, a set of emancipatory laws that ranged from the abolition of polygamy, to the extensive reform of the country's divorce laws, providing Tunisian women with rights unequalled in the rest of the Arab world (Murphy, 2007).

The fragile boundaries between markers of traditional authenticity and the modernising reforms that Bourguiba sought to rapidly implement were also a source of tension, as they called for a radical break with the past (Siino, 2004). His authoritarian programme of reform and secularisation (see Chouikha and Gobe, 2015, p-16-20) was perceived by part of the population, eager to demarcate itself from former colonial authority, as a Western-influenced imposition by a French-educated leader. The changes were seen by this group as not attuned to the country's cultural heritage and religious makeup (Willis, 2012). Opinions about Bourguiba's legacy were – and are - consequently ambiguous and divided, as the discourses of modernisation, secularisation, national identity, and of paternalistic authoritarianism were closely imbricated, reflecting the complex ideological and sociological anchoring of political culture in this context (Voll, 1997). Emblematic of this issue is an often cited photograph from the fifties, portraying the president removing the traditional Tunisian ‘sefseri’ veil of a woman

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<sup>4</sup> Translated from French “sécularisation à la Tunisienne”

<sup>5</sup> Less than a third of children were schooled when Bourguiba came to power (Timoumi, 2008).

on the street (see for example Borsali, 2012, p.222-223), an image that continues to be a point of reference and disagreement, being regarded by some as symbolising an emancipation from constrictive and repressive cultural norms, and by others as a forcible attack on Tunisian identity and values.

Bourguiba's ability to institute drastic reforms rested in large part on the highly centralised nature of political power that he established within the first decade of his rule. This was achieved essentially by cumulating executive and legislative powers, making the very existence of political opposition contingent on the consent of his party, the PSD (Part socialiste Destourien, known until 1964 as the 'Néo-Destour<sup>6</sup>'), and thereby turning it from a "party *in* power" to the "party *of* power" (Chouikha and Gobe, 2015, p.17). This enabled a number of important social and economic advances that may, arguably, have been more difficult to implement at such speed under less centralised and hierarchical power dynamics. For instance, this resulted by the eighties in the highest life expectancy of the Maghreb region, the lowest fertility rate, and the highest primary schooling rate (Muenz, 2012, p.242-244). However, on a political level Bourguiba's three decades in power (1956-1987) were marked by the limitations of what the profound contradiction of his authoritarian emancipatory project inevitably engendered, what Camau (1987, p.39) referred to as the inadequacy of seeking to reform society through "passive citizenship". Indeed, whereas the opening of the socio-political space underwent fluctuating cycles during this period, party politics was severely impeded. Between 1963 and 1981, no opposition party was allowed to exist at all (Chouikha, 2004, p.343). A level of political pluralism was later conceded in 1981 by a president under pressure, but only within restrictive parameters, and over which the ruling party continued to exert an important influence (*ibid*). The increasingly authoritarian character of the regime was perhaps made most explicit in 1975 with the passing of a law enabling Bourguiba to be proclaimed president for life.

## 1.2. The limits of economic reform and rise in social contention

The 1970s witnessed the progressive shifting and centring of main political opposition to and around alternative, non-party, structures - a direct result of the circumscribing of conventional party-based political activity. The workers' union UGTT (Union Générale des Travailleurs Tunisiens) and, to a lesser extent, the human rights league LTDH (League Tunisienne des Droits de l'Homme) were the most significant of these groupings. The rise of

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<sup>6</sup> 'Destour' means constitution in Arabic.

the UGTT was accompanied by a rapidly changing economic context: Whereas the first decade of Bourguiba's rule was marked by heavy state interventionism, the nationalisation of key sectors of the economy<sup>7</sup> as well as a set of ultimately unsuccessful socialist policies (see Perkins, 2004, p.130-156), the seventies were a period of exponential growth spurred by a (relatively) more economically liberal approach. Although the public sector continued to play an important role as key investor and employer, the economy became increasingly geared towards private as well as foreign investment<sup>8</sup>.

Despite improved GDP growth rates, a result of rapid and intense industrialisation during this period<sup>9</sup>, unemployment was relatively high at approximately fifteen per cent (World Bank, 2014) due to demographic pressures as well as to the nature of the opportunities on offer, as they mostly consisted of low-skilled work, providing low wages and limited long-term prospects. Relatedly, more tangible regional and social inequalities started to become apparent with these changes as economic development predominantly benefited the coastal areas at the expense of the interior regions. Simultaneously, rapid urbanisation also contributed to very high urban and youth unemployment levels that were as much as three times the average national rate (Perkins, 2004, p.120). By the end of the 1970s, the UGTT's growing influence culminated in the first general strike of the republic in January 1978, ending in violent clashes with police in which between fifty and two hundred<sup>10</sup> protestors lost their lives (Chouikha and Gobe, 2015, p.28). It is worth noting that the violent suppression of the protests at the time was orchestrated by the Director General of National Security Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, who was to subsequently rise through the ranks to become the next president of the Republic (Perkins, 2004, p.170), and ultimately be ousted during the revolution.

The regime became increasingly beset by crises in the eighties as the country's economic situation deteriorated, social movements increasingly demanded more autonomy, and a vicious political power struggle over the succession of the ageing president began. Economic development slowed in the eighties and the economy's level of dependence on the public sector continued to be relatively high. Public expenditure was spiralling out of control as a result of inefficient public investments and expenditure on substantial food subsidies, leading to an unsustainable budget deficit (Alexander, 2010, p.79). The economic difficulties faced by

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<sup>7</sup> This included the nationalization of companies, institutions and land formerly in the hands of the French.

<sup>8</sup> Over five hundred foreign-owned factories were established in Tunisia within four years (1973-1977) (Perkins, 2004, p.160).

<sup>9</sup> Average annual real GDP growth of seven and a half per cent between 1970 and 1979 (IMF, 2016).

<sup>10</sup> Numbers remain disputed.

the country at this time led to the repeated intervention of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, whose financial support was contingent on the government's implementation of drastic structural reforms and a significant reduction in state spending. These included the elimination of state subsidies on a number of basic ingredients, which resulted in 1984 in the 'bread riots', some of the most important social unrest of the Bourguiba era, as bread prices doubled overnight.

### 1.3. Cycles of repression and relaxation of the political and public realm

Whilst not formally recognised, influential parties and ideological movements emerged out of this context, which were met with a level of tolerance. Notably, during the early seventies, political Islamism started to emerge as a coherent movement out of a backdrop in which modernising post-colonial political discourse was exhausted, and Pan-Arabism' fall from grace had been accelerated by the defeat by Israel of an Arab military coalition in 1967 (Hermassi 1984, p.40). In particular, this period witnessed the early steps of what was to later become the MTI party<sup>11</sup> (Movement de la Tendance Islamique), led by Rached Ghannouchi and Abdelfattah Mourou. The government initially turned a blind eye to the development of Islamism as it was considered as a useful counterweight to the appeal of the political left and the influence of the UGTT union (Chouikha and Geisser, 2015, p.31). However, the movement's development became more problematic for the regime over the course of the 1980s, as the MTI became increasingly popular, attracting both the economically disenfranchised as well as proponents of a more traditional, religiously-and-morally inspired national identity discourse, a growing popularity on which the movement sought to capitalise in 1981 by seeking to become a formally recognised political actor.

Notwithstanding the centralised and authoritarian character of Bourguiba's regime, the media sphere was not as closed as was to later be the case under Ben Ali. There were regular phases of political openness, followed by a return to the status quo of tighter government control of public space and discourse. While state-owned broadcasting and print publications served as the voice of the regime<sup>12</sup> and propaganda for a president who was increasingly losing touch with his people (Zalila, 2004), a number of newspapers with connections to opposition parties were permitted to publish some critical material, particularly during the

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<sup>11</sup> Established in 1981 as the MTI (French name) or Harakat al-Ittihad al-Islami (Arabic name), and renamed in 1987 as Ennahdha. The movement was originally inspired by the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood as well as by the Iranian revolution movement, although it did not fully adhere to the latter's ideology (see Perkins, 2004, p.166).

<sup>12</sup> State-owned media outlets included the Tunisian radio and television, established in the first decade after independence, as well as newspapers Assabah, La Presse and Le Temps, and magazine Réalités (further details can be found in Hostrup Haugbølle, 2013).

eighties when a level of political pluralism was enforced by the opposition<sup>13</sup>. However, most publications were operating under difficult circumstances, with limited resources and being regularly subjected to political pressures that adversely affected their printing schedules, financing or distribution (Chouikha, 2004, p.348-351). Its popularity and legitimacy having been eroded over time, the regime fluctuated between allowing a degree of free expression, and heavy-handed censorship of the opposition's publications in order to quell dissent and to maintain its grip on power. As Chouikha (*ibid*) notes, although it was difficult at times for political commentators to identify with clarity what they could or could not write<sup>14</sup>, overall the expression of critical stances on a wide range of social and political issues was tolerated, and this enabled the development of a relatively vibrant media sphere in the eighties.

The eighties became increasingly marked by intense power struggles in which the two main opposition forces, the UGTT union and the Islamist party MTI, experienced, in turn, cycles of repression and a relaxation of restrictions, a divisive strategy aimed at isolating each group and undermining their influence (Chouikha and Gobe, 2015). For instance, the growing influence of the MTI led to a wave of repression in 1981 that included the rejection of its request to be officially recognised as a political party, the imprisonment of its leadership, and banning women from wearing the Islamic headscarf (hijab) in government offices<sup>15</sup>. Paralleling this, government relations with the UGTT improved during this period and a level of political opening was signalled through the organisation of early legislative elections. However, this precarious balance worsened during the eighties and the union became the target of renewed repression, whilst the imprisoned Islamist leadership benefited from the issuing of presidential pardons in 1984. Although the Islamist party was still not officially recognised, it was allowed to gain influence, in particular through its powerful student union at universities. However, the non-legalisation of the party slowly led to the rise of a more violent Islamist faction, further bolstered by renewed suppression of Islamist protests at universities. This cycle of violence culminated in the summer of 1987 with bomb attacks in four hotels in the tourist town of Sousse<sup>16</sup>. These were claimed by an extremist jihadist group, but blamed on the MTI party by the government, leading to the severe persecution of its supporters and its leadership being sentenced to death - who consequently sought political asylum abroad. In this climate of economic instability, social tension, and recurring political

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<sup>13</sup> Numerous opposition newspapers were published during this time, notably Attariq al Jadid of the PCT (Parti Communiste Tunisien) and El Mawkef of the Democratic Progressive Party (Zayani, 2015, p.56). Others include: El Mostaqbal, El Wahda, Outrouhat, Le Progrès, Démocratie (see Chouikha, 2004 for further details).

<sup>14</sup> The only clear red line was that they could not directly target their criticism at the president (Chouikha, 2004, p.350).

<sup>15</sup> This ban was later extended to educational establishments.

<sup>16</sup> The same town where, in the summer of 2015, a terrorist attack, claimed by the Islamic State, took place in a beach hotel, killing close to forty tourists.

crises, the then prime minister Zine El Abidine Ben Ali seized the opportunity to assume the presidency through a non-violent coup<sup>17</sup> on 7<sup>th</sup> November 1987, bringing Bourguiba's three decades in power to an end.

## **2. The Ben Ali years**

### **2.1. Rise of Islamism and the authoritarian turn**

Ben Ali's period in power can, in retrospect, be seen as a fairly unbroken continuation of Bourguiba's policies and intolerance of dissent, as detailed above. However, the level of opposition and pluralism erratically permitted by Bourguiba's regime in the 1980s was not replicated by that of Ben Ali, whose rule soon came to be characterised by a far more stringent and systematic lockdown of public space and discourse. Ben Ali's access to power initially raised the promise of an improvement of the socio-political situation in the country and a possible gradual move to democracy. Indeed, a number of reforms and pieces of legislation enacted within the first year of the coup supported the perspective that the control of the political sphere and public space were to be relaxed. Political prisoners were freed and an amnesty of the Islamist party was declared. Furthermore, the Press Code and laws regulating associative life were eased, and limits were instated on the number of terms a president could stay in power<sup>18</sup> (Chouikha and Gobe, 2015, p.45-46).

However, a different narrative soon emerged which highlighted the limits of the regime's engagement with the concept of political pluralism. Although tolerated, the Islamist party, renamed Ennahdha<sup>19</sup> (meaning renaissance), continued to have its request for formal recognition as a party refused, whilst secular opposition parties were systematically weakened. In 1988, Ben Ali oversaw the signing of a National Pact between political parties<sup>20</sup> in the country, which effectively neutralised opposition by outlining a consensus on how political life was to be conducted (Santucci, 1993, p.75). Under the new configuration, the two main political forces were the president's party, renamed as the RCD (Rassemblement

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<sup>17</sup> Officially the coup was undertaken on medical grounds that certified Bourguiba's inability to continue holding the office of president. It occurred at a time when the Islamist party MTI was purported to be preparing a coup, with the help of part of the military and security forces, a day later, on 8<sup>th</sup> November (Geisser and Gobe, 2008, p.377).

<sup>18</sup> These limits were lifted again in 2002.

<sup>19</sup> Formerly the MTI, the name change was conceded in 1988 along with a number of other measures aimed at stressing a more secular character for the party and thereby supporting its (unsuccessful) attempt to be formally recognised.

<sup>20</sup> All parties except the communist party signed the pact, including the MIT despite not being officially recognised as a party.

Constitutionnel Democratique)<sup>21</sup>, and Ennahdha, which continued to enjoy high levels of popularity. As Santucci (*ibid*) observes, Ben Ali initially sought to contain Ennahdha through a less repressive strategy than in previous years by tolerating the Islamist party's activities on the one hand, whilst simultaneously engaging in a "re-islamisation of the state discourse" on the other hand; a marked departure from the strictly secularist rhetoric of the previous regime. Whereas Bourguiba stressed a break from traditional social norms and religious references through actions such as publicly drinking a glass of water during the fasting period of Ramadan, Ben Ali appeared on television dressed in traditional clothes, taking part in religious ceremonies. Equally, a number of state-supervised religious institutions were allowed to develop, and calls to prayer began to be broadcast on television on a daily basis, measures aimed at undermining Ennahdha's monopoly over religious discourse and providing the regime with a level of controlled "religious legitimacy" (Chouikha and Gobe, 2015, p.48).

The onset of civil war in neighbouring Algeria following electoral wins by Islamist party FIS in 1990, as well as the relative success of Ennahdha party members<sup>22</sup> in the 1989 legislative elections in Tunisia, led to a drastic change in Ben Ali's regime's strategy towards Islamism, revealing the increasingly authoritarian nature of its political rule. Ennahdha was accused of plotting to overthrow the government and designated a criminal organisation, a move that triggered a fresh cycle of harsh repression directed at both the party's leaders and its supporters. Protests and hunger strikes at universities were violently quashed and many party supporters were imprisoned and tortured, whilst others fled into exile abroad. As noted by Murphy (2001), Amnesty International estimated that there were approximately eight thousand political prisoners by 1993, in total, "while Islamists put the figure closer to 30,000" (p.204). Furthermore, the state tightly controlled the expression of religious observance and piety in the media and in public spaces through, amongst other measures, enforcing a ban on the wearing of Islamic headscarves in public and even harassing men into shaving beards that were considered as sign of support for the Islamists. Paradoxically, the attempt to eradicate the Islamist movement and the enforced de-Islamisation of public life only served to fuel the rise of radical Salafism in the country (Willis, 2012, p.60).

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<sup>21</sup> Formerly the PSD under Bourguiba.

<sup>22</sup> The party was not allowed to take part in the elections as it was not formally recognised but a number of its members stood for election as independents.

## 2.2. Consolidation of the 'façade democracy'

These developments were accompanied by a more generalised authoritarianism, and an increasing intolerance of any form of perceived opposition and dissent, a shift that the regime justified by the need for the secular opposition to rally against the purported threat of Islamism, and that was in part facilitated by Ben Ali's tightening grip on the country's security apparatus<sup>23</sup>. The government's increasing intimidation and persecution of the opposition, religious and secular, resulted in many members being forced into submission or exile, with others coerced or persuaded into actively voicing support for the regime. By 1994 electoral law had been amended to fix the number of seats allocated to the opposition in parliament prior to any election (Chouikha and Gobe, 2015, p.59), with the majority being reserved for the president's RCD party. This process consolidated what Sadiki (2002) termed a "façade democracy" in which electoral laws were progressively adjusted to modify the conditions of recognition for presidential and legislative candidates to the regime's liking.

The political clampdown initiated in the early nineties was soon extended to the activities of unions, to associational life, and more generally to any form of public action and gatherings deemed subversive by the state. The regime adopted a similar double-discourse to that used to weaken political party-based opposition, permitting the existence of a number of formerly influential unions and associations on the one hand (such as the worker's union UGTT and the human rights league LTDH), while utterly undermining their effectiveness on the other, through a series of financial, legal and coercive means. The regime was consequently able to externally project an image of political pluralism – albeit an extremely superficial one - and pay lip service to human rights concerns, whilst stifling or eliminating any potential source of genuine opposition.

The regime operated through a centralised single-party system, around which a network characterised by nepotism, cronyism and corruption developed. Eight thousand regional cells of the RCD existed across the country and a fifth of Tunisia's population of ten million were estimated to be members of the party by 2008 (Chouikha and Gobe, 2015, p.57), either out of choice or necessity. Indeed, the RCD's centralised structure significantly extended the regime's control, enabling it to infiltrate all aspects of political, social, economic and personal

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<sup>23</sup> The number of police agents and security forces remains contested to date. Chouikha and Gobe (2015 p.56) estimate it to have stood at between fifty thousand and one hundred and fifty thousand agents, additionally to thousands of supporting personnel, and extensive networks of informants. IMS (2002) instead report an "estimated 145,000 strong police force with reportedly an additional 200,000 plainclothes security personnel" (p.3).

life, serving to mediate employment opportunities and promotions, overseeing business allocations, distributing resources to the under-privileged and resolving citizens' everyday administrative issues or problems with the police<sup>24</sup>.

Crucially, the regime's ability to maintain power was also enabled by an important economic dimension of Ben Ali's rule. Although initial hopes for democratic reforms that accompanied his accession to power soon dissipated, his liberal economic reforms and relative stabilisation of the economic situation meant that his regime's increasingly overt disregard for the democratic process were met with relatively muted international criticism (Murphy, 2001) as well as a level of acceptance by a significant section of Tunisia's population that benefited from the rise of a new middle class, predominantly located in the capital and coastal areas of the country.

Assessments of the effectiveness of Ben Ali's economic measures have been mixed. The government partially implemented the structural readjustment plans advanced by the IMF, which advocated a reduction of the budget deficit, an expansion of the private sector's share of economic activity and the introduction of new taxation. The IMF proposal also encouraged the prizing open of the Tunisian economy to international – and in particular European - markets and companies through free trade agreements, reductions in tariffs, and fiscal and currency devaluation measures. The country witnessed a marked economic improvement during this period, with annual growth rates of over five per cent for the first decade of Ben Ali's rule, and a GDP per capita growth of eight per cent in the latter half of the nineties (King, 2003). However, this was also accompanied by a sharp rise in inequality. Crucially, high levels of unemployment - already a challenge under Bourguiba's regime - remained largely unresolved. The country's population stood at approximately 10.5m at the end of 2010, when the revolution started (INS, 2015), of which one third were between fifteen and twenty-nine years of age at the time (UNFPA, 2015). Structurally, this demographic distribution or "youth bulge", characteristic of many countries in the Middle East and North African regions, translated in Tunisia into a youth unemployment rate twice the national average, from which high education levels – previously a radical determinant of social mobility for the post-independence generations (Allman, 1979) – no longer provided security (Roudi, 2011; UNFPA, 2015; Cammett et al., 2015; Zayani, 2015). In fact, youth and graduate unemployment was exacerbated by an education policy that strongly encouraged the attainment of higher

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<sup>24</sup> See for instance the treatment of this issue in Leila Bouzid's film *Ala Hallet Aini* (2015).

education qualifications, and by the continued discrepancy between employment demand and the low-skilled work on offer (Stampini and Verdier Chouchane, 2011).

In addition to these dynamics, the Tunisian economy during the Ben Ali years was also subject to a pervasive degree of control and interference by the state. Not only did it directly oversee, through the centralised RCD party structure (see above), the running of business affairs and the allocation of projects, work opportunities and promotions, but the president and his wife's family were also able to gradually assume control of key assets and companies in the country. These were estimated to equal, in total, one quarter of GDP by 2010 (Chouikha and Gobe, 2015, p.57). As noted by Camau and Geisser (2003), the growth of the private sector under Ben Ali was in fact in total "symbiosis" with the regime (p.212). Whilst there are contrasting interpretations of the degree to which the centralised control over economic matters inhibited - or perhaps to some level also supported - growth<sup>25</sup>, what is clear is that under these circumstances the links between the economic and political sphere were deeply intertwined, contributing to as much (active or passive) consent to the regime, as nurturing inequalities, injustice and fomenting public resentment in the longer term.

### 2.3. Centralised control of the media sphere

"It is with pride and elation that Tunisians, wherever they are, in the far end of the country or outside it, celebrate today the 23<sup>rd</sup> anniversary of the Change. Our people, through the different stages of their history, have never been, in fact, this dignified, free, prosperous, solidary, sovereign and ambitious."  
(La Presse, 7<sup>th</sup> November 2010)<sup>26</sup>

Under Ben Ali, state surveillance and control of national print and broadcast media, and later of online access, became particularly pervasive and sophisticated, with any indications of political and/or social dissent being closely monitored. The media space in fact occupied a pivotal role in the government's projection and maintenance of power. Although media infrastructure and access to satellite television and internet connections were significantly developed and expanded over the course of the Ben Ali period, the media landscape was submitted to "one of the most repressive" systems among Arab nations "in terms of both freedom of expression and political independence" (El-Issawi, 2012a, p.19). Whilst the media

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<sup>25</sup> See Camau (2008) for an overview of debates on the links between political and economic liberalization.

<sup>26</sup> This excerpt, translated from French, was originally published on the title page of *La Presse* newspaper on the occasion of the celebration of Ben Ali's access to power (7<sup>th</sup> November 1987), often referred to as the date of 'the Change' ('le Changement'). The date of this newspaper publication marked the last anniversary of 'the Change' before the start of the revolution in mid-December 2010 and Ben Ali's removal from power.

sphere had benefited, under Bourguiba's rule, from intermittent phases of liberalisation, particularly during the 1980s with the state's political concessions (detailed above), the situation rapidly changed under Ben Ali. Although hopes of a transition to more democratic, pluralistic form of government that the 1987 coup had raised were initially accompanied by an opening of the media sphere, which saw the re-emergence of some formerly banned publications (Chouikha and Gobe, 2015, p.47), this period was soon superseded by an increasingly systemic control of public discourse, unequalled in post-independence Tunisia.

Several aspects of the subsequent media strategy of the Ben Ali government can be identified: First of all, it was characterised by an overt and extensive censorship system. A complex, interlocking network of state agencies and institutions existed to control media activity, governing everything from licensing, to content production and distribution. One of the most significant of these was the department of political affairs, part of the Interior Ministry, which checked pre-publication media content<sup>27</sup> and reported on the activities of journalists, associations and political parties (INRIC, 2012, p.58-59). Another important state organ with extensive powers of (effectively) censorship was the Agence Tunisienne de Communication Exterieur (ATCE), which became central to the allocation of public advertising budgets<sup>28</sup>. The Tunisian Internet Agency (ATI), established at a later date, dealt with online access and content, again playing a key role in restricting expressions of dissent and criticism of the regime (the online media environment is discussed in detail at a later point in this chapter). Censorship became stricter in the early 1990's (a period outlined above) in which repressive measures were implemented by the state in an attempt to curb the growing political influence of the Islamist movement. During this time, many well-established newspapers such as *El Fejr* and *Le Maghreb* were subjected to regular bans or were even forced to close (INRIC, 2012, p.58). Several legislative amendments to the press code<sup>29</sup> during Ben Ali's years in power merely served to reinforce its repressive character. More generally, media content was scrutinised, critical publications banned and journalists and editors regularly intimidated, imprisoned or coerced into writing favourable coverage. As noted in a UNESCO report on media development in Tunisia (2012, p.32), opposition media in Tunisia almost ceased to exist under the state's centralised system of censorship and other politically repressive measures. The few surviving opposition newspapers that were successful in carving out an alternative space of expression (see Zayani, 2015, p.56-57 for

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<sup>27</sup> This was a new phenomenon in journalism's difficult history with political censorship in Tunisia since independence (INRIC, 2012, p.57).

<sup>28</sup> Extensive details on these different institutions and censorship mechanisms can be found in the final report of the commission for media reform (INRIC, 2012).

<sup>29</sup> The 'code de la presse' was originally established in 1975.

more details) were significantly undermined through the imposition of further barriers at the distribution level. Rival opinions were also discouraged by exerting financial pressure on media companies, in part by threatening to withdraw vital government advertising budgets, subsidies or licences (Chouikha, 2007). These measures were also effective in instilling an atmosphere of fear which engendered self-censorship. Although the number of media outlets significantly increased during the Ben Ali years, the media sphere was marked by a uniformity in perspective that failed to engage the majority of citizens, as indicated, for instance, by existing print distribution figures<sup>30</sup> (Aisen Kallander, 2013). Not only were journalists prohibited from voicing criticism and from covering important political events (such as the Islamists' trials in 1991 and 1992), but journalists were occasionally not even allowed to provide coverage on 'adverse' events that had no political character, such as the aftermath of floods and other natural disasters (INRIC, 2012, p.51). This censorship also extended to foreign media, such as the French television channel *France 2*. The broadcaster had been transmitting content to a Tunisian audience for ten years when it was banned in 1999, apparently as a result of making a number of on-air references to the authoritarian nature of the Tunisian state (Chouikha, 2007).

Secondly, the regime's treatment of the media sphere included its subordination to the pervasive government propaganda, which was particularly pronounced on public media. State institutions such as the ATCE (referred to earlier) as well as the national news agency TAP (the only official information source in the country) largely contributed to supporting this strategy. One dominant theme of state propaganda was the relentlessly positive and (self) congratulatory coverage in print and broadcast news programmes of Tunisian achievements under Ben Ali (as illustrated by the quote above). Such content became increasingly dissonant with citizens' daily lives and experiences (see Chapter 3). Another defining characteristic of the state's control over the media was the gradual emergence of defamatory content attacking and undermining the reputations of some political opponents and regime critics. Equally prevalent were posters, banners and other representations of the president, located in public spaces. The propagation of a 'cult of personality' focusing on Ben Ali was expressed in a variety of ways, such as in the posters covering the walls of shops whose owners sought to avoid trouble with the police, and in the sculptures and effigies symbolising Ben Ali's

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<sup>30</sup> Distribution rates below 50,000 for some of the most established newspapers such as *Al-Shuruq* and *La Presse* (Aisen Kallander, 2013).

rhetoric of progress<sup>31</sup> which were sited in prominent locations, such as town centres and important traffic roundabouts.

Thirdly, one of the key features of the Tunisian media landscape during this period was the government's progressively tighter hold over the ownership of different media outlets in the country. While public media served predominantly as a mouthpiece of the state, and the activities of the private print sector were severely restricted, private broadcasting was authorised for the first time in 2003, in large part due to international economic and political pressures (Chouikha, 2007; Unesco, 2012, p.53). As a result, a number of new radio and television channels emerged over the following years. However, as was the case in the privatisation of other sectors of the Tunisian economy (see above), and in the absence of legislation regulating the audio-visual sector (INRIC, 2012, p.20), these new media companies were far from being independently run. Rather, for the most part, they formed part of the same network of partonage, cronyism and personal/political connections which dominated most areas of economic activity in the country. These broadcasters were also prohibited from reporting on politics (El-Issawi, 2012b), and nearly every single one of the new media outlets was partly or fully owned by members of Ben Ali's extended family or his close allies. *Hannibal TV*, for example, was launched in 2005 and was the country's first private television channel. It was owned by a businessman whose son was married to one of Ben Ali's in-laws. Similarly, *Shems FM* radio was launched in 2010 by Ben Ali's daughter, and *Express FM* was financed by his brother-in-law. Simultaneously, the state rejected numerous other (independent) requests for private media licences (Hostrup Haugbølle, 2013; Chouikha, 2007) and forced those private broadcasting outlets who were permitted to operate to adhere to strict agreements over programming and the management of news content, which additionally required them to avoid any form of political commentary. Government interference also extended to directly involving itself in the choice of staff members overseeing news bulletins (Chouikha, 2007). Control over the channels through which Tunisians received news and other information was not confined to domestic media ownership: Canal Horizons Tunisie - part of French Canal Plus group (but sixty per cent owned by Tunisian shareholders) - started broadcasting on the Tunisian herzian frequency in the early 1990's, but was only able to do so on the condition that it sign a convention stipulating the boundaries of permissible content (Chouikha, 2007).

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<sup>31</sup> For instance, these included sculptures representing a globe and the number 7, which stood for the date of Ben Ali's accession to power (7<sup>th</sup> of November 1987); other sculptures and campaign posters related to regime achievements in the environmental, transport, or technology sectors. Equally, the statue of former president Bourguiba at the center of Tunis was replaced with an imposing clock-tower designed to symbolize modernity and progress (further details in Chomiak, 2013).

Additionally, the media strategy of the regime was characterised by what could be termed a 'containment' strategy, constraining those whose voices were more difficult to control or undermine. The launch of local public radio stations in the early 1990's in the interior regions of the country where feelings of marginalisation had fuelled protests in the past (Hostrup Haugbølle, 2013, p.162) exemplified this approach. In a similar vein, a religious radio station and Islamic bank were launched<sup>32</sup> in the latter phase of Ben Ali's rule to contain the rising Islamisation of parts of Tunisian society (Merone and Cavatorta, 2013, p.257). Ben Ali's regime invested significant resources in camouflaging social and political tensions and propagating a unilaterally positive image of the country to its citizens, but also to its Western interlocutors. It sought to contain critical coverage of the regime by foreign media. The activities of foreign journalists in Tunisia and the distribution of western publications in the country were closely monitored and controlled. Equally, broadcaster *Al Jazeera's* offices in Tunisia were repeatedly shut down following unfavourable coverage of the regime (Lynch, 2012, p.76). Key to managing media coverage of the country abroad was the ATCE agency (referred to above). By progressively becoming the central organ for the distribution of public advertising budgets, it played an important part in the coercion and manipulation of foreign journalists into delivering uncritical coverage of the real situation in the country. As detailed in the report of the national commission for the reform of the media sector after the revolution (INRIC, 2012), the ATCE's activities included 'guiding' foreign journalists' reports on the country in various ways, the issuing of licences for foreign correspondents in Tunisia, the acquisition of print space in foreign publications to include articles written by ATCE staff praising the virtues of the Tunisian government and Ben Ali, as well as making direct payments to foreign journalists to produce 'helpful' articles and other material casting the State in a positive light (*ibid*, p.154-156).

#### 2.4. Rhetoric of progress and censorship practices in the new media age

The profound contrast between Ben Ali's rhetoric of political, social and technological progress, and the government's regressive policy of centralising control over public life, became most apparent with the introduction and development of the Internet in Tunisia. Outwardly, the state strongly endorsed and promoted the development of Internet infrastructure, which served a number of national and international economic purposes,

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<sup>32</sup> Radio station Zitouna FM and Islamic bank Banque Zitouna were launched in 2007 and 2010 respectively by the president's son-in-law.

whilst forming an integral part of the regime's cultivation of the image of a progressive and youth-oriented democracy (IMS, 2002, p.6; Zayani, 2015, p.80). Tunisia was the first, among Arab countries, to connect to the Internet, in 1991<sup>33</sup> (Rinnawi, 2011, p.126). The government invested significant resources into promoting Internet access and boosting what was initially a relatively limited adoption rate of the new technology (Aisen Kallander, 2013). For instance, in the late 1990's and early 2000's, it supported the establishment of the first generation of Internet cafés (known as 'publinets' in Tunisia), subsidised the purchase of home computers, lowered Internet subscription rates, and promoted the development of Internet access in educational establishments (see Zayani, 2015, p.81-82). By the time of the revolution, just over one third<sup>34</sup> of the population in the country used the Internet (ITU, 2011; Internet World Stats, 2011; ATI, 2011). This rate placed Tunisia slightly above the average figure for Arab countries<sup>35</sup>, and second (after Morocco) compared to other countries in the North African region<sup>36</sup> (ITU, 2011). The number of households with personal computers was relatively low<sup>37</sup>, but many users accessed the Internet at work, university, secondary schools or at internet cafés. There were just under five hundred thousand broadband subscribers in Tunisia at the time (World Bank, 2012), and just under one hundred thousand subscriptions to 3G USB keys<sup>38</sup>.

On the other hand, however, the state subjected content and users in the country to one of the most intrusive and repressive Internet surveillance regimes in the world (OpenNet Initiative, 2005), leading Reporters Without Borders (Reporters Sans Frontières) to designate Tunisia in 2006 as one of a select few global "Internet enemies" of free speech (RSF, 2006). Navigating the online space prior to the revolution involved regular encounters with the government's censorship apparatus, widely referred to under the term "Ammar 404" after the "404 error" message that appeared on blocked web pages to pass censorship for a technical error. The Internet's centralised infrastructure in Tunisia enabled the state to systematically control and filter content (OpenNet Initiative, 2005, p.7; Goupy, 2013; Silver, 2011). Indeed, all computer traffic transited through the government ATI agency (Agence Tunsienne d'Internet), established in 1996 when the Internet was first made available to the public. Filtering software such as *SmartFilter* was deployed to detect potentially contentious

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<sup>33</sup> The Internet was introduced for public use in 1996.

<sup>34</sup> Rates range from thirty-four to thirty-seven per cent depending on source and definitional parameters.

<sup>35</sup> Defined here as those countries in the MENA region with a predominantly Arabic-speaking population.

<sup>36</sup> For instance, Algeria was at thirteen per cent, Lybia at fourteen per cent and Egypt, where the Tunisian revolution movements rapidly spread in February 2011, was estimated to have an Internet user rate of approximately twenty-two per cent (ITU, 2011).

<sup>37</sup> In total, the number of computers per 100 inhabitants stood at 13 in 2010 (Freedom House, 2012).

<sup>38</sup> The first 3G network was launched in 2010 and covered about half of the Tunisian territory by year end (Hostrup Haugbølle, 2013, p.168). It was mostly used to access the Internet through a USB key connected to a computer, as Internet access through mobile telephony was very limited and prohibitively expensive at this point.

website content, and roughly one hundred and twenty agents at the ATI and at the Interior Ministry were tasked with the surveillance and censoring of websites (Goupy, 2013). By 2005, the OpenNet Initiative (2005) estimated that approximately one in ten websites were unable to be accessed from within the country as a result of this control mechanism. State use of such technological tools to further tighten constraints on free speech became an increasingly sophisticated strategy for public control. As Goupy (2013) notes, in conjunction with mass-scale phone tapping (fixed line as well as mobile telephony), they provided very effective, cheap and relatively invisible means of detecting and silencing dissenting voices. Public Internet cafés were not immune either from this control, as their owners were required by law to monitor content accessed by users (OpenNet Initiative, 2005, p.4).

Internet surveillance and censorship became steadily more prevalent and oppressive as the number of users increased, and new ways of circumventing Ammar404 were sought by Tunisian users. Recognising this, the government endorsed the creation of new Internet surveillance tools in Tunisia, or purchased them from European suppliers, in the latter half of the 2000's in order to control email, and increasingly also social media content. For instance, email content was filtered through a deep-packet inspection technique with suspicious content being sent to the Interior ministry, and emails were even altered at times, to include threatening messages to intimidate opponents, or pornographic content to inflict reputational damage (Silver, 2011). More savvy Internet users and activists also gradually learned to bypass this surveillance, by migrating away from email messaging, using encryption in their online communications, connecting to the Internet through proxy servers, and adopting anonymous user profiles online (Lecomte, 2013). Information on how to do so was carefully circulated around opposition networks, but the majority of Tunisian Internet users lacked the knowledge, skills, or motivation necessary to circumvent online censorship, or to assume the risks inherent in transmitting, receiving or observing potentially subversive content. An additional weapon in the state's Internet control strategy consisted of increasingly resorting to the judicial system to imprison citizens on the basis of their online activities. This was rather effective in encouraging self-censorship and dissuading many web-users from accessing critical content. At least a dozen bloggers were arrested between 2001 and 2008, as well as several students accused of simply downloading materials critical of Ben Ali (Aisen Kallander, 2013). Paralleling these developments, a number of laws and legislative amendments were drawn up to extensively detail and legitimate existing restrictions on online activities, and to criminalise cyber-dissidents on grounds such as defaming public officials or posing a threat to national security (IMS, 2002; INRIC, 2012).

## 2.5. The escalation of resistance and repression before the revolution

The last three years of the Ben Ali era became increasingly marked by the rise of social and political contention. Unsurprisingly perhaps, the state's intrusive and authoritarian nature served to ultimately undermine its authority, fuelling a sense of injustice, and strengthening the resolve of its opponents. Although Tunisian society continued to be closely subjected to government control, new pockets of resistance also emerged, leading to a level of dissipation, within some circles, of the culture of fear (see Zayani, 2015, p.47-49) surrounding any expression of political activism that decades of authoritarian rule had instilled. Such pockets of resistance became apparent, for example, within the legal profession. In 2000, the human rights league (LTDH) managed to force-through the election of a committee that was fully independent of RCD party involvement, although its activities continued to be severely constrained by the state (Chouikha and Gobe, 2015, p.71). Equally, the National Bar Association elected an independent leadership in 2001 (Zayani, 2015, p.56) and lawyers - who frequently faced restrictions on the exercise of their professional duties - staged numerous protest actions over the course of the first decade of the 2000's. Their experience of protesting was to prove valuable in the revolutionary period (Gobe, 2013). The rise of extremist and jihadi strands of Islamism also represented a growing challenge to the regime's control over public, political and religious discourse. In 2002, the bombing of the Ghriba synagogue on the island of Djerba was claimed by a branch of Al Qaeda in the Maghreb and, at the end of 2006, confrontations with Salafist extremists who were plotting attacks on New Year's Eve, led to fighting between heavily armed militants and police forces in the areas of Soliman and Hammam-Lif, both in close proximity to the capital.

The crises confronted by Ben Ali's regime in its last years were exacerbated by the impact of the global economic crisis on a Tunisian economy that was highly dependent on its European partners. A mix of rising levels of youth unemployment, corruption and the continued growth of the informal economy contributed to a deepening of the country's economic problems. In 2008, the deterioration of the socio-economic context translated, in the Southern mining region of Gafsa, into the most important collective protest movements in Tunisia since the bread riots of 1984. Against a backdrop of high local unemployment and a series of mass redundancies at the *Companie des Phosphates de Gafsa* (CPG), the main local employer, these were sparked off by the results of a recruitment contest deemed to be based on nepotism rather than merit. The initial protests soon escalated and spread, involving wider sections of the local population. Although these demonstrations ultimately remained

confined to the local area, their protracted nature (six months) despite the implementation of violently repressive measures by the government, and the involvement - against its leadership's directives - of the local militant base of the UGTT union, signalled a turning point in the capacity of the regime to enforce its authority. More protest actions ensued in the following years, further widening the underlying fissures between the state and many of its citizens, notably in the town of Ben Guerdane near the Lybian border in the summer of 2010, and in the region of Sidi Bouzid in the autumn of 2010, where local farmers, including members of Bouazizi's<sup>39</sup> extended family, protested against the seizure of their lands by the government (for a detailed account, see Zayani, 2015, p.66-68).

In response to the escalation of these tensions, the regime adopted an increasingly authoritarian stance and attempted to restrict any articulation of political dissent in the media. However, this response in turn engendered further expressions of dissatisfaction and calls for the liberalisation of public and political expression, creating a cycle which the state was unable to break. The discrepancy between the positive image projected by the regime, and the rising instability and recurrent crises on the ground, had reached a new level of incongruity. The national media's complete lack of coverage of the attacks in Djerba and Soliman, and of the protests in Gafsa (Zayani, 2015, p.65), arguably had the effect of further undermining the credibility of the state, and throwing its vulnerabilities into ever sharper relief (Geisser and Gobe, 2008).

## 2.6. The digital media sphere: an increasingly difficult space to control

The proliferation of transnational television and online media technologies made the systematic control of communicative flows increasingly difficult to maintain (Murphy, 2011). For instance, the Tunisian government was forced, in 2006, to abrogate a law aimed at restricting the sale of satellite dishes, having given up on attempts to restrict their purchase and use (Chouikha, 2007). Political activists took advantage of the communicative opportunities afforded by digital technologies to express their opinions, in particular, in the few media spaces that had eluded government control. For some, foreign satellite television channels and online petitions were a means of appealing to international public opinion and non-governmental organisations into exerting political pressure on the Tunisian government by its Western partners (Chouikha and Gobe, 2015, p.58). By 2007, at least sixty per cent of

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<sup>39</sup> Mohamed Bouazizi is the street vendor whose self-immolation in Sidi Bouzid triggered the revolutionary protest movements in December 2010 (as detailed later in this chapter).

Tunisian households had a satellite television dish<sup>40</sup> in urban as well as rural areas (Chouikha, 2007), providing them with access to channels from different parts of the world, including hundreds of Arabic-speaking channels that proliferated in the 2000's. Qatari broadcaster *Al Jazeera*, which played an important role in the transformation of the Arab public sphere from the mid-1990's (Lynch, 2006; El Oifi, 2011), was seen by the state to pose a particular threat, due to its critical stance towards the Tunisian government. It made frequent references to the political situation in the country, and provided a platform from which Tunisian opposition figures<sup>41</sup> could air their opinions. A number of unlicensed Tunisian satellite channels also emerged at this time, launched by exiled political opponents, which primarily broadcasted political content from outside the country for a few hours per week (e.g. *El Mustakillah*, *El Hiwar*).

On the whole however, online media became the favoured space of expression for opposition activists in Tunisia and in the diaspora. For instance, Sihem Ben Sedrine, a human rights activist whose journalistic work had been repeatedly subjected to restrictions and sustained governmental interference since the 1980's, was swift to recognise and exploit the possibility offered by the Internet to reach a wider audience. Having been denied permission to issue a print publication, she consequently launched an online newspaper, *Kalima*<sup>42</sup> (Pintak, 2007), in 2000. But equally, the Internet became increasingly important in enabling the rise of a "digital culture of contention" (Zayani, 2015), from which new actors and forms of activism emerged that were not tied to any officially recognised or clandestine political grouping. Zayani provides a detailed account of the development of cyber-activism in the Tunisian context over the decade leading up to the revolution, carefully charting and contextualising its evolution from early experiments with news sites, newsletters and online forums (e.g. TUNeZINE, Réveil Tunisien) run by a few isolated individuals and groups, many of whom were part of the Tunisian diaspora, to the rise of a community of bloggers who ultimately provided an important connection between offline and online contention during the revolution. Zayani highlights the close link between succeeding waves of Tunisian cyber-activists, their experimentation with various forms of online expression as well as its boundaries, and he provides important insights into how the state's intensive, and increasingly arbitrary, censoring of the Internet inevitably affected all aspects of everyday and social life. The state's

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<sup>40</sup> A figure difficult to estimate due to the proliferation of black market dishes. Chouikha (2007) refers to at least sixty per cent and Mabrouk (2007) mentions a satellite penetration rate of sixty-nine per cent.

<sup>41</sup> Notably for Moncef Marzouki, who was to be elected as president after the revolution.

<sup>42</sup> The Arabic word *Kalima* means 'word'. In 2008 ben Sedrine also co-founded an unauthorised radio station of the same name. After her enforced exile in 2009, the station continued to broadcast its programmes online from France.

approach was to lead to the gradual politicisation of a section of the Tunisian blogging community.

A number of protest actions were organised, over the years, to contest rising levels of censorship as the state assumed an increasingly authoritarian character. These were initially mostly staged by political activists, or members of the media and journalistic community with direct experience of the negative consequences of censorship on their livelihoods. However, anti-censorship campaigns intensified over the last years of the Ben Ali regime, in large part a consequence of the extension of media expression, production, and distribution opportunities offered to a wider section of the population through access to the Internet. A pivotal moment in the evolution of this movement was arguably the hosting by Tunisia of the World Internet Summit (WIS) in 2005, which was used to draw the attention of the international community to the suppression of democratic rights and freedom of expression in Tunisia. Significantly, members of different opposition parties organised a joint protest and staged a month-long hunger strike ahead of the summit. Cyber-activists also coordinated an international web-campaign during the summit to denounce the lack of freedom of expression in the country<sup>43</sup>. The government's response was to censor undesired online coverage, attack journalists covering the protests, and even interrupting the live transmission of the summit's opening ceremony on national television when the subject of censorship was referred to.

The following years were marked by the exponential growth of the Tunisian blogosphere. For the most part, political subject matter remained taboo in these blogs, but at the same time increasingly creative and playful strategies were developed in this space to bypass the regime's imposed boundaries of expression (see Zayani, 2015, p.123-126 for further details). Although the community of bloggers who were bold enough to challenge these restrictions remained relatively small (Aisen Kallander, 2013), their anti-censorship campaigning intensified and became more coordinated, partly reflecting widespread anger at the state's increasingly severe persecution and imprisonment of online dissidents. The anti-censorship movement culminated in 2010 with attempts by cyber-activists to translate online campaigning into physical action in the form of street demonstrations, a day they termed "Nhar ala Ammar" (a day against Ammar<sup>44</sup>), which led to the arrest of its main instigators and

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<sup>43</sup> The campaign was run under the motto "Yezzi Fock Ben Ali", which similarly to the slogan of the 'Kefaya' movement in Egypt, or the 'Ya Basta' motto of the Zapatistas in Mexico and the anti-capitalist association in Italy, meant "enough already" and called for the end of oppression. Yezzi Fock asked supporters to upload photos of themselves holding a sign reading the slogan. The campaign was picked up by several prominent international news media (Zayani, 2015, p.100-103).

<sup>44</sup> With reference to online censors nicknamed 'Ammar 404', as mentioned earlier in the chapter.

the forced cancellation of the protest. More campaigns were organised over subsequent months, and were responded to with further repression. Despite these restrictions and the limited success of these campaigns in mobilising the wider blogging community or a wider public, the intensification of the anti-censorship movement arguably had a more effective longer-term contribution in strengthening the bonds of trust and solidarity in the small community of cyber-activists, which was later to be of far greater significance during the protests leading up to the revolution. It also articulated a powerful, symbolic message to other citizens, within the wider context of rising social contention; that it was possible to defy Ben Ali's regime.

The social media space was not immune to the prevalent nature of political surveillance. In particular, the increasing popularity of social media posed a particular challenge for the government, as they permitted the rapid, widespread dissemination of public opinion. Access to platforms such as video sharing site Youtube and Daily Motion, and photo-sharing platform Flickr, were all censored in turn. However, social networking platform Facebook was particularly problematic due to its popularity and the threat it potentially posed to the regime. Although its use remained predominantly de-politicised prior to the revolution, it was an attractive space for cyber-activists to migrate to, as censorship of the blogging sphere intensified and it became an ideologically compromised space as a result of intensive government propaganda campaigns (Zayani, 2015, p.121). It was not possible for the regime to filter through communications on Facebook to detect suspicious activity, other than by deploying agents to infiltrate this communicative space and spy on individual users. According to Silver (2011), a new software to enable more systematic surveillance had been ordered by the regime, but the revolution occurred before this tool could be delivered and implemented. In the summer of 2008, the government blocked all access to the platform from within the country. A few campaigns emerged to protest against this ban, including one in which users threatened to terminate their Internet subscriptions if Facebook access was not reinstated (Zayani, 2015, p.146). Perhaps most harmful, from the state's perspective, was the reputational damage inflicted by the strategy as it drew unwanted international attention to its broader socially repressive policies, and bred resentment among thousands of Tunisian Internet users accustomed to socialising, flirting and sharing their private lives on Facebook. It remains unclear precisely what triggered a change in the regime's social media strategy, but two weeks later, access to Facebook was reinstated in Tunisia. By the time of the revolution, the platform's use had increased exponentially, with an estimated eighty per cent of just under four million web-connected Tunisians subscribing to it (Internet World Stats, 2011).

### **3. From revolution to democratic transition**

#### **3.1. An unsustainable social and political context**

At the time of the December 2010 protests, Ben Ali had been in power for 23 years, securing five consecutive terms in national elections, which returned him with a consistently implausible share of over ninety per cent of the vote. The growing sense of frustration and injustice felt by a significant section of the population came to be symbolised by the public self-immolation of street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi in mid-December 2010. The act, which took place in front of the municipal building of the town of Sidi Bouzid, followed the confiscation of his cart – his livelihood - by local police, and the refusal of the local governor to hear his pleas for its return. The government's attempted suppression of the ensuing region-wide protests triggered larger-scale demonstrations as widespread economic and political dissatisfaction coalesced, which quickly spread to key cities and the capital. By mid-January, Ben-Ali's promises to introduce more egalitarian policies and implement democratic reform had been broadly rejected by the protesters, and on 14th January 2011, mass mobilisation in the capital prompted the departure of the president to what was to become permanent exile in Saudi Arabia. Bouazizi's act initially caused spontaneous protests in Sidi Bouzid, a town located in Tunisia's geographic centre whose forty thousand inhabitants had experienced decades of socio-economic marginalisation. Only a few months earlier the state had taken repressive measures to quell the protests of farmers in the region (see above), which had an effect on local anti-government sentiment.

No single factor is attributable for the successful outcome of these uprisings. The escalation was partly due to the eruption of spontaneous solidarity protests across the country, as well as riots and acts of vandalism against state institutions and party buildings through which citizens' long-repressed anger against Ben Ali's regime apparatus was vividly and violently expressed. Members of every social group eventually joined these uprisings, and no clear leadership structure of the movement was identifiable (Zayani, 2015; Chouikha and Gobe, 2015). The social, economic and political background to the revolution outlined in this chapter highlight that a renewed political crisis and accompanying public discord in Tunisia were probably inevitable. However, the scale of the escalation, propagation and politicisation of this crisis, from its early stages in December 2010 to the departure of Ben Ali in mid-

January 2011, was tied to a number of contributory factors and the involvement of several groups of individuals and activists.

The specific succession of incidents and the timing of events had a part to play in this escalation. The relatively delayed reaction by the president to these events was, for instance, due to the fact that Ben Ali was abroad in Dubai when these events started (Camau, 2014). Equally, whereas the early phase of the protests had started to lose momentum in Sidi Bouzid, it was a number of rapidly succeeding events that fuelled the movement including the second public suicide of a young man five days after Bouazizi's, and the first deaths of protestors from police gunshots in neighbouring areas two days afterwards. Furthermore, the wider spread of the social movements to other regions can be partly tied to the start of a new term at secondary and higher educational establishments, as many young people gathered again in great numbers after spending time home or with families during the winter holidays<sup>45</sup>. Although these are quite incidental parameters, they are worth mentioning as a different timing may have delayed or altered the movements' escalation.

More significantly, the handling of these events by the regime was an important factor in the rapid expansion, in numbers and geographical range, of the protests. The disproportionate level of violence used by security forces to subdue the protests inflamed an already highly volatile situation. The rising death toll as police started to use live ammunition against protestors was an important catalyst in intensifying the level of violence present in confrontations between local youth and security forces, and had the effect of triggering solidarity protests in other regions. The cumulative effect of this was a gradual shift in most protestors' demands from socio-economic to political ones. By the time Bouazizi died of his burns, two weeks after his act of protest, the movement had reached the governorate of Kasserine, where unprecedented levels of police brutality and cruelty<sup>46</sup> triggered further public demonstrations in key urban centres and the capital. In total over three hundred people died in the events which took place during the revolution, and in the chaos which ensued in the power-vacuum following Ben Ali's departure (Bouderbala Commission, 2012). Close to two thousand people were also injured. The violent response of state security forces was accompanied by an antagonistic and dismissive position adopted by the president in his initial speeches that attempted to delegitimise the protestors by characterising them as terrorists and delinquents. It was only once the movement had built up a strong momentum

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<sup>45</sup> NB: A week later, by 10<sup>th</sup> January, classes were suspended again.

<sup>46</sup> For example, in the governorate Kasserine, a women's hammam (public bath) was attacked and a number of injured protestors were prohibited from accessing hospitals (Bouderbala Commission, 2012, p.21).

that this uncompromising stance shifted, with the president assuming a more conciliatory tone, in his last speech on 13<sup>th</sup> January (delivered for the first time in Tunisian dialect<sup>47</sup>), and promised socio-economic reforms and important political concessions.

Equally, one of the most significant contributory elements to the outcome of the revolution was that different social and political players joined the protest movement during this period, crucially among them was the national union confederation UGTT. Members of local UGTT syndicates were soon involved in the Sidi Bouzid demonstrations, helping to stage and coordinate further protests, and to frame the tragic narrative of Bouazizi's act<sup>48</sup> to the populations of other areas. Although the leadership of the national union was slow to officially express its support of the movement, local branches across the country quickly sought to politically capitalise of events and mobilise workers in different regions (Chouikha and Gobe, 2015, p.76). Eventually, the involvement of the union's leadership, despite its relatively conciliatory position and apparent hesitancy to take an unambiguous stand against the state, marked a decisive turning point in the movement, leading to the successful organisation of a general strike in key cities on 12<sup>th</sup> January, including in Sfax, the country's second biggest city (Langohr, 2014, p.182). Additionally, the involvement of other professional groups, notably that of Tunisian lawyers who staged protests in front of tribunals, also lent the demonstrations important symbolic weight. The role played by the Tunisian army was also fundamental in supporting the movement in its final stages before Ben Ali's departure, as the relatively small Tunisian military body, sent in to protect state institutions, chose to maintain a strictly neutral position in relation to ongoing events. Its refusal to participate in the repressive measures being undertaken by other state security organs at a time when these started to lose control over the situation, effectively translated into tacit support for the socio-political movements.

### 3.2. Media's role during the revolution

The media sphere further contributed to these factors in several ways. Importantly, the role of new media needs to be understood in relation to the wider existing media landscape in Tunisia during this period. National media, for instance, continued to act, as it had in the past, as barriers to the circulation of information about the rising movement. Whereas a complete

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<sup>47</sup> Previously, all presidential speeches were delivered in the more formal classical Arabic language (fos'ha).

<sup>48</sup> For instance, in order to add to the dramatic impact of the event and mobilize more people, these narratives were shaped to highlight Bouazizi's status as a victim (Langohr, 2014, p.181). Equally, the false rumor was generated that he was an unemployed graduate, which gave his desperate act more resonance (Chouikha and Gobe, 2015, p.76). Zayani (2015, p.176) also points out that imagery found online was used to depict Bouazizi's self-immolation as none was available when, in fact, the photo originated from a South Korean cult.

information blackout was no longer sustainable with the spread of the uprisings in January, programming on public television remained unaltered and only minimal references to the turmoil were made in daily news bulletins. Similarly, national media continued to serve as a propaganda tool for the regime. Zayani (2015) notes, in this respect, that public television channel *Tounes 7* was broadcasting images of jubilant Ben Ali supporters celebrating on the streets after the announcement of reforms by the president in his last speech on 13<sup>th</sup> January (p.78).

*Al Jazeera's* coverage of the uprisings also attracted much attention and was regarded by some observers as crucial to regime change in Tunisia. As previously noted, satellite penetration rate in the country was much higher than Internet penetration and, as the main reference point for televised political coverage in the Arab world at the time, *Al Jazeera* was soon accessed by a significant share of a population frustrated by the absence of content on national media sources. The broadcaster was among the first to focus on the events in Tunisia, and it has been argued that it played an active role in amplifying the size and influence of the protest movement, by providing uninterrupted coverage of them at an early stage (Chouikha and Gobe, 2015, p.175). In addition, the nature of this coverage was significant as much of it consisted of amateur video footage, rather than professionally shot material. Indeed, as Hammami (2011) points out, the broadcaster had no official active presence in Tunisia at the time, its local office having been forced to close a number of years earlier due to restrictions imposed by the Ben Ali regime. These limitations on filming meant that the broadcaster relied substantially on transmitting amateur footage instead, which contributed to one of the first instances of what Hammami refers to as a "bi-media" logic, where traditional and new media reinforced each other (*ibid*). Furthermore, Campbell and Hawk highlight in their analysis of the broadcaster's news programming during the revolutionary period (2012) that it also played an important role in shaping a positive narrative about civic empowerment through social media during these uprisings. Campbell and Hawk argue that this helped to establish social media not only as a useful resource, but in fact as an agent of social and political change (p.5), a narrative that supported the broadcaster's own ideological positioning as a proponent of democratisation and a revived pan-Arab identity.

New media provided an important space for the circulation of imagery and information that starkly contrasted with the regime's official discourse. As the protest movements in the country gathered pace at the beginning of January 2011, Facebook turned into a central

online network for the dissemination of highly politicised media content whilst national media outlets were still reconsidering their political position. Citizens with Internet access turned *en masse* to this social media platform with the aim of forming a level of connection with a national political environment in flux. Much of this online media content was produced by individual protestors capturing video footage on their phones, as well as by cyber-activists reporting from the locations of demonstrations and increasingly overtly expressing their support for the movement. The role of these activists was most tangible in terms of helping the dissemination of this content by circumventing and undermining censorship. Indeed, a real battle unfolded online between the regime and cyber-activists during the revolution, which is indicative of the level of political threat associated by the regime with networked online communication. Government censors intensified their control of website and blog content, blocking access to controversial material and arresting some of the most prominent cyber-activists. Additionally, they hacked into emails and social media accounts, stealing passwords and deleting undesirable content (Silver, 2011; Madrigal, 2011) - cyber-attacks that were conducted, according to Silver, directly from the presidential palace (rather than the ATI) with the help of hired foreign hackers. In response, direct collaboration between cyber-activists and IT staff at Facebook helped to raise awareness of these issues and of the disappearance of some content posted on the platform. As a result, additional security measures were instated by them to prevent further attacks, and to provide safer access to the platform for social media users in the country (Denieul, 2013). Counter-attacks were also coordinated, under the name 'Operation Tunisia', by hacking group Anonymous in collaboration with Tunisian cyberactivists, with the avowed aim of disabling the state censorship apparatus and bringing down several Tunisian government websites (Aisen Kallander, 2013). These activities further served to transmit a sense of the political turmoil, and repression, in Tunisia to an international audience. In a last attempt to quell popular anger during his speech on 13<sup>th</sup> January, Ben Ali announced the end of censorship and enabled access to previously censored online sites and social media platforms (e.g. Youtube), but the impact of this announcement was severely diminished by the fact that footage of the protests was already being broadcast, and that extensive politicised use of social media was already underway, irrespective of the regime's surveillance machinery. Many citizens had, by that point, lost the fear of publicly expressing their dissatisfaction and anger with the government.

### 3.3. The discovery of new democratic freedoms and the resurgence of religion on the political map

Although this research focuses in more detail on specific moments during the post-revolution phase, its overall scope covers a three-year period from the onset of the revolution in December 2010 to the resignation of the first elected post-revolution government at the end of 2013. This last part of the chapter provides a brief chronological overview of key events of relevance to understanding this post-revolution period (a more detailed exploration of these issues is provided in subsequent chapters of this dissertation). This three-year period can be roughly divided into three phases: a first phase of just under a year from the revolution to elections at the end of October 2011; a second phase to February 2013 when a political assassination marked a turning point in Tunisia's transitional period; a third phase to the end of 2013 where a continued rise in violence and a second political assassination led to a lengthy political crisis, which ended with the formation of a provisional unity government and the accelerated completion of the new Tunisian constitution. A chronological overview of these events is also included in Appendix (A) at the end of this dissertation.

The immediate aftermath of Ben Ali's departure was marked by a mix of euphoria and anarchy as scores were settled, hierarchies overturned and large numbers of detainees released from prisons (France 24, 2011). The former regime's prime minister Mohammed Ghannouchi temporarily headed the government but, under renewed pressure from the streets during the 'El Kasbah sit-ins', he was forced to resign in March 2011. A new transitional government, deemed to be further removed from the former political power network, was formed and the RCD party was formally dissolved. This government was headed by Beji Caid Essebsi, an octogenarian who previously served as minister under one of Bourguiba's governments, and who was to subsequently establish one of Tunisia's main political parties, Nidaa Tounes. A number of commissions were formed during this period to support the process of political reform and investigate alleged abuses by the former regime.

In this new context, freedom of expression and rights for political participation were radically transformed. Hundreds of new media outlets emerged and, as El-Issawi (2012a) notes, this period witnessed the "legalisation of more than 106 political parties, most of them unknown to the Tunisian voters" (p.19). More generally, a new public realm emerged. Citizens were suddenly able to discuss political opinions in public without fear of reprisals. Public and private media broadcasted a wide range of political analysis and debate programmes, civil

society progressively organised into new structures, and numerous non-profit organisations and charities were created (600 new associations between October 2011 and March 2012 alone (IFEX-TMG, 2012). The media landscape was also extensively expanded. Initially an explosion of print-based titles occurred, evinced by the emergence of 228 new publications (INRIC, 2012) immediately after the revolution, although most of these have since ceased activity. Within eighteen months, five new television channels and twelve national, as well as regional, radio stations were also created, and the Tunisian Internet Agency (Agence Tunsienne de l'Internet - ATI) announced the end of Internet censorship (Unesco, 2012, p.50). In this context, online social networking platform Facebook became a particularly popular and vibrant platform for expression and interaction. In 2011, this social networking site was the most visited website in Tunisia (Kharbachi, 2011).

The first democratic elections in the country were held at the end of October 2011, aimed at electing members of a constituent assembly for a period of one year. This assembly's role was to appoint the new government and to draft a new constitution for the country. Mounting disagreement over the role of Islam in public life and the country's secularist legacy became key issues when the elections brought Islamist party Ennahdha to power, with over forty per cent of the vote (ISIE, 2012). The party's perceived identification with working class interests, and its ability to organise an effective electoral campaign (El-Issawi, 2012a, p.19) were critical components in securing its political victory. Significantly, the party's background as persecuted political opponent under Bourguiba and Ben Ali, as well as its religious foundation, lent it credibility in the eyes of many Tunisians eager to witness a radical break with former governments that were perceived as both morally and financially corrupt. A 'troika' coalition government, led by Ennahdha together with two secular parties (CPR and Ettakatol), was formed by the end of December 2011. The electoral results marked a shift in the socio-political landscape.

The subsequent political phase and its contentious process of drafting a new constitution foregrounded issues that had little or no connection with the revolution's initial demands, and redirected national debate towards questions of religion and national identity (Antonakis-Nashif, 2013). This was partly due to the rise of a religiously-anchored political movement to power, but equally a predictable outcome of the extensive and unremitting restrictions imposed for decades on public discourse in relation to these issues. Polarisation between "the traditional Tunisia of conservative Islam" on the one hand, and "the Francophile Tunisia inspired by the secular colonial regime" (El-Issawi, 2012a, p.20), became

increasingly evident during this period. This situation was exacerbated by the relatively slow progress made by the governing triple-coalition, which faced a multitude of obstacles to implementing effective reforms - including an alarming economic situation (Yaros, 2013). Furthermore, Ennahda was increasingly criticised by opposition groups during this period, due to its perceived tolerance towards the rise of extremist Salafist and jihadi groups (Shadid, 2012) whose actions, such as an attack on the US embassy in Tunis in September 2012, went largely unpunished. These developments gradually served to strengthen opposition to the government, but the increasing polarisation equally stimulated a rise in violence.

#### 3.4. Polarisation of opinions and rise in violence

The one-year mandate of the constituent assembly passed, but the process of drafting the new constitution continued, and no concrete plans for the organisation of new elections were presented. Meanwhile, the political polarisation in the country became increasingly violent (Hinds, 2014). In October 2012, Lotfi Nagdh, a regional coordinator of opposition party Nidaa Tounes, was dragged out of his office and beaten to death by a crowd of protestors. In February 2013, Chokri Belaid, an outspoken left-wing opposition figure and fierce critic of the Islamist party was shot outside his house in broad daylight. The latter assassination sparked widespread protests, attacks on some of Ennahdha's party offices, and violent clashes causing the death of a police officer. On the day of Belaid's funeral, the first general strike in the country in over thirty years was observed and the funeral itself was attended by tens of thousands of people. The Prime Minister, Hamadi Jebali, proposed dissolving the incumbent government and forming a non-partisan transitional government to lead the country in the run-up to hastily arranged elections, a proposal that failed to find the backing of his own party Ennahdha, leading to his resignation. Ali Larayedh, from the same party, and formerly acting as Interior Minister replaced him. Members of an extremist Salafi group were later identified by the Interior Ministry as Belaid's killers - a version of events contested by the politician's relatives and close allies, who pointed to the government's (direct and/or indirect) responsibility in the assassination, and of interference with the subsequent police investigation (Dreisbach, 2014).

The climate became one of deepening suspicion and distrust. At the end of July 2013, a second political opposition figure of the left, Mohammed Brahmi, was assassinated in a similar way. A few days later, eight soldiers were killed by a group of religious extremists in the mountainous region bordering Algeria to the West of the country. These developments

triggered some of the largest scale protests in the country since the revolution. The 'Bardo' square in front of the National Constituent Assembly building was occupied by a group of protestors and opposition politicians from the assembly who boycotted its activities and demanded the government's resignation. A long political crisis ensued. The bloody developments in Egypt during this period informed a significant effort to reach a consensual outcome (McCarthy, 2013) in which civil society organisations, in particular workers' union UGTT and employers' union UTICA played a vital role<sup>49</sup>. The political impasse lasted several months, but negotiations eventually led to the nomination of a new prime minister with a mandate to head a reduced 'caretaker' government. The finalisation of the constitution's drafting and the setting of a date for new legislative and presidential elections was prioritised. The new constitution was adopted in January 2014, and elections were scheduled for October 2014. The tumultuous events of the three years since the revolution took their toll on citizens' political engagement and participation. Campaigns to increase the number of registered voters were met with limited success (*The Economist*, 2014), and voter turnout was low in comparison to 2011, particularly among the youth demographic considered to have fuelled the revolution movement in 2010/11 (Bonhoure, 2014).

### 3.5. Difficult reform of the national media sector

Despite these sudden and very drastic changes, a more in-depth and lengthy reform of the media sector encountered much internal and external resistance. First of all, the new journalistic sphere lacked the skills and resources necessary to support civic engagement during this democratic transition. This often translated into a marked lack of objectivity in media coverage and analysis, further exacerbated by the fact that many journalists and media professionals felt compelled, in the new context, to distance themselves from past practices under Ben Ali, where enforced de-politicisation and an uncritical news reporting equated to serving as voice for the regime. Furthermore, the sector continued, after the revolution to suffer from relatively poor working conditions and remunerations, as well as insufficient professional training (El-Issawi, 2012b). In this context, misinformation and defamation campaigns were occasional reminders of the complexity of the sector's reform process. The situation, also translated at times into misinformation circulating on social media to be picked with no further verification by traditional mass media professionals, thus expanding the online social network's scope, beyond its three million users, to a mass

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<sup>49</sup> The role of four civil society organisations in heading the national dialogue process during this period was rewarded in 2015 with the Nobel Peace Prize.

audience. In addition, journalists were faced with new types of challenges in the volatile and highly contested political context after the revolution. As the Unesco report (2012) highlights, many 'red lines' completely disappeared, yet new boundaries started to emerge after the revolution, including those relating to religion and issues of public morality (*ibid*, p.18), marking a slow return of self-censorship in these areas. Another report (IFEX, 2012) also triggered alarm, detailing the increasing number of attacks on journalists and cases of persecution of members from the media community under the new provisional government (*ibid*, p.8). In addition, the study highlights the weak coordination between state institutions and civil society structures, making political dialogue more challenging (*ibid*, p.16).

Regulation of the transformed media landscape remained problematic. Paradoxically, whilst the practice of free speech was becoming established, the minimal legal guarantees to protect it were initially suspended (Unesco 2012, p.26). Whilst a new constitution was still in the midst of being drafted, provisional legislation on human rights and freedom guarantees remained vague, and emergency law endowed the provisional government with extensive powers. New legislation to guarantee media pluralism and to create the country's first independent audio-visual regulatory institution was officially approved by the government in November 2011, but no concrete measures were subsequently taken to implement them (*ibid*, p.22). In the meantime, criminal law was employed by the judicial system to frame some cases where freedom of expression was perceived to clash with public order and morality, thus undermining civil liberties (Amnesty International, 2012). For instance, one of the cases that attracted particular attention in the early transitional period was that of two young Tunisians who circulated cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed on their private Facebook page. The content, deemed as offensive by a group of private citizens who initiated legal proceedings against them, resulted in the delivery of harsh court verdicts that included a seven-year prison sentence for one of the two young men.

The High Independent Authority for Audiovisual Communication (HAICA) was eventually created in May 2013, but it was not operational until several months later. Its ability to enforce the proposed separation of broadcast media ownership from political activity was (and continued to be) one of its biggest challenges, as most media outlets remained linked to political groupings and individuals, to different degrees of transparency. It is not only the case that some of the old connections to political elites were still in place, and that new ones have emerged, but also that new figures from the media stage have in turn engaged with overt political activities (Abrougui, 2014). This ownership issue needs to also be understood in the

context of the media's political economy in the country and a fledgling advertising industry that was previously controlled by Ben Ali's regime. Sources for reliable viewer numbers are still developing, leaving most private media outlets' financial viability dependent on funding by those pursuing political agendas. As a result, as El-Issawi emphasises, by end of 2012, media platforms were turning into "the main stage for the fierce political and ideological battle" being waged in the country (2012b, p.14). It is also important to note in this regard that under the troika government, these politicised ownership links led to the view, within Islamist circles in particular, that they were under attack by most mainstream national (public and private) broadcasting outlets due to their overly-critical stances on government achievements and defence of secularist values (Farmanfarmaian, 2014). Campaigns to boycott many such outlets were particularly noticeable on social media platforms during this period (this is further discussed in the empirical findings). These key issues of financial transparency and political neutrality were particularly central to media coverage in the run-up to the elections in October 2014. It remains unclear at this stage to what extent the HAICA will be able to execute its far-reaching regulatory powers, but early indications suggest it is faced with significant obstacles. Additionally, the proliferation of unlicensed media outlets such as satellite television channels and community radio stations, but also platforms that promote jihad and violence, has created an extremely challenging operational environment for the regulatory body (Al Jazeera, 2014). In this respect any attempt at regulation is likely to be fraught with difficulty in order to address the pressing need for oversight on terrorism-related communications (Article 19, 2014) without reinstating the threat of media surveillance and control in public perception. These issues are even more tangible when it comes to the online, and social media environment.

With only two rulers in over fifty years, followed by five government leaders in three years, it would be fair to characterise the initial transitional period in Tunisia as a period of intense social and political instability, albeit one with a relatively successful outcome to-date in comparison to other post-revolutionary contexts in the Arab world. Whilst there was a clear common denominator to rally against during the revolution, the subsequent period was characterised by a more complex negotiation over socio-political projects, identities and prevailing ideologies amid a transformed media environment and a newly found pluralism of voices.

## CHAPTER 2

### RESEARCHING A SHIFTING SUBJECT

#### Introduction

This chapter discusses the methodological approach adopted in the thesis, its underlying assumptions and its application in practice. Like most investigations of this nature, this empirical study required a degree of flexibility in its approach to the project. As an exploration of new media and political change, it faced a number of challenges: One of the principal difficulties - but equally a strength – was the politically unstable, rapidly changing, and unpredictable nature of the environment in which the study was conducted.

The socio-political context in Tunisia, as well as its media landscape, underwent significant transformations during the research period (see Chapters 1 and 6), many of which could not have been anticipated. Repeated changes to the electoral calendar, for example, and the occurrence of important political turning points, including two political assassinations during the research period (see Chapter 1 for details), rendered the planning and optimal timing for fieldwork problematic. Equally difficult to predict, capture and decipher, was the lack of change, on other levels, over time in this context. Indeed, whilst numerous social, economic and political reforms were announced with regularity by successive governments during the research period, their implementation was slow and relatively ineffective, leaving many of the issues that triggered the revolution unresolved<sup>50</sup> and seemingly feeding new cycles of social and political disaffection. This context impacted on citizens' relation to - and involvement with – their socio-political reality and, concurrently, their orientation towards different media and communicative opportunities online and offline.

Whilst requiring a level of adaptability in research methodology, the relative complexity and instability of the socio-political backdrop to the study also provided a particularly rich setting in which to address different hypotheses on social media's civic and political role. It offered additional support for the rationale behind the study, which emphasised the local and

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<sup>50</sup> This was particularly the case in terms of deeper structural reforms of the economic sector, as well as in terms of the transitional justice process.

historical contexts of actions, motivations and their consequences, and stressed the application of caution in assuming any overarching causal links detected between communication technologies and socio-political change.

Equally, the study was set in a rapidly evolving academic context, in which a number of theoretical and methodological framings arose to conceptualise different social networking sites, which were in turn relatively unstable objects of investigation. Not only do new platforms, that users might migrate to, emerge, but their architecture, adoption and the media habits that users might develop around them may also be subject to rapid changes. Furthermore, as Karpf (2012) stresses, conducting research related to the rapidly evolving field of online communications poses particular challenges for researchers, as previously established methods may no longer be suitable to capture the complexity of the phenomena at hand, and new methods can be untested and consequently relatively flawed.

The following chapter delves into these issues in more depth, starting with a discussion of the methodological perspective adopted and the rationale behind the study's methodological approach, followed by an outline of the implementation of the interviewing process and the issues that arose with conducting research in the transitional Tunisian context. This assessment is accompanied by a detailed reflection of my own position as researcher and "halfie" (Abu-Lughod, 1991) in this context. The third part of the chapter delves into the online component of the research and the research dilemmas associated with studying social media. Inevitably, this type of study also raises new ethical challenges, a discussion of which closes the chapter.

### **A brief overview of methods**

Over the course of the research period, from the end of 2011 to the end of 2013, I spent extensive periods of time in Tunisia. In total, I visited the country on five occasions, with two of these visits lasting approximately seven weeks (each), during which interviews were conducted. Data gathering centred around three main dimensions of research. First of all, the study started from in-depth face-to-face interviews with a sample of thirty 'ordinary' social media users in Tunisia (as defined later in this chapter). Participants were asked to describe and reflect on their experiences of the revolution period, their political interest(s) and involvement, as well as their media practices before and after the revolution, and to discuss

in further detail key issues arising from their social media practices. Interviews were conducted in October and November 2012, one year after the first democratic elections in Tunisia were held, and at a time when the first elected transitional government was due to be dissolved and new elections were timetabled.

This offline data was complemented by an online component derived from the interview participants' personal social media profiles. This online data was composed of two elements: the first one assessed key patterns from their profiles; the second element contextualized their online practices in relation to broader online patterns based on a small sample of publicly accessible social media pages that the participants interacted with.

Finally, the design also accounted for a temporal dimension to these online and offline practices. It assessed changes in participants' online and offline media practices over time. To this end, their online profile data was compared at different points of the research period. Furthermore, this was achieved via a second round of interviews with participants from the initial sample, one year after the first interviews.

The chapter discusses these methodological elements, and the issues they highlight, in greater depth.

## **1. Methodological perspective and rationale**

### **1.1. Foregrounding social media users' construction of meaning**

In this study, my primary concern was to further an understanding of what it meant for Tunisian citizens to have access to networked media in their everyday lives after the revolution. The basic premise of the study was that social media played a contributing role during the 2011 revolution (see Chapters 1 and 3), and consequently that the political dimension of such online activity in the subsequent period was worthy of detailed examination. As a project that was empirically-led, it was important to adopt and develop a research methodology that was appropriate to, and driven by, the research questions. It was also important to stress, through my approach to the issue, that I had learned the lessons that emerged from early techno-utopian appraisals of the Arab uprisings and what Markham (2014) highlighted as a teleological tendency to attribute political agency and progressive political spaces to social media. Through my methodological choices, I sought to articulate a neutral position in respect of social media's role after the revolution, and to clearly express that although the research focused on social media's civic and political dimensions in this

context, this was simply because I believe that these dimensions mattered, even if they have frequently been misinterpreted or over-emphasised. Indeed, my initial observations pointed to a far more complex and 'messy' answer. As a result, my approach sought, from the outset, to highlight the importance of context in relation to the adoption of different social media practices, to emphasise the perspectives of citizens of varying levels of political involvement rather than taking, as a starting point evidence of mediated action and forms of activism on social media, and to provide different facets of what politically-related activity on social media could mean, rather than to establish a pre-defined framework for how action and participation were to be defined in this context (see Chapter 5 for a detailed discussion of this question).

As a result, the study is mainly anchored in a constructionist epistemological perspective that stresses the contingency of knowledge and of "meaningful reality" on human practices and interactions (Crotty, 1998, p.42), and principally in symbolic interactionist theory, as well to a limited extent in ethnomethodological, theoretical perspectives. Both perspectives have much in common, in particular the foregrounding of the individual as "unit of analysis" (Denzin, 2005, p.124). Through a focus on the meaning-making activities of social actors, both approaches establish a "link between the person and social structure that rests on the role of symbols and common meaning" (*ibid*). However, they also differ in their underlying research traditions, although the debate about these differences has arguably been marred by a lack of comprehension and unfortunate mis-readings (Dennis, 2011, p.349). A closer examination of these debates would divert this discussion from its intended trajectory. However, I will briefly flag up the main issues of relevance for my purposes and contend that their juxtaposition is not only relevant, but indeed beneficial to this study.

Symbolic interactionism emphasises the fact "that people create, negotiate, and change social meanings through the processes of interaction" (Sandstrom et. al, 2006, p.1). This perspective particularly stresses the agency of individuals in constructing social reality and meaning (Dennis, 2011, p.350). It is especially useful as an approach to capturing individuals' engagement and participation in the Tunisian socio-political context in online interactions with each other, as well as in the way they regard these processes in interview accounts. It allows for an assessment of the meanings that individuals uphold, collectively construct and negotiate. Whilst this perspective provides a very useful angle of analysis, it can be limiting in terms of clarifying how this meaning is constructed beyond the way it is conceived of by individuals. Whilst individual discourses, both on- and off-line, will be given particular

attention, a certain critical distance needs to be simultaneously maintained. This is to help clarify the differences and similarities between online and offline contexts, and to help decipher the relation between mutual meaning-making processes. Ethnomethodology is useful in this respect. It emphasises the ongoing creation of social order "through the practices by which people make sense of what others are doing" and it further focuses on their actions as a way to "display that understanding" (Hammersley, 2006, p.103). As Dennis summarises:

Instead of focusing on *what* interpretations are made, then, ethnomethodologists emphasize the *ways* in which meaning is produced, recognized, and transformed during an interaction (2011, p. 351, italics in original).

Consequently, ethnomethodology tends to focus attention on conversational analysis and emphasise the role of "interactional processes", rather than the notion of the social actor being the "driving force" of the interaction (*ibid*, p.352). This view will be particularly useful for my purposes in helping to assess online interactions beyond the meaning they 'appear' to carry, and further open the analysis to how these interactions are in turn delimited by the online environment they are embedded in, including the communicative architecture they are framed by on specific social media platforms.

## 1.2. Ethnographic elements

My approach includes a number of ethnographic elements to address some of these issues, but as I argue, adopting a more rounded ethnographic approach was not appropriate. The notion that culture is contained in a bounded space, within which ethnographers can freely explore it, has long been challenged. Alternative perspectives have been advanced that emphasise movement, processes and links between different entities (Burrell, 2009). But such reappraisals are nevertheless not fully aligned with some of the purposes of a study that aims to foreground citizens' own reflections on their political engagement, and the meanings they associate with social media practices in this context.

Research into media use in the past focused on audience reception, on mass media viewers' interpretive activities or contexts of reception in particular. In doing so, it highlighted the multifaceted discursive dimensions of media. A number of methods were developed and combined in order to more effectively capture the relationship between media user and media text, as well as the space this relationship evolved in. Lesser attention was paid, however, to the performative dimension of media use, to what Jensen (2002, p.165) refers to

as the wider “social context of action”. This was in part because defining the boundaries of such an exploration posed significant challenges, but equally, as Jensen further contends, because of a more pronounced emphasis on conceptualising media as “means of representation, rather than as resources for action” (*ibid*, p.163).

The rise in the usage of ethnographic terminology in the field of media studies since the mid-1980’s, and of calls for a more radical emphasis on context (e.g. Radway, 1988), can then be understood as partly seeking to redress the previous lack of attention to the actions, practices, and identity performances that media use relates to within a wider social context (Jensen, 2002). However, with the emergence of this new methodological emphasis, the difficulties in defining the scope of “media ethnography” also became more pronounced. What space should the researcher immerse themselves in to best capture this broader social dimension, and if no single space is adequate for this purpose, then how can media ethnography be differentiated from other mixed methods and multi-sited research strategies? As Hine (2005, p.8) argues, one of the problems of talking about ethnography is that there is no consensual basis from which to judge what constitutes an ethnographic approach or otherwise. Whilst some (e.g. Lull, 1988) criticised the stretching of the term “media ethnography” to refer to a wide variety of qualitative approaches, others emphasised the need to reimagine contemporary ethnography around the different parts that compose it (Marcus, 1998).

I consider that it is important for a researcher to be immersed in the environments they explore in order to understand them in depth. As Madianou (2015) stresses, ethnography is unique in providing a combination of ‘macro and micro’ lenses through which to explore complex processes, such as those relating to social media use. However, the new media environment also poses substantial new research challenges. For the purposes of this study, I adopted a number of elements inspired by an ethnography, but I do not consider that my line of enquiry is ethnographic. The level of immersion in a fieldsite that a more ethnographically informed approach requires, would not have been compatible with the breadth and variety of views and practices that I sought to account for in this study. Rather I consider my methodology to be a primarily qualitatively-driven mixed-methods approach that includes a number of ethnographically inspired elements. I sought to provide insights into some of the wider contexts of social action, to link media use to broader and longer-term processes, to contextualise findings in depth, and I also drew - to a limited extent - on personal observation

and experience of the wider socio-political context in Tunisia to decipher social media practices.

This methodological approach was also inspired by the new practice paradigm in media research (Couldry, 2004, 2012; Postill, 2010), for its emphasis on what people do “in relation to media” in different contexts, and its exploration of how these media-oriented practices are related to their agency more generally (Couldry, 2012, p.37). The turn to practice in media studies evolved out of a research context whose primary focus was formerly anchored in the study of media texts, or of media institutions, and their purported effects on society (*ibid*). This paradigm was progressively challenged by some strands of audience research, and by media anthropology in the eighties and nineties<sup>51</sup>, in favour of more contextualised, and ethnographically-informed, research perspectives. The media practice paradigm decentres “media research from the study of media texts or production structures” (Couldry, 2004, p.117), and it stresses that opting to (methodologically) take media-related practices as a research starting point assists in avoiding the tendency towards functionalism in media research. It is also an approach which arguably engages more effectively with the variety and complexity of media practices, and that recognises how media and other practices in daily life can be mutually constitutive (*ibid*). For the purposes of this study, it helps to shift focus onto the complex and non-linear meaning-making processes that underpin people’s divergent relations to media within a broader context of action, and to provide insights into how their everyday media practices relate to their orientations towards particular understandings and representations of social order and political reality.

## **2. Offline research components**

### **2.1. Starting offline**

To some extent, the change introduced by networked online communication to media users’ position(s) - a transformation from (passive) audience to potential producers of content - was accompanied by a reversal in the conceptualization of media that Jensen (2002) contends, leads to an emphasis on media’s appraisal primarily as “resources for actions” rather than “means of representation” (p.163). The “wall of idealism” (Horst and Miller, 2012) that

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<sup>51</sup> This paralleled the practice turn in social theory which sought to overcome the divide between structure and agency debates (Couldry, 2004, p.120).

accompanied early online research over-emphasized the transformative potential of new media, and this often translated into a focus on online environments in isolation from offline contexts. Parallels can equally be drawn with past debates in audience theory, where a widely-held perception of audiences as passive receivers of media messages was, over time, replaced with a view which sought to incorporate the many aspects of their engagement and meaning-making activities that had previously gone mostly undetected or neglected by researchers. The adoption of networked online communications and their highly visible role in recent social movements led to an over-emphasis on their framing as instruments for socio-political action. Their conceptualisation as a means of representation was, however, equally challenging, as media users were able to represent themselves and others, and to collectively contribute, interpret and react to each other's framings of socio-political reality. However, with the rise of new media, a new binary emerged and it seemed that mass media audiences were relegated, again, to the realms of passivity, in sharp contrast to a new and distinct category of active online media users. How, then, can media research account for the large number of people who seem to straddle these two seemingly discrete characterizations?

The intense focus on the parallel between new media and agency predictably led to similar shortcomings. This is apparent, for example, when we consider the change in perspective on media users' relation to news and current affairs. Morley (2011) reminds us that, as far back as 1948, Merton and Lazarsfeld were already discussing the relation of audiences to news, and expressing concern about the "narcotising" impact they perceived that the "exposure to a flood of information" would have on audiences' motivation to take action in response to the problems they were informed about (*ibid*, p.240). The role that online social networks seems to have played in disseminating information through actions by individual citizens in recent social movements, such as the Arab uprisings, may suggest that social media provided the ideal answer to this issue. There was much that people could do - and indeed have done - with information and media content they encountered on social media. However, if we take into account the valuable insights that debates in audience theory have provided us with over the last few decades, a different perspective arises. The move from offline to online contexts for the "people formally known as the audience" (Rosen, 2006) is, then, not so much a move from passivity to activity, but one to an activity that is shaped and made publicly visible - to the researcher, among others - in new and different ways. The availability and ease of access for Western researchers to large sets of digital data from the online space in the Arab world during the recent uprisings may have led to an over-emphasis on their democratic

significance, at the expense of both individual local contextualisation and less visible long-term processes underpinning new media adoption and everyday use (such as those detailed in Chapter 1).

In assessing questions relating to new media's role within the public and political spheres, numerous studies to date have tended to choose, as a starting point of their exploration an online environment, online phenomena, actions and activities, or communities and networks, at times incorporating into this exploration offline data, but typically as a subsequent, supplementary and contextualising research element that tends to be given less weight. Whereas such an approach can elucidate online dynamics and actions, it provides less scope for understanding the broader context from which action, as well as inaction, may emanate, or to assess underlying motives and consequences of the adoption of new media in relation to other media uses and forms of connection to a wider public world. As some research has highlighted in recent years (e.g. Madianou and Miller, 2011; Tachi, 2011), communicative opportunities provided by new media technologies do not necessarily translate into their adoption. Instead, individual contexts, circumstances and necessity often motivate acting on these possibilities (*ibid*). As a result, these technological affordances (Hutchby, 2001; Nagy and Neff, 2015) may frame possibilities for action and shape sociality in particular ways, but equally be shaped by their wider social context of use in turn.

No methods could possibly fully capture these processes, but my research goals necessitated an approach which minimised some of these exclusions, and consequently one which started from an offline context. This is not to say that online phenomena are not worthy of exploration in their own right, or that the offline world ought to be seen as more authentic - a valid criticism that Orgad (2009) addressed at those undermining the validity or meaningfulness of the online sphere. It is, however, to remind us of some of the questions that tend to be overlooked when the focus of such an enquiry is almost exclusively on actions and actors. These are issues that I argue are equally determinant of an understanding of new forms of action and power in the networked online era. As Mackay (2005, p.131) contends:

Somehow, decontextualizing use of the Internet exaggerates its significance for identities and everyday lives, and emphasizes the radical potentials and practices of Internet use [...] Much research on electronic communities has examined those who are heavier, rather than more ordinary or less committed, users.

This unbalanced, even skewed, distribution of academic attention has occurred at the expense of assessments of the political dimensions of citizens' Internet usage as part of their everyday lives. Even some assessments, such as Zayani's detailed exploration of the Tunisian context before the revolution (2015) which calls for a reading of politicised new media use as part of everyday life, ultimately concentrate on forms of online contention, highlighting the actions of the minority of bloggers whose online content became increasingly politicised prior to the Tunisian revolution.

My research approach thus sought to provide an alternative framing of new media's political dimension by focusing on media practices by more ordinary and less politically committed citizens using the Internet. If we are to take seriously the potential of networked online communication to empower citizens or give rise to new forms of collective action capable of challenging established political elites and hierarchies, then we need to account for a broader and less politically-conscious group of online users as they engage with – or disengage from – their shared socio-political context and its mediated representation. These are the same citizens who, for the most part, did not participate in online contention before the revolution in Tunisia and yet took advantage, after the revolution, of the newfound freedoms to express their opinion and contribute with others in exploring social media's opportunities for public and political participation. The simple binary of activism and passivity, or, as Corner (2009) contends in the context of attitudes towards authoritarian regimes, of consent and dissent, risk overlooking the majority of people whose commitment and involvement with a cause is far more ambivalent and contingent on circumstances. As Hann (1996) contends, "political society" needs to be understood in a broad sense of what civil society may entail, as not just an antagonism to the state, but also within the "context of the ideas and practices through which cooperation and trust are established in social life" (p.22), and from which the inherently political potential of all communities, may, or may not, emerge.

## 2.2. Participant selection and interview implementation

As the research sought to gauge the attitudes and behaviour of these 'ordinary' new-media users in relation to new communicative opportunities to engage and participate in the transitional socio-political context, three main criteria were established to determine the constitution of this sample. Participants firstly needed to have access to the Internet or to a social media platform, and to make use of this access, at least to a minimal extent. Secondly, I sought to select individuals who did not identify themselves as cyber-activists. Of course,

what constitutes an activist in the Internet age is debatable. It could be argued that the networked joining of forces through small online actions by 'ordinary' users makes each and every one of them an activist. This crucial aspect of networked communication today is certainly not one I seek to discount in my reference to 'ordinary' users as non-activists. The key point, however, is that this study aims to turn the spotlight away from the forms of activism that are planned, and which add up to a more coherent and sustained strategy aimed at fulfilling specific political goals through the use of online resources to engage or mobilize others. The research focuses instead on what can be regarded as everyday practices, taking *as a starting point* individuals with varying degrees of activity in relation to social media and politics, rather than activism per se. Finally, the third selection criteria related to the socio-political profile of study participants. The statistical representativeness of the sample was not my primary objective, and I do not claim to provide any demographically statistically significant findings in this study; instead the study adopted a strategy inspired by grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) and aimed to offer as wide a spectrum as possible of existing positions in relation to the questions explored. My main priority was to have access to a diverse range of social and political opinions and backgrounds in order to compare media practices across these differences, and to understand them in greater depth. The sample thus includes participants from different socio-demographic backgrounds whose political views ranged from supporters to opponents of the transitional 'troika' government, as well as those expressing a distrust of all political factions, and whose religious views variously include atheism, secularism, Islamism and Salafism. I continued to expand this sample and optimised it by looking for under-represented views until a sense of "theoretical saturation" was achieved (Seale, 2012, p.396), meaning that no specifically new trends could be detected. An overview of the sample composition is listed in Appendix (B) at the end of this dissertation.

There are thirty participants in the study in total. They were selected across three main regions: in the capital Tunis, in the coastal Sahel region to the Central-Eastern region of the country, and in the North-Western region of the country in the Kasserine governorate. I sought, through this choice of regions, to provide a level of variety in perspectives, from participants living in urban centres to those from more socially and economically marginalised regions, a variety that was nevertheless shaped by the limited resources of the project and the use of snowball sampling (Bienarcki and Waldorf, 1981) from personal networks of acquaintances. The choice of sampling method was underpinned by two considerations: Seeking access through an organizational setting or civil society association,

for example, would have been more constricting in terms of profile variety; Secondly, the adoption of this sampling method was rooted in a need to establish a relationship of trust with participants whose aim was twofold. It helped to put interviewees at ease and facilitated the achievement of a level of detail in conversations with participants who, for the majority, had limited experience or knowledge of qualitative research methodologies. Furthermore, because of the progressive political polarization of opinion in Tunisia during the research period, accessing individuals through a chain of existing contacts facilitated the development of a certain level of trust and enabled interviews to be conducted in greater depth than would have otherwise been possible. In particular, it made it easier to overcome potential barriers, including dispelling the potential suspicions of supporters of the transitional Islamist-led government towards my research, as there was the unavoidable potential of being identified as a Westernized Tunisian holding a correspondingly liberal (and consequently 'secularist') agenda. Although it was largely unproblematic to converse with people from a broad range of backgrounds, the quality of interactions and openness in discussing media practices and political attitudes in detail was improved by this snowballing approach. As an additional precaution, interviewees' identities were kept anonymous. No real names of participants were consequently used within the text of the study and any other details that were likely to make them identifiable, either through their quotes or their online data, were accordingly excluded from the research.

Interviews were semi-structured and it was possible to cover most points fairly consistently across the entire sample. Typical questions discussed during the first interviews focused on five main areas: 1/ an account of the participant's experience of the revolution period, including their media use; 2/ current (i.e. during autumn 2012) 'offline' media practices; 3/ a general account of online and social media practices before and since the revolution (e.g. time spent, typical activity, changes); 4/ a more detailed discussion of current social media practices (e.g. motivations for different interactions, examples, trends and issues); 5/ engagement and participation in different forms of political talk and actions. A detailed example of interview questions is listed in Appendix (C) of this thesis.

As previously referred to, one of the key elements of this methodology was the inclusion of a temporal dimension in the research. My strategy aimed to capture the evolving culture around social media use by Tunisian citizens during the research period, and to respond to a call by Karpf (2012) to take "Internet time" more seriously into methodological consideration, as online communicative technologies are "undergoing a social diffusion process and an

ongoing series of code-based modifications” at the same time (p.640). Whilst I adhere to Karpf’s view that that the rapidity of such changes can provide research findings on the Internet’s political impact with more limited “shelf life” (*ibid*, p.647), I believe that such changes only reinforce the need for a more detailed and in-depth understanding of underlying dynamics of use, and that much can be learned from incorporating a temporal dimension into such research, particularly in a transitional context such as the one I focus on, in order to better capture a framing of change – however transient. I therefore opted to include in my research a second set of interviews with the same participants one year after my initial encounter with them and to assess the evolution of their social media activities over the research period.

The second round of interviews was to some extent adapted to the responses of the individual participants' in the first interviews, but covered quite similar territory in terms of media practices and political involvement. Additionally, it included a more detailed discussion of any changes that had taken place in the socio-political sphere since the first interview and their underlying factors, where relevant. These interviews also incorporated a few additional points to further probe perspectives on freedom of expression and limitations to autonomous expression, as well as perceptions of collective versus individual identities. It was not possible to have access to all the participants in the sample for the second round of interviews as circumstances had changed for some and others expressed no interest in being interviewed for a second time. I was, however, able to re-establish contact and interview two-thirds of the original respondents at the end of 2013.

As previously mentioned, interviews took place in October and November 2012, followed by a second round - as well as some additional contextual interviews - one year later. The interviews had no specific time limit and in some cases lasted up to two hours. I requested permission to record them on my mobile phone, to which most participants agreed. Additional interviews to help contextualise some of the questions were conducted with several online activists, politicians, civil society actors, journalists, and administrators of Facebook pages. Equally, early test interviews with close acquaintances provided useful informal feedback on the interview protocol. For instance, some respondents had preconceptions of what constitutes research, typically associated with large scale quantitative surveys and opinion polls that had become quite common after the revolution and which were frequently cited by media outlets. However, interviewees were often intrigued by the more discursive form of the interviews, and pleasantly surprised by the

outcome of the lengthy discussions. I had also memorised the issues I wanted to cover in the interviews to avoid reading questions from a paper and to establish a more conversational tone. The reflective depth achieved through these discussions resulted in generally positive feedback from the interviewees. Many seemed to have enjoyed the interview experience and the topics discussed. As a result, the same interview technique was subsequently used for this first round of interviews, but I spent more time clarifying in advance how interviews would proceed and the purpose of the methodology.

Interviews were mostly conducted and answered in Tunisian dialect, occasionally mixed with some French. The language choices of respondents had an interesting sociological dimension that, although not the focus of this project, warrants a brief explanation as much of this subtlety was lost in the translation process<sup>52</sup>. These choices were linked to a number of factors including regional, socio-economic, political, and postcolonial, as well as gender, that all played a part in the study participants' identity performances and their interactions. These are inevitable and integral processes in any research and are important to flag up. For instance, depending on the context in which it was used, French could indicate identification with a bourgeois Francophile urban elite, be a sign of demarcation from calls by Islamists for re-acquaintance with a more authentic Tunisian identity (and thus a political positioning in turn), contribute to the performance of a particular feminist or emancipatory stance, or in turn point to the positioning of a respondent towards my ambiguous Western-Tunisian identity. Similarly, differences in the adoption of different accents<sup>53</sup>, or use of a rich classical Arabic vocabulary, were at times indicative of regional identifications, education levels, or political stance for example. As a result, I sought to pay attention to these linguistic dynamics in my interactions with interviewees, and attempted, where possible, to strike a balance between, on the one hand, adjusting to, and reflecting, the respondents' use of language in order to put them at ease or avoid antagonising them, and on the other hand, performing a relatively neutral identity, for instance, by avoiding to over-emphasise the use of French or classical Arabic.

Similarly, the choice of location for the interviews was the result of a flexible and adaptive approach. At times, this involved a level of negotiation between participants' needs and the requirements of the project, in particular as I tried to conduct interviews in a relatively quiet

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<sup>52</sup> However, in the quotes included in the empirical chapters, I inserted some of the words and expressions in their original language to highlight some of these language uses.

<sup>53</sup> For example, the pronunciation of the [gu] which is not a letter in the classical Arabic alphabet, has a political dimension in Tunisia. Tunisians with regional accents using the "gu" used to be marginalised and derided by sections of the urban upper and middle classes before the revolution. Conversely, this became a source of pride for some after the revolution. The use by leftist politician Hama Hammami of the "gu" in the media was quite revolutionary in the early days of the transitional period.

location to allow more in-depth and uninterrupted engagement in conversation to unfold. However, this was not always feasible and I also attempted to accommodate respondents' preferences so far as possible. As Herzog (2005) argues, interviewees' choices of locations are significant in terms of the social dimensions and identity performances they highlight, and they can be constitutive of the knowledge such spatial parameters enrich a study with. Interviews mostly took place in research participants' homes, works places or in cafés. These settings were partly dictated by societal gender norms that respondents, to varying degrees, wished or implied a need to adhere to.

Being a female researcher in the Arab world has both advantages and disadvantages. In the field of political research for example, it has not been deemed to pose any significant issues (Clarke, 2006). Often such research takes the form of short quantitative surveys aimed at the general public or, on the other hand, lengthier interviews with 'expert' figures. However, as my interest was primarily in non-experts and my research entailed a need to conduct in-depth interviews, my approach necessitated some adjustments. Furthermore, as someone conducting research "at home"<sup>54</sup> (Strathern, 1987), there were greater expectations for me to adhere to local gender norms, in particular in those less urbanised areas where the public and private spheres were more distinctly gendered. For instance, whilst most female participants invited me to their homes for the interviews, the majority of male participants were interviewed in less private locations. As a young female researcher, it was more problematic to interview men in private, as in some contexts it was perceived as socially unacceptable for a man and woman to be together and unaccompanied in a room. Many of the interviews with male respondents took place (at their suggestion) in their work place or in cafés. One participant was also eager to conduct the interview in a bar, a choice I interpreted as seeking to ascertain a non-conservative identity, whereas at the other extreme of this dynamic some male respondents were anxious to avoid shaking my hand or have any form of eye contact with me as a way to establish their interpretation of religiously-informed gender norms, and to maintain a distance aimed at expressing respect towards women. In four cases, I also conducted interviews in houses of mutual acquaintances, with the acquaintance being present in a separate room, with doors left ajar as a way of putting everybody at ease.

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<sup>54</sup> This is discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

### 2.3. Interpretive parameters and assumptions

The theoretical discussion of the project's methodological perspectives at the beginning of this chapter has laid the foundation of a framework for data assessment. The interview accounts were assessed on the level of the meanings explicitly advanced by the respondents, the meanings they constructed, and the assumptions they implied. The assessment can further be seen as anchored in the method of discourse analysis. Although no fundamental agreement exists between scholars as to its definition (Barker, 2008), it can be broadly delineated through a common concern with the social role of linguistic and symbolic systems and their power to "shape identities, social practices, relations between individuals and all kinds of authority" (*ibid*, p.152). The approach selected for the analysis of the data will inevitably suffer from the typical shortcomings commonly associated with qualitative research in the broader validity of the claims it may purport to make (Jaworski and Coupland, 2005, p.30) – which I fully acknowledge. There were some limits to the precision that could be achieved in the interview analysis due to linguistic issues. As Tunisian dialect is not a formally written language, transcribing the recordings phonetically carried with it its own challenges in terms of the subsequent analysis. To facilitate the process, interviews were instead fully translated and transcribed in English. Computer software NVivo was then used to help manage the data coding process.

Consequently, such an assessment also necessitates a critical assessment of my personal interpretative assumptions. As Kendall argues (2009, p.109), because the researcher's identity inevitably differs from that of the interviewees, an awareness of differences and similarities is crucial in order to decipher how these may be affecting responses. Although no claim to objectivity is made, as this would not adhere to my ontological stance, particular care was taken to be consistently aware of the ways in which my judgment shaped responses and interactions with the study participants, and my subsequent assessment of material. The comparative elements of the study, at the level of a temporal comparison between sets of interviews, and at the level of a comparison between offline and online discourses, further support this effort.

Doing research in the country I grew up in was an enriching, but equally a challenging endeavour in the specific context of this study, and one that calls for a more detailed reflection. There are three aspects, in particular, that warrant attention: my own identity as insider/outsider and 'halfie' (Lughod, 1991) conducting research in Tunisia; my own

positioning vis-à-vis the revolution events in Tunisia and the political landscape that subsequently emerged; and my personal experience and use of traditional and new media relating to the Tunisian context. Conducting this type of research has been tied to a number of methodological approaches and terminologies such as “insider ethnography” (Hayano, 1979), “auto-anthropology” (Strathern, 1987), and “auto-ethnography” (Reed-Danahay, 1997; Denzin, 2014; Ellis et al., 2011), with varying definitional scopes. Whilst some of these approaches call for a systematic and in-depth reflexive contextualisation of research within the researcher’s personal experience and biography, at a more basic level most of these methods share a concern with the position of a researcher exploring his/her own culture. As my methodology only partially intersects with these debates, it is at this broader level that I tap into them to address some of the issues that arose with my research.

In anthropology, the notion of researching one’s own culture has been at the centre of much debate as it raises particularly probing questions about research context and conditions, and in particular the power dynamics inherent to the relationship between researcher and research objects (Rapport, 2014, p.25). Indeed, proximity between the two challenges and undermines the notion - on which much positivist-oriented research is based - that distance is a necessary factor in conducting research and, by association, it threatens to collapse the separation between subjectivity and objectivity, and the scientific epistemology on which the notion is based, which implies that a value-free knowledge of culture and human experience can be produced (Marcus and Fisher, 1986; Ellington and Ellis, 2008). Challenges to these perspectives have grown, however, in particular in connexion with anthropological theory’s tradition of being rooted in the opinions and judgments of Western anthropologists on the cultures of ‘native’ - and often colonised – others. Equally, the gradual contestation of such perspectives has been accelerated by the increasing focus, over the last three decades, on the study by researchers of their own societies and cultures in the West (Jackson, 1987).

Beyond the question of whose culture the researcher is best placed to explore, these debates challenge essentialist or fixed notions of identity (national or other), and highlight the complexity and fluidity of identity performances and enactments by those inside and outside a given culture. As Lughod (1991) denotes, these issues become particularly apparent in the case of “halfies”, ‘native’ or ‘semi-native’ researchers whose position cannot be simply categorised, from the outset, as being insiders or outsiders. These, she contends, appear to destabilise the notion of distance and objectivity in anthropological research, but in fact

highlight, perhaps more markedly than in the case of other researchers, that “the outsider self never simply stands outside” (p.468).

At the same time, proximity between researcher and researched raises a number of issues. Whilst it can facilitate access and provide deeper insights into cultural subtleties, it can also make it more difficult for researchers to sufficiently detach themselves from the contexts they are exploring (Strathern, 1987; Hastrup, 1995) and from the implicit hierarchies of power that govern the construction of a given social order. This can make it particularly difficult for researchers to maintain a level of independence in navigating between personal, public and academic identities, and it can blind them to the interpretive assumptions they ground their assessments in. These limitations have, however, gradually led to a re-evaluation of anthropological research approaches towards a broader turn to self-reflexivity (Rapport, 2014, p.35).

In media studies, deeper engagement with the issues that insider research can raise has been less prevalent (Madianou, 2010, p.429), although the situation is changing. Furthermore, the reassessment of what counts as ‘insider’, from fixed notions to more conceptual and fluid conceptions (Hastrup, 1995) of the terms, also raises questions on the need for reflexivity in anthropologically-inspired media research. These issues are of growing importance in an era of increasing media pervasiveness in the everyday life of both researcher and researched, particularly so in a digital age in which media affordances increasingly transcend local and national borders. This, perhaps more markedly, brings to the fore the need for the media researcher to account for his/her own position not only with reference to a specific regional cultural setting, but also in relation to mediated transnational and networked online cultures.

These ambiguities were certainly reflected in my own position as a researcher who was educated in, and a long-term resident of, the UK; of dual Tunisian-German heritage, who grew up in Tunisia, and whose research ‘at home’ was funded by a British research institution. This meant that, quite often, participants were unsure how to categorise me and I paid particular attention to instances where this appeared to matter. Some interviewees seemed to interact with me as they would with other Tunisians, speaking in Tunisian dialect, taking for granted that I understood some of the references they were making, and including me in the expressions of the groups they felt they belonged to (e.g. “our generation”, “we Tunisians”). Others, in turn, seemed to place me as a foreigner and Westerner, expressing surprise that I spoke Tunisian or, as one female participant did, complementing me on my

height and my 'soft' hair. Some respondents, without being prompted, explained in detail political events they made reference to, which they evidently considered I might not be aware of (e.g. that elections were held in 2011, that a politician had been assassinated). A few research participants also felt compelled to compare the Arab and Western world, making rather derogatory generalisations about Arabs whose views they set against 'Western' development, rationality and democratic values. These comments were phrased in a way which suggested that the speaker(s) expected to provoke me into taking a position. Mostly, however, participants appeared to switch between different modes of interaction, inclusion and exclusion. As Sabry (2010) notes in regards to the comparable context of Morocco, the relationship with the Western world of many inhabitants of the region is frequently complex, and he makes the general observation that their discourses of "Arabness", of Western modernity, and of Islam, as a "symbolic repertoire", are not fixed, nor ever "total" (p. 153). Instead their positions towards tradition and modernity unfold, and are resisted, on different levels in the everyday. An attempt was made on my part from the start of the project to remain continuously aware of these dynamics and to establish a level of neutrality towards these reflections, whilst maintaining a non-judgemental attitude. Similarly, I sought to be particularly sensitive to what interviewees appeared to take for granted about my familiarity with their perspectives, by dwelling on some of the links they inferred as obvious and asking them to explain their views in more detail.

It is also important, in this regard, to briefly reflect on my own political position, and how it may have impacted on interactions with interviewees, as well as on my interpretative assumptions. The underlying impetus for focusing on digital media in the Arab world is related to an interest in the possibilities for alternative media content and communicative configurations to support change towards a more egalitarian society in the region. Having grown up in Tunisia, I was acutely aware of the social, economic and political inequalities in the country, although these were perhaps less pronounced than in other countries in the region. This dissatisfaction with the status quo in Tunisia prior to the revolution did not translate into any specific adherence or positioning in relation to the emerging political sphere following the collapse of the Ben-Ali government. Nevertheless, as someone who was brought up in an Islamic culture, but held agnostic religious views, I was less sympathetic to the political project of the Islamist party, than to the liberal and secular agenda of other political groups, although ultimately none of the emerging political figures and parties held particular appeal for me. This meant that, in recruiting participants through snowballing, starting from personal acquaintances and contacts, it was initially easier to access

participants whose views were closer to my own, and more difficult to access supporters of ideological movements such as Islamism and Salafism. I was fully aware of this imbalance at the outset, and consciously set out to redress it through achieving an overall sample which attempted to broadly reflect the plurality of opinions in Tunisian society at the time.

Finally, as Strathern (1987, p.17) notes, whilst the conducting of research in a familiar environment can result in a richer understanding, it can also result in a lack of critical objectivity. It may additionally, at times, lead to more pressure on 'native' researchers to provide positive accounts of their 'home' setting to a western academic audience, and to a more heightened sense of awareness of the "risk of betrayal" that all research necessarily carries (Darling-Wolf, 2003, p.110). This was certainly an issue I could relate to: I was acutely aware of my disappointment at some of the research findings, which served to paint a quite different picture of the Tunisian democratisation process than that I had hoped for.

This self-reflexive account would not be complete without reference to my perspective and practice in relation to the Tunisian media sphere. These were also characterised by a level of ambivalence during the research period, tinged with cautious optimism about social media's disruptive potential in the early days of the revolution, and an awareness of the specificity of the Tunisian context in terms of the highly politicised nature of online interactions. I sought, throughout the research period, to maintain an engagement with different Tunisian broadcast, print and online content, which was at times emotionally taxing due to the level of verbal aggression and symbolic violence encountered in some discourse - particularly on social media. My personal use of social media was also, to some extent, shaped by the online research component as participants connected to my personal Facebook account, a point I discuss in further detail below.

### **3. Online research component**

#### **3.1. Approach and delineation of online fieldsite(s): Following users' interactions**

Orgad (2009) highlights that one of the prevalent interpretative assumptions in research on "people's experiences of the Internet" relates to the distinction between online and offline and rests on a view of online relations as meaningful in their own separate terms (p.35). This distinction has been progressively challenged (e.g. Sade-Beck, 2004; Wilson 2006; Beneito-

Montagut, 2011) and this area of media research is increasingly evolving towards a less disjointed analysis of online and offline materials, but such an approach needs to be more systematically embedded in online media research in a manner that shows these materials as contextualizing each other (Orgad, 2009).

Nevertheless, Internet research is still quite an unstructured research area with much scope for creative methodologies, as Baym and Markham (2009) highlight. A number of voices have called in this regard for the adoption and development of new ethnographic methods to explore online media and communications, described for example as “virtual ethnography” (Ruhleder, 2000; Hine, 2000 and 2005), and “netnography” (Kozinets, 2010). To a point, these discussions have extended previous debates on the critical adoption of ethnographic terminology (e.g. Postill and Pink, 2012) and partially highlighted the necessity of creating new and more flexible approaches (Pink, 2009, Markham, 2013) to assess online contexts as fieldsites (Hine, 2005), to consider online fieldsites as networks (Burrell, 2009), or to focus on a multiplicity of sites in Internet research beyond notions of networks and communities (Postill, 2008). With the development of social networking sites, such approaches were also developed to explore social media uses and environments, such as what Postill and Pink (2012) refer to as social media ethnography – a term they are careful to frame as being ‘internet-related’ rather than exclusive to the exploration of online sites.

Both the discursive and performative dimensions of media use are important, and I believe there is much to be gained from combining explorations of the two. As media users progressively adopted new media technologies and turned to online environments, more uncertainty developed for media researchers regarding the focus and sites of exploration. The issue was further complicated by social media platforms, on which the boundaries between media users and producers, as well as between media text, users’ interpretive activities and socially performative actions, become extremely indistinct. This lack of clarity translated into a number of questions and methodological issues.

This study sought to explore the socio-political dimensions of social media use by ordinary citizens as part of their everyday lives in post-revolution Tunisia. As previously discussed, a key part of this objective was to avoid a focus on forms of activism and groups of activists as a starting point for the research. However, determining who and what to assess instead for a study of ‘ordinary’ citizens and the everyday was equally problematic, as this opened up the

prospect of boundless online and offline fields of research. This is not a new problem in media research, but one that is significantly complicated by online media.

A further important departure from ethnographic research on social media, relates to the nature of the immersion such an approach involves. There are divergent opinions about the adequate level of interaction with online users that informs such research (Postil and Pink, 2012). This issue relates to broader debates concerning the level of interaction that participant-observation entails, which are further complicated by the communicative set-up of online research as it facilitates a greater level of observation at a (physical) distance. With the social media environment, the issue raises a different set of questions as lines between the researcher's private, public and academic lives can also become blurred. For instance, the online environment may expose, to the researcher and to research participants, information about the other that they may not have wished to disclose. This issue requires more careful management of traces of online interactions, particularly in a context such as the one I studied, which became increasingly polarized. The dynamic was reinforced by communication and opinion expression on social media as I later highlight in the empirical findings of this study.

I thus elected to adopt a different, less obtrusive approach than that of some existing social media research, one that started from a sample of ordinary users selected offline whose social media profiles were accessed and analysed retrospectively. Rather than observing participants during their communicative activities on social media, I requested access to their profiles after the end of the interviewing process, once a level of trust had been established, as a way to avoid impacting on research findings through my online presence. I believe that this approach was particularly helpful, as the outcome of initial interviews suggested that some participants were quite unsettled by the fact that I wanted to discuss their media practices. From the perspective of a number of interviewees the question of why someone writing a thesis at a Western institution would be interested in their Facebook usage rather than talk to cyber-activists, was perplexing. Some subjects were almost apologetic, pointing out that they were relatively inactive on social media and that perhaps they were unsuitable as interview subjects as a result. Whilst I attempted to clarify the aims of the study in more detail, this highlighted to me that potential access to private social media accounts– if permitted – might have a degree of impact on subsequent use, as some of the respondents may have sought to represent activity that perhaps better fitted (what they assumed to be)

my expectations. My choice to opt for a more self-effacing approach and to seek access to social media data retrospectively was well suited to addressing some of these issues.

The online methodology of this study was designed along predominantly qualitative lines. However, it also incorporated a limited number of quantitative elements. Whilst my approach adheres to a more interpretative agenda, it also supports a pragmatist paradigm that takes into consideration the weaknesses and strengths of quantitative as well as qualitative research elements, and aims to bring forth their mutually enriching aspects (Hewson, 2006, p.180). As Deacon (2008) contends, the "incompatibility thesis" between the two categories tends to overstate the "antinomy of positivist-orientated and interpretivist-orientated research concerns" (p.95). The opposition between the underlying assumptions of the two perspectives needs to be acknowledged but it should not, I argue, inhibit research from resorting to a well-delimited emphasis on "the factual characteristics of the object under study" (Silverman, 2012, p.34) - whether these characteristics are of a quantitative or qualitative nature - as long as an open mind is maintained towards alternative readings of these characteristics, and a critical eye is simultaneously applied to their reading as 'facts'. Furthermore, as Hine (2005) observes, the sheer volume of data available to researchers in an online environment calls for more proximity between qualitative and quantitative approaches in research designs (p.109). In this sense, the incorporation in a qualitatively-led study, of elements to quantify such environments can help in supporting their reading and depiction.

The decision to focus the online component of the research design primarily on social media platform Facebook was deliberated over at length. Although the study did not initially intend to specifically focus on the platform, the centrality of Facebook to the online research component became increasingly evident. The suspicion that Facebook had not only been widely adopted in Tunisia, but was in fact the dominant social media platform in the country and an essential part of online practices more generally, was confirmed from the very beginning of the interviewing process. During the initial test interviews, the time many of the interviewees reported to spend on the platform compared to other media suggested that its role was central to media practices of a substantial number of people who had online access. Furthermore, these findings revealed that social media platform Twitter had not met the same success in Tunisia as in other countries. It was perceived as being in some way more 'exclusive' as a social media platform, principally used by the media, academic, and political elites, as well as by activists. By contrast the perception of Facebook as being more of a

mainstream platform appeared to be widespread. Although the selection of participants in the study was open to different types of Internet use, the entire sample had a Facebook account and only a few study participants used Twitter in addition to Facebook. The design of my online research component resultantly centred on analysing data from this platform. This focus meant that particular attention and critical distance needed to be paid to Facebook' communicative architecture and political economy in order to avoid a superficial analysis of its socio-political scope. An uncritical approach risked simply giving resonance to the platform's "rhetoric of transparency and openness" (Van Dijck, 2013, p.14) and to the conflation between "(human) connectedness and (automated) connectivity" (ibid, p.12) on which the branding strategies of many contemporary 'social' media companies are based.

### 3.2. Online data gathering and assessment

The gathering and assessment of social media data consisted of two aspects. On the one hand, personal account data was amassed in order to identify key trends, similarities and differences in practices between research participants, and evolutions over time, mainly in quantitative and anonymised terms. An initial assessment revealed that the majority of content shared by individuals on their Facebook walls was not user-generated, but instead stemmed from other sources, and that the same source tended to be regularly drawn on by each participant. Consequently, the second component of the online data gathering process consisted of a sample of ten publicly accessible Facebook pages that participants used as their primary source for material they shared. This data served to complement and contextualize personal account data as it provided a basis of comparison between individual and large-scale collective patterns of interactions (e.g. 'likes', 'shares', written comments), as well as insights into a different and more public communicative environment that participants operate in.

The assessment of this online data drew on a mix of content analysis, conversation analysis and discourse analysis. The online data was treated successively as texts, as discursive acts, and as part of a broader conversation between disparate parts of the social networking platform and framed by the communicative paths of its design. Social media data from participants' private accounts over the entire research period was first analysed for key statistical trends such as developments in the number of content pieces shared by participants on their walls and subsequent interactions. The type of content present on individual accounts was also analysed from the following two angles. First, I assessed how

much of the material was user-generated, rather than shared from other sources. Secondly, I looked into the nature of these materials to thematically code them and capture, in particular, the extent to which they were politically-related. Every effort was taken when analysing this data to primarily extract common and comparative trends between participants and interview accounts, such as the framing of some of the events during these periods by government supporters and opponents in the sample. Personal and private third party data was not used. Similarly, I assessed the use of profile pictures that were not personal photos. It was common practice for Facebook users to use symbolic images for their personal profile pictures during some of the research period, such as Tunisian flags or photos of politicians. These uses were analysed more closely, whilst personal profile imagery was not used.

The second element of the participants' social media accounts that was analysed in detail consisted of the sources from which content was distributed at the height of the political crisis, and mass protests, in July 2013. As socio-political polarisation was most palpable at this point, and quite different representations of events were produced on social media accounts, this period was chosen as the basis for the selection of a sample of publicly accessible social media pages that were most frequently used by the participants as sources of politically-related content.

The overall analysis of this online data presented particular challenges due to its complexity and the sheer volume of available material. As Baym (2009, p.175) notes, researchers are faced, more than ever before, with the tensions between breadth and depth when they come to explore a topic across the potentially unlimited number of possibilities that a converged global networked communications environment presents to them. These issues were particularly evident in regards to assessing the broader online context within which participants operated as social media users. Data from this sample was limited to a single date, the 31st of July 2013, which fell in the midst of the political crisis after a second political assassination and a deadly attack on soldiers triggered the beginning of one of the largest wave of protests in the country since the revolution. Despite this narrow analytical time-frame, the amount of data gathered from this sample is very significant, with over a hundred separate pieces of content per day on some of these pages and up to several hundred comments per single item. To tackle this issue, analysis of these pages focused on the following key aspects. First of all, these source pages were coded by overall profile information, political orientation, content type and frequency. Secondly, a more detailed

coding was conducting of content posted on each page in the sample on 31<sup>st</sup> July by source, number and type of interaction ('shares', 'likes', 'comments'). Finally, content analysis was undertaken of the three most interacted-with posts on each page, as well as of key discursive and conversational patterns in their comments discussion.

Collecting the online data was slightly complicated by the mix of languages, and alphabetical and numerical characters used across Tunisian social media content and commentaries. There were limitations to data extraction possibilities, as some of these resulted in illegible materials (e.g. the order of Arabic letters was inverted from its original right-to-left form). Data requiring more detailed scrutiny was therefore archived mostly manually through screenshots in order to facilitate repeated access, categorization and coding.

#### **4. Ethical considerations**

Despite my relative familiarity with Tunisian culture, one of the challenges I encountered was in reconciling a Western-informed approach to research ethics with quite different local attitudes towards privacy. For example, when it came to interviews, the fact that I asked to conduct them in private on a one-to-one basis was, at times, met with suspicion or incomprehension, and at times, it was simply not possible. It occasionally transpired that requests to interview subjects separately were interpreted as a sort of accusation, with the implication that the subject in question was concealing something from those around her/him – be it friends, or family. This culture of openness extended to discussions around potential access to personal social media accounts with Tunisian friends who were advising me. Their readiness, and the anticipated readiness of others, to allow access to data which would - from a Western perspective be considered personal, was surprising. To my Tunisian interlocutors, however, this openness appeared self-evident and a strange issue for me to even be considering. For example, it was pointed out to me that the practice of accepting complete strangers as 'friends' on Facebook was relatively widespread in Tunisia at the time<sup>55</sup>, and that individuals were very much aware that nothing too personal ought to be shared on the platform. Additional support for these perspectives was provided at a later point, when respondents reflected on the public nature of the subject matter shared by individuals on their private social media accounts. "If you put it on Facebook it's like you hung it on your washing line outside for everyone to see", one interviewee memorably said. There

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<sup>55</sup> This changed later during the research period.

seemed to be quite a prevalent perspective that social media provided a public space of expression, rather than a more ambiguous public-private one. Consequently, it was not used to share particularly personal information. The discovery of new freedoms of expression after the revolution reinforced the use of the platform for exchanges on public and political matters rather than personal ones (see Chapter 4). The insistence by some participants that there was 'nothing to hide' made me quite wary overall. I was conscious of the increasingly contentious nature of interactions on social media, of progressive distrust and divisions between different social and political stances in the country, and that seemingly well-established attitudes towards Internet usage could undergo significant changes over time, which led me to be cautious about this unproblematic attitude towards data access, as the political became increasingly personal and social media users became more accountable to others for their publicly-performed political identity expression (see Chapter 5).

A number of measures were taken to ensure that the research was conducted ethically. Participants in the study were under no pressure to take part in the first, nor second, round of interviews. Particular care was taken to clarify the framework and aims of the research. Although most of the interview material does not cover any particularly sensitive issues, interview data was treated anonymously as an additional precaution, and care was taken to ensure that any quotes used in the final written analysis of the findings were used in a way that does not make participants identifiable. Permission was sought at the beginning of all interviews to proceed with recording the soundtrack of the conversation for analysis purposes, and where this permission was not granted, written notes were taken instead. All interview data was treated confidentially, labelled anonymously, securely retained and will be destroyed after the end of the research project. Archiving and use of online materials was approached along similar lines and these were kept on a separate external storage device.

Permission to access and assess participants' social media accounts as part of the research project was sought at the end of the interviews, and it was further clarified that personal data would not be used, that data would be treated anonymously and that the majority of it would be utilised to draw out common trends as well as some statistical evidence. Respondents who agreed to the online component of the research, were asked to send a 'befriend' request to my Facebook account and, as previously clarified, data was examined retrospectively. As a result, this connection with my private account did not impact on their activity. It was also indicated to participants that they were free to 'un-friend' my account at any point.

Access to online data used in this study also presented new ethical challenges. Consent from Goldsmiths' ethical committee was sought, and guidelines from the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) and the International Communication Association (ICA) were consulted for additional advice. Many of these issues are relatively new to the field of media and communications research and some remain open to debate. Of particular relevance to my research design is the issue of dealing with data from the sample of 'public' Facebook pages. There is a level of ambiguity on how to treat content from such pages as there were no privacy restrictions to accessing them and no social media account was needed to do so (they were openly accessed like other websites). At the same time, these pages document interactions and comments by third party individuals who may not be aware of these unrestricted privacy settings, or despite this awareness, may hold certain expectations of privacy, or in regards to the use of this data (AoIR, 2012, p.6). But equally, as the pages do not constitute a closed community and any social media user can interact on them, it was impossible to seek informed consent from all users. Sveningsson Elm calls for a conception of private and public as a continuum rather than a dichotomy (2009, p.74) and that the research site - but also the nature of its content and context - need to be closely examined in order to make ethical decisions about the suitability of conducting research where no informed consent is available (*ibid*, p.85). Internet research guidelines stress the inherent lack of clarity regarding how these research dilemmas ought to be resolved and suggest an in-depth assessment on a case-by-case basis in order to balance ethical considerations with research needs (*ibid*, p.9).

I believe that my approach in the context of this research is primarily aimed at detecting and making sense of social media user-interaction patterns in relation to content. My understanding of the use of public pages in the Tunisian context would indicate that references to the content pieces from these pages for research purposes posed no harm. These are materials that can be considered similar to newspaper clippings or comparable to news content from other media. However, particular care was taken to ensure that any unethical content (such as particularly violent imagery or defamatory material) was approached with due consideration to the consequences of referring to it. In terms of the interaction patterns of third-party users with this content, the research also sought to protect user identities in referring to such cases, and identify and elucidate collective patterns rather than concentrate on individual users. Finally, there was also the issue of how findings referring to such content will be published, as this raises issues relating to intellectual property. As the code of practice developed by the ICA highlights "scholars find their research

goals stymied because of confusion over their rights to quote” digital content in particular, today, and the area suffers from a “disconcertingly wide variety” of practices (ICA, 2010, p.5). The association clarifies that the law allows using copyrighted materials without securing permission under some provisions, including that of “fair use” which academic research work falls under when quoting such materials for purposes such as analysis, commentary or illustration in academic publications. This does not, however, mean that their publication is ethical. I have made decisions on a case by case basis, anonymised all data and opted as much as possible to provide descriptive accounts instead of such content when it was relevant.

## **Conclusion**

As discussed in this chapter, the methodological approach had to account for a relatively complex context and to creatively navigate between the needs of the study and the delimitations drawn by a number of ethical and practical issues that needed to be taken into consideration. By combining assessments of interviewee accounts of their everyday media practices, retrospectively accessing their online activity in relation to the socio-political context, further drawing on that activity to contextualise large scale patterns of online interactions at the height of a political crisis, and incorporating a comparative assessment of media use over time through a second set of interviews and an analysis of research participants’ online activities over time, the research design directly addressed key methodological issues identified in this chapter. The next four chapters present the outcome of these empirical investigations, in conjunction with a theoretical framing of the questions they relate to.

## CHAPTER 3

### EVERYDAY SOCIAL MEDIA USE IN AN EVOLVING INFORMATIONAL LANDSCAPE

#### Introduction

Chapter 1 assessed key literature on the complex factors that underpinned the protest movements in Tunisia and highlighted that, although media-centric accounts failed to adequately explore the complexities of these progressive transformations, new media nevertheless played a contributing role at the start of the revolution in Tunisia in spreading information, partially resulting in a wider mobilisation of sections of the population. However, less is known and understood in regards to how citizens related and reacted to the different sources of news and information they encountered - online and offline - in their daily lives before the revolution, and in the period leading up to it. Similarly, the question of how they experienced the changes in the media landscape, which was transformed from a highly monitored and controlled pre-revolutionary paradigm, to a revolution period during which media practices radically changed, remains underexplored.

There is a crucial political dimension to this question. Citizens' orientation to mediated information about their shared socio-political environment, is an important factor in how they conceive of their relation to each other as citizens, of the political sphere, and of the hierarchies that order these relations. It can consequently also play an important role in supporting or undermining the maintenance of these hierarchies and order, over time. However, as Coleman et al. (2012) observe, the political dimension of media and information tends to be theoretically explored – and often idealised - at the expense of more sociological and phenomenological perspectives. Providing this alternative perspective matters for a number of reasons: First of all, equating information access and the process of democratisation is overly simplistic and excludes important sociological elements as the analysis in this chapter highlights. In particular, trust plays a crucial part in how (and on the basis of what criteria) public knowledge is formed, and made sense of. Furthermore, offering these alternative viewpoints is important within the contextual parameters of this study, as the citizens whose accounts and reflections inform this study experienced a radical change in

their conceptions of the media, and its place in their shared social and political lives, prior to and after the revolution.

To address these questions, the chapter employs a chronological structure. It opens by revisiting the developments leading up to this period, tracking respondents' media practices before the revolution to determine which media acted as points of reference for the participants in their everyday lives, and how they formed an opinion about their socio-political reality in a highly censored and closely controlled public space. The chapter then focuses on research participants' accounts of the revolutionary period between the end of 2010 and the beginning of 2011. It draws on their experiences of this time to develop an understanding of how knowledge of social movements was acquired and, more specifically, how an awareness of their importance was formed. It provides an overview of the different communicative means employed in these processes and of the shifts in the way respondents used media during this period. This analysis aims to function as lens through which to better view and understand the post-revolution context, which is explored in subsequent chapters.

### **1. Disconnecting media and enforced disengagement before the revolution**

This first part of the chapter analyses the study participants' accounts and recollections of their media consumption before the revolution. It is not intended to be a comprehensive assessment, as the pre-revolution period is not the principal focus of this research. Rather, the discussion aims to provide an outline of key trends and the orientations of these Tunisian citizens towards different national and international, analogue and digital, and offline and online, media sources within a censored informational environment. Elucidating how these were used by respondents in their everyday lives to form knowledge and opinions of their socio-political reality, is intended to provide a grounding for a deeper understanding of the media context from which a highly politicised social media use emerges during and after the revolution. In this section, I highlight how censorship in Tunisia before the revolution reinforced a disconnection of citizens from the public realm, a disconnection that was even echoed by some in their private interactions, and further enacted online. What this analysis further aims to emphasise is that, despite its profound disconnect from most citizens' everyday lives, and its lack of credibility during the last years of the Ben Ali regime, Tunisian media – and national news broadcasting in particular – nevertheless appeared to play an important role in participants' media habits. It acted as a marker for daily routines, and

equally signalled the maintenance of the Ben Ali regime and the political status quo, constructing a reality that respondents oriented themselves against, and yet were obliged to accept.

### 1.1. A dual reality

The civic and political dimensions of media are often discussed from a normative and idealised perspective emphasising their potential for instigating change, questioning public matters and holding the political sphere to account. This viewpoint is set against predominantly Western contexts where democracy is relatively well-entrenched. By contrast, perspectives on media in undemocratic settings have attracted less attention – or, in many such cases, the terms of the debate have tended to provide a rather simplified perspective of the media as an effective propaganda tool enforced on a passive citizenry to manipulate public opinion. Such a view fails to differentiate - as Schudson (2011) notes - between media power and indoctrination (p.23), or to take into account the complex combination of factors that support the resilience of authoritarianism beyond its imposition through coercive means, as Camau (2008) notes with reference to the Tunisian context<sup>56</sup>. Furthermore, as Gunther and Mughan (2000a, p.20) stress, such viewpoints provide limited insights into the individual contexts in which propaganda media are received, as circumstances vary from case to case and are contingent on a broad range of factors. Instead, what authoritarian or totalitarian contexts often reveal is the extent to which propaganda media content under such regimes is in fact profoundly at odds with citizens' experiences of their shared social reality (*ibid*, p.19), and how limited the success of such media content is in shaping "the basic political attitudes and orientations of their subject populations" (Gunther and Mughan, 2000b, p.404). Corner (2009) refers to a similar discrepancy between the "dual reality" of authoritarian regimes, and of citizens' everyday experiences, a gap that citizens have no choice but to inhabit (p.9). Corner contends that the position this duality enforces is far more ambivalent for most citizens than that which categorises them as either consenting or dissenting to undemocratic rule. In such a context, those actively accepting or opposing such regimes usually form a minority, whereas the majority of the population tends to inhabit a more ambivalent position (p.6). Understanding the implications of this duality in terms of citizens' use of media in their everyday orientation to public matters is, therefore, important.

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<sup>56</sup> Camau highlights, in particular, the importance of transnational and economic factors in this respect.

In the context of Tunisia before the start of the 2011 revolution, control over media content was exerted through direct and indirect means (as detailed in Chapter 1) and this served to uphold and bolster a positive image of the regime and of the population's purported satisfaction with the government. However, the assumption that the closely controlled media landscape of the Ben Ali years was successful in shaping a positive public opinion about the regime that was only undermined with the advent of 'new media', is erroneous. All participants in the sample were fully aware of the undemocratic nature of the public and political sphere before the revolution, although more specific knowledge of issues and abuses of power in the country varied from participant to participant. The seemingly apolitical citizenry before the revolution – or what Camau (1984) refers to as 'negative citizenship' – resulted from decades of surveillance of not only the media space, but also of public and private space generally, ensuring consensual silence on those issues in discourse. Whilst this trend was initiated under the long rule of president Bourguiba (1956-1987), it was further intensified under Ben Ali's regime, resulting in what Geisser and Gobe (2008) refer to as an utterly "locked political space"<sup>57</sup>.

The government's Interior Ministry deployed an array of measures to maintain this degree of control, including an extensive network of informants and spies to detect dissident views and activities. As in many other authoritarian regimes, such surveillance mechanisms simultaneously acted as a means of repression, but equally as a way to gauge citizens' opinions and the public mood (Corner, 2009, p.11), revealing the regime's acute awareness and deep-seated anxiety about its lack of legitimacy. This monitoring extended to networks of informants in cafés, taxi drivers eavesdropping on and reporting passengers' conversations, and of agents infiltrating online forums or tapping the phone lines of opposition figures (Human Rights Watch, 2007; Arfi et al., 2011; Thorne, 2012).

Participants in this study were fully aware of this control and surveillance before the revolution. The majority of them further articulated a similar knowledge of the tacit rules that accompanied this censored public space. Engaging in political discussions and expressing any form of critique of the regime was regarded by most interviewees as a dangerous activity. Political subject matter was, largely, taboo. The resulting climate of anxiety and fear in relation to public issues before the revolution, was vividly evidenced by interview accounts. Significantly, and as already alluded to, this fear was not limited to public interactions. A number of respondents described feeling that their private life under the Ben Ali regime was

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<sup>57</sup> Translated from French: "un champ politique verrouillé"

equally exposed to state surveillance. A vivid example of this was provided by one of the interviewees, Sonia, who lived in Tunis with her husband and small child; she recalled how her brother, who had migrated to Europe several years earlier, shared information about corruption issues in Tunisia during one of his phone calls with her. She was so scared that the phone might be tapped, and of the possible consequences for her and her family, that she decided to hang up the phone on him. The contrast between the safety and spontaneity of general interactions in the home environment, or with friends and family members, and the self-control individuals had to exercise in such situations are illustrative of a shared, frequently unspoken, knowledge among citizens in the country of the communicative norms they needed to adhere to. Ahmed and Mehdi, both still children when Ben Ali first came to power, made - independently of each other - very similar observations on this issue.

Ahmed:

Before, it was impossible to talk about politics. You couldn't even utter the word. If you wanted to share a tiny little word about politics with friends, you had to be in a closed space, and even then you worried that the walls would report you.

Mehdi:

Before, something called politics, even in private, one wouldn't talk about it. Even in the house, in one's home, one wouldn't. To the extent that they used to say even the walls have ears [hatta el hyout and'ha wedhnine].

Their wording indicates not only a sense of pervasive surveillance and associated paranoia, but also the level of self-awareness that accompanied citizens' self-censorship of political conversations in this impoverished sphere of civic communication. The resultant space was marked by an avoidance of political talk in public for the majority of respondents, and a very limited and cautiously managed circulation, in private, of news and information relating to social and political developments in the country, that increasingly also included, during the last years of the Ben Ali regime, jokes about the president and his wife's entourage, as a means of expressing dissent. Everyday life for these participants, their constant awareness of the regime's pervasive presence, and the discrepancy between their social reality and the regime's representation of it, served to impose a collective silence on – and disconnection from - the sphere of shared public concern.

## 1.2. Disconnecting media

Prior to the revolution, disinterestedness in politics and current affairs was a position that a large majority of the research participants were obliged to accept, as a result of the restricted information that they were given access to in their everyday lives, their limited trust in national media, and their perception of the regime's omnipresence in the public, and to some degree also private, sphere. This translated in most cases into a distancing from Tunisian media's representation of socio-political reality, and news in particular.

The sense of detachment was prevalent in many accounts, particularly among younger participants who had grown up under the Ben Ali regime. Narjes, for example, considered that her distancing from news was because: "the news we had didn't touch us so closely". It was striking that many interview accounts of participants' media usage before the revolution were articulated in similar terms to Narjes'. Tunisian media's representation of socio-political reality being separate from their own common experience as citizens. Often a distinction was drawn between, on one hand, a political sphere which Tunisian media was identified as forming a part of, and a sense of togetherness, communal experience and culture on the other hand: "before we<sup>58</sup> didn't hear about anything" (Ahmed), "politics was not part of our culture" (Youssef). By contrast, their perspectives about national news and the regime's representations of events in the country framed them as an external and distant reality, or a 'façade' as Sadiki (2002) notes with reference to Tunisia's pseudo-democracy. These points equally confirm the notion of a separation or duality between the reality constructed by the regime's propaganda and citizens' everyday experiences - that Corner (2009) and Gunther and Mughan (2000b) pointed to as emblematic of civic experience under authoritarian regimes, as discussed earlier.

Ahmed, for example, referred to this representation of the country by the regime as "an image for the tourists and investors abroad". Sonia justified her disinterest in Tunisian news before the revolution by stating that it was "[all about] his excellence and his wife" - subject matter to which she felt unable to relate, in contrast to international news material which was of greater interest. In a similar manner, Meriem regarded Tunisian news bulletins and shows as unimportant, as they were "always the same", denoting her awareness that by not offering any variation in narrative, such news provided an unauthentic and untrustworthy reflection of reality. Similar points have been made in relation to other contexts, such as

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<sup>58</sup> Emphasis added.

those of former communist states (e.g. Mihelj and Huxtable, 2016, p.9). The notion of 'liveness', and its associated connotations of unfiltered reality and authenticity, seen as a key feature of television's distinctiveness (Scannell, 2014), was undermined, particularly in news broadcasts; instead a controlled, predictable and repetitive reality was expressed, thereby denying television news the ability to deliver anything truly newsworthy, in turn severing many viewers' sense of connection to such content.

The media in Tunisia played a crucial role in restricting citizens' knowledge of events in the country and in shaping a representation of their socio-political world that transmitted a relentlessly positive image of Ben Ali's regime. As previously indicated, the banality, and obvious artifice of this representation was of very limited interest to the respondents, lacking both credibility and relevance. Qualitative assessments, by the interviewees, of pre-revolutionary national media as news and information providers, were consequently almost uniformly negative in this sample (P1, P2, P4, P6, P7, P9, P11, P12, P15, P16, P21, P22, P25, P28, P29, P30)<sup>59</sup>. When referring back to their media use before the revolution, the vast majority of participants indicated that they were relatively disconnected from news and information about their country. But how did this view of Tunisian media and this enforced disconnection from the media sphere relate to their everyday media habits before the revolution? As these media were considered as generally failing to fulfil their informational purposes, respondents developed different strategies and attitudes to distance themselves from the regime's propaganda in their daily use of media. Alternative media sources, international media in particular, played a role in these strategies, but as transpires from the following assessment, this role should not be over-emphasised.

### 1.3. Orientations to national vs. international media

Most of those who had access to satellite channels watched them to some extent, and at times also followed the news on these channels; this was not a regular occurrence, however. Some participants preferred to watch French channels such as France2, TF1 and France24 (P2, P12, P20, P28), but overall, pan-Arab satellite broadcaster *Al Jazeera* was cited as the main source they referred to in relation to their pre-revolution news habits outside of the national media context. However, only a minority of respondents (twenty per cent) acted on the possibility of accessing alternative media content by intentionally avoiding Tunisian

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<sup>59</sup> Participant numbers are used here to enable an easier overview. Their names are used for more detailed discussions. A list of names and corresponding numbers is included in Appendix (B) at the end of this chapter.

media (particularly television) as much as they could. This group consisted mostly of respondents who turned to satellite television and/or the Internet to access pan-Arab and Western media content exclusively, and in place of any Tunisian media sources. This was the case for Ghada for example, a retired bank employee in her sixties, who expressed her profound dislike of national media - public broadcaster *Tounes 7*<sup>60</sup> especially. She explained that she refused to watch it before the revolution, preferring French satellite channels for their international news content, and pan-Arab channels to follow soap operas. Similarly, Hanen, who was in her early twenties, expressed contempt for the public broadcaster – including its news coverage- and stated that she never watched it before the revolution, regarding this as a “pointless” and “unthinkable” activity. Her perspective was in line with a more general disinterest in news and political issues she had before the revolution. She spent most of her media time online chatting to friends, downloading American television series or watching pirated films on DVDs.

Most other participants in the study made reference to using, rather than avoiding, Tunisian media in their everyday lives before the revolution. However, all seemed to have developed relatively ambiguous and complex positions as audiences and consumers of these national media. Approximately one third of them turned to Tunisian media, but were very selective in their choice of programming. Overall they sought to ignore or avoid the distorted mediated representation of political reality in the country, particularly through the news media. In their interview accounts, these respondents were keen to emphasise their distance from such representations. For example, five male participants in this group explained that, although they regularly read Tunisian newspapers before the revolution, it was only for the purpose of finding out about football results. Similarly, listening to radio programmes was exclusively associated with access to music and entertainment programmes, rather than any news or information on current affairs. Televised news programmes, in particular the daily evening news broadcast on *Tounes7* at eight o'clock in the evening<sup>61</sup>, was referred to by several interviewees in this group. Some, such as Ahmed, were keen to emphasise that they watched the channel but skipped the news, as they found its daily enumeration of the regime's activities and grandiloquent achievements difficult to bear. Others were keen to explain that they only watched the evening news for its international section, avoiding the first half on national coverage because they found it tedious. This was the case for Sonia (referred to

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<sup>60</sup> *Tounes7* (aka. *Tunis 7* and *Tunisie 7*) means “Tunisia 7”. The 7 in the name of the national channel refers to the 7<sup>th</sup> November, date of Ben Ali's access to power in 1987. The number was used as a symbol of the regime in various propaganda campaigns and logos.

<sup>61</sup> This was the first news broadcast of the day on this channel.

earlier), who explained that she skipped the national content or sometimes had it on in the background on low volume whilst engaging in other activities, waiting for the international section of the bulletin.

The remainder of the research participants followed Tunisian media regularly, including evening news bulletins, but they were keen to stress their distance from the content presented to them. The way in which interviewees reflected on their news-viewing habits before the revolution was particularly revealing in this respect. Watching the national evening news was an act that, for many respondents, was one which appeared to be performed reluctantly - at least when discussed retrospectively. Some interviewees felt compelled to justify their stated pre-revolutionary viewing choices. For example, Zied, a respondent in his early thirties, said he used to watch the national news broadcast every evening before the revolution, but he was swift to add that this was “out of habit” rather than a matter of interest or enjoyment. Furthermore, and echoing a number of studies on media orientation patterns and news consumption routines (e.g. Madianou, 2005; Gauntlett and Hill, 1999; Jensen, 1990), the activity of watching the evening news was an important marker of time, often associated with the time preceding, during or following family dinners and watching evening programmes together, for a number of participants. Interviewees over thirty years old were more likely to participate in this media routine whilst younger respondents only watched the news if they were still living at home with their parents. This was the case for Lobna, Salma and Neila for example, all under twenty years old when the revolution started.

Satellite access supplied the participants with the opportunity to gain a broader perspective of international developments, but references on such channels to the situation in Tunisia were relatively rare. As detailed in Chapter 1, Ben Ali’s regime endeavoured to limit the impact of international media on Tunisian citizens’ opinions. For example, it halted the distribution in Tunisia of French newspapers containing articles critical of Tunisian politics, and it intimidated and obstructed the work of foreign journalists in the country. However, limiting the transmission of similarly critical content on satellite television proved more challenging for state censors, as programming by broadcasters such as *Al Jazeera* occasionally focused on Tunisian politics and directly challenged the regime’s meticulously managed representation of the socio-political reality in the country. Access to alternative international media sources, and satellite television in particular, by Tunisian citizens presented new problems for the regime in maintaining its previously firm hold over the terms of mediation

of content dealing with political or social issues. However, the importance of satellite broadcasting in viewers' everyday media routines should not be overstated either. Whilst increasingly political and politicised programming - such as content delivered by *Al Jazeera* - since the mid-1990's certainly encouraged the opening of a pan-Arab public sphere (Lynch, 2006), it did not follow that access to such alternative media and informational sources was a prominent feature of respondents' everyday media habits. Instead, as Meyen and Schwer (2007) contend in their assessment of the role of West German media in the media routines of East Germans under the German Democratic Republic, domestic media content continues to be relevant in such contexts despite its widely acknowledged shortcomings, principally because viewers could more easily relate to it and - in the absence of reliable information - citizens continued instead to base most of their opinions on their everyday contexts, encounters and experiences. In this sense, national as well as international media sources can be seen to have played roles, but arguably limited ones, in shaping and orienting Tunisian citizens' perspectives towards the public and the political sphere in this undemocratic context.

For participants with access to satellite television, such channels helped to occasionally satisfy some of their informational needs, but made a limited contribution in terms of forming a better knowledge of their local context. For Habib, who had a keen interest in Middle East politics, satellite television provided a means of expanding his awareness of international affairs when such information was severely limited in the national media. National news bulletins and television were nevertheless an important component of his daily media routines. He explains:

Before, media were totally locked down so we used to get information through other means, mainly when satellite TV came. I remember the first Gulf war in 1992, we just had our satellite dish installed, it was the first few satellite dishes on tower blocks. I remember when that war started I followed all of it on satellite TV. But there wasn't much about Tunisia.

Similar sentiments were expressed by Farah, a primary school teacher in her fifties, who said that she used to be uninterested in politics before the revolution, but nonetheless felt it important, even at the time, to find out about what the national news "have to say". This was despite the fact that she was deeply sceptical about their representation of political matters in Tunisia. Farah also had access to satellite television and stated that she enjoyed pan-Arab broadcaster *Al Jazeera's* news and debates, but also stated only to have watched it

occasionally, unlike the national news broadcast on *Tounes 7* which she viewed on a daily basis.

The orientations towards national and international news and information sources are arguably indicative of the ambivalent position that many Tunisian citizens considered themselves to be in, in the years leading up to the revolution, when the discrepancy between the state media's representations was particularly detached from citizens' own immediate experience of the social, economic and political realities with which they were confronted. Tunisian media was also the official mouthpiece of a regime many wished to distance themselves from, but it equally served to reiterate and reinforce the reality that citizens were compelled to accept, a reality that was both marked by the complete absence of political or politicised media content outside of news bulletins, as well as by the perceived inauthenticity of the socio-political reality rendered by national news content. By consistently failing to provide citizens with accurate or relevant information, the implicit message in Tunisian media was one of unbroken and unchallenged political continuity and the maintenance of the status quo. As Gunther and Mughan stress (2000b, p.406-411), media messages need to achieve a level of homogeneity to play a role and be considered as legitimate, but often, in undemocratic regimes, they are inconsistent in the long run with a number of other factors, including people's experiences, in which case their lack of credibility only serves to undermine the regime.

Furthermore, as suggested by interview accounts I gathered, exposure to this mediated reality in Tunisia also fulfilled other purposes, marking domestic routines, social time, or forming part of a national culture (Morley and Silverstone, 1990; Scannell, 1988), albeit one which respondents constructed in opposition to the regime's media representations, and with which older participants were more likely to be involved than younger ones. In a different authoritarian context, Mihelj and Huxtable (2016) reach similar conclusions. In their assessment of the media's role (television in particular) in the communist contexts of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia between the sixties and late eighties, the authors stress that an important distinction needs to be drawn between television's role in connecting citizens with the communist project, and on the other hand - drawing on Scannell (2014) - its role in synchronising citizens' quotidian, and in providing them with a sense of instant connection to an unfolding reality they have in common. The study highlights how television's embedding in the fabric of socialist daily life played a role in sustaining a sense of comfort, and continuity, which was in many ways more important than the communist narratives it articulated. The

authors stress how television, in these contexts, simultaneously undermined the first type of socio-political connection whilst supporting a socio-temporal connection. The previous overview of these dynamics at play in Tunisia similarly reveal that, despite the barrier that Tunisian media formed between the regime and its citizens, it still fulfilled some of these social functions by bringing many citizens together around shared media habits, and uniting them in their sense of detachment from political and public matters, a disconnection they were aware of, but nevertheless had no choice but to inhabit.

#### 1.4. Dual worlds online

As detailed in Chapter 1, under a much-publicised modernisation programme in the mid-nineties, the Ben Ali regime supported the development of new communicative technologies in Tunisia, but equally swiftly it attempted to harness them as a further means of extending its control (Goupy, 2013)<sup>62</sup>. Fissures nevertheless appeared in the regime's controlled image in conjunction with the proliferation of online communicative opportunities, but once again the availability of alternative informational opportunities did not automatically translate into participants seizing them. Although new media further undermined the regime's constructed reality, a number of obstacles also meant that, for many participants, online connections to alternative informational networks was difficult, fraught with risk and frequently required time, dedication and technical expertise that most of them lacked.

In Tunisia, political activists opposing the regime were quick to seize on the potential of these new possibilities and participate in online discussion forums, blogs and social media. However, the Internet was also closely policed in the country through the deployment of filtering tools (OpenNet Initiative, 2005), and a network of online agents and informers to block webpages, screen email content, infiltrate dissenting groups or intimidate political opponents (see Chapter 1 for further details). This resulted in the blocking of a significant number of websites and blogs that were critical of the regime, as well as video sharing platforms such as Youtube. A number of regime opponents and political activists managed to carve out an alternative online space that circumvented some of this control. Primarily, dissident forums and blogs were managed from outside the country and were only accessible in Tunisia through proxy servers. Many figures behind such spaces were part of a political or intellectual elite that either chose, or was forced, to live abroad.

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<sup>62</sup> Goupy notes, in this regard, that new communicative technologies' inherent potential to extend surveillance by authoritarian regimes such as Ben Ali's, tends to be ignored under a principle of technological neutrality that in fact serves as form of political legitimisation for such regimes.

However, the majority of Tunisian citizens who had Internet access remained relatively sheltered from this virtual, alternative informational sphere. Indeed, two quite different Internets emerged out of the context described above. Similar to trends observed in relation to the national media landscape, Internet within the country sustained a common knowledge about the regime's undemocratic nature and its censorship, but it was relatively effective in restricting the formation of a more specific knowledge about public matters in the country. One of the interviewees, Ahmed, who had the opportunity to travel to Germany before the revolution, described how overwhelmed he felt by the difference in the information he was able to access online about his country in Germany and in Tunisia. Although he was aware of censorship in Tunisia, he was not prepared for the level of discrepancy between the two realities he encountered online from, within and outside his country:

Before, when you used to look up videos about Ben Ali or news about the country, like in 2008 when there was a big revolution in Metlaoui and the miners there, there were big protests and a lot of people got killed and arrested, but we were living in the country and didn't hear about any of it... But afterwards, I was at some point abroad in Germany and I asked a cousin to look up Ben Ali and so many things came up that I couldn't see in Tunisia, he showed me all the problems in Tunisia and what people were writing, I couldn't believe it at first. I was living in Tunisia and this person was living abroad and was showing me many things about Tunisia that I didn't know about.

Despite online surveillance, it was possible for some citizens to access this alternative space from within the country. Out of the sample of interviewees, four (Youssef, Habib, Neila, Anis) were aware of methods to circumvent online censorship, having learned how to do so through close friends. However, the level of effort this entailed, or the risks involved, dissuaded some of them from further venturing into such activities. The availability of Internet access did not automatically translate into a drive to explore alternative communicative opportunities, in some cases even when sufficient knowledge to bypass online censorship was available. In this regard, Youssef explained that:

Before the revolution, the Internet, they made us hate it. Because almost everything was shut [...] You had to use peer-to-peer programmes to be able to access sites [run] from abroad. I did use them a bit but it was such a hassle until you reached what you were after that I got fed up. It's only after they opened the Internet that I started to use it more.

The majority of participants did not possess either the opportunity and/or knowledge to access these alternative information sources online. Although digital media was gradually eroding the regime's control of its image, few individuals were willing to assume the risk of breaking the established norms of silence which were attached to civic and political engagement. For Tunisian citizens living beyond the confines of the country's borders, contributing to the construction of a dissenting Tunisian public space online was also associated with a degree of risk, albeit a less significant one. This was the case for Slim, in his mid-forties, who lived in France and the UK before returning to Tunisia after the revolution. During this time, he recalled being active on a number of Tunisian online discussion forums where many regime opponents found like-minded people and used pseudonyms to anonymously engage in political debate. Although this activity was conducted outside the country, it remained under close scrutiny and surveillance by the Tunisian authorities. He recounted receiving intimidating phone calls at the time:

They had my phone number because I would have given it to them, because you would be talking to people [in online forums] and befriend them, they'd be talking to you a lot, and maybe they'd say at some point if I'm in your area I'll get in touch or there's someone I want to put you in touch with, what's your number... it's only in retrospect that you would find out they were Ben Ali's people, or if you put something bad about Ben Ali then they defended it or said give me your number I need to talk to you, that's not right... and so I got calls... on three occasions.

As with offline public interactions, a large majority of respondents (who lived in Tunisia before the revolution) were acutely aware of online surveillance and the discursive norms this entailed. In interviewees' descriptions of online media use before the revolution, politically-sensitive content regularly "disappeared", was "blocked", "closed" or "shut", sharing it was "unthinkable" and "impossible", and commenting on it like entering a "forbidden kingdom"<sup>63</sup>. Whilst some had direct experience of this online monitoring by noticing that some content disappeared, that other content was signalled as inaccessible with the "404" error message (mentioned in Chapter 1), others based their awareness of Internet monitoring on third party accounts and their own perception of the ubiquitous nature of the regime's surveillance apparatus. Although they were aware that the regime could not control all online content, it was striking to which extent respondents' sense of the regime's pervasive presence online transpired from interview accounts and shaped online interactions, reflecting views on the norms of public expression offline. This is vividly expressed in

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<sup>63</sup> An ironic reference by one of the respondents to Jackie Chan's movie, the title was mentioned in English.

comments made by Zied, an interviewee in his early thirties, mirroring Ahmed and Mehdi's observations (see above), of a sense of being 'watched by the walls' in their own homes. Reflecting on his Internet use before the revolution Zied, in similar terms, explained that: "Even if you were not being watched, you felt you were being watched". As a result, research participants primarily accessed the Internet for relatively innocuous, non-political activities, such as calling friends or relatives abroad, listening to music, chatting online and finding potential girlfriends or boyfriends.

Although online space afforded novel opportunities for informational access and the expression of dissent, these remained underutilised outside of a limited circle of 'cyber' and political activists, and those with not only the requisite skills and time to dedicate to such activities, but also sufficient motivation to take the risks associated with challenging the rules of silence and the maintenance of the status quo. Furthermore, the regime's surveillance also fostered a climate of distrust online to which the apparent safety of anonymity was not immune. As evidenced by the case of Slim, communicating one's dissent in online forums also had the potential to become a further source of threat, as equally anonymous regime informants infiltrated this space in an attempt to establish a rapport of trust with users and track down their identities.

Considering that social networking sites offered the opportunity to expand communication online across networks of pre-existing, and thus more trusted acquaintances, the question consequently arises whether they were used to access, disseminate or express alternative information and representations of socio-political reality, or if instead the trends observed in relation to the broader communicative context were replicated in the use of social media before the revolution.

#### 1.5. Social media: The status quo maintained

Available interview accounts and social media data support the latter perspective. The social media space was not immune from the trends observed in relation to other media and communicative exchanges between citizens both offline and online. Although it offered relatively easy opportunities to access, produce and transmit alternative news, information and opinions about social and political issues in Tunisia, participants who acted on these opportunities were in the minority. This was despite the fact that social network content was

far more problematic for the regime to control and that it had not (yet<sup>64</sup>) deployed surveillance tools in this space.

Before the start of the protest movements, eighty per cent of research participants used social media, all of them members of the social networking site Facebook. None of them used Twitter before the revolution. Although it was not possible for authorities to use Internet filtering tools to restrict information transmission on social media, as was the case with other websites, the platform was subjected to the scrutiny of government agents. As in the wider online space, participants were keenly aware of this monitoring presence. Consequently, their use of the platform was considered primarily a means of socialising, and participants did not use it to share information or news relating to any public issues or socio-political matters. A significant proportion of the interviewees concurred in describing their use of Facebook before the revolution as exclusively dedicated to “trivial”, leisure, “entertainment” and “social purposes” (P6), “cultural things” (P4), “just for a laugh” (P15), to see football news (P10, P16, P22), watch music videos (P19, P16, P5), keep in touch with friends or expand networks of acquaintances (P1, P3, P15, P19), and for sharing personal photos and jokes (P4, P15, P18). Equally, this tendency was justified – in interviewees’ reflections on their pre-revolution social media practices – by an awareness of the monitoring and control of this networked online space. In this regard, several respondents mentioned, for example, being aware of government employees infiltrating social media under fake profiles as a means to access networks and monitor posts on Facebook.

Only three of the study’s participants who had a Facebook profile before the revolution said they used Facebook in a more politicised manner, to transmit alternative informational content that denounced abuses by the Ben Ali regime. Two of them, Slim and Imen, were living abroad at the time and felt that the risk associated with this was relatively minor in comparison to the persecution that activists in the country exposed themselves to. The other notable exception to this was Lobna, a twenty-year old student in Tunis, originating from a small town in the South of the country, where she was living until 2011. Lobna had been sharing politically related content on her Facebook account since 2008 when she first started using social media. In 2009, her profile image on Facebook was a photo of Ben Ali with a sign of the Tunisian flag and the word “no” in Arabic. Not only was she unafraid of the possible

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<sup>64</sup> According to Silver (2011), the regime had requested the deployment of a systematic social media surveillance tool from the same European company that had previously an email surveillance tool to the regime, but the revolution started before this plan could be implemented. As a result, alternative methods were used by the regime during the revolution to limit content transmission, including the pirating of Facebook passwords. Further details are included in Chapter One.

repercussions of her online activities, but she was using her real name and included photos of herself on her social media profile, making her perfectly identifiable to authorities. Looking back, Lobna admits she took many risks, but that she enjoyed the exhilaration of such activities: “It was adolescence and it had a bit the taste of an adventure”. Ironically, it is the very overtness of her online dissent that proved to be a hurdle when she decided to take her political engagement further and tried to join an opposition party. Her profile was mistaken for one of the fake accounts run by Ben Ali’s regime to spy on opposition activities:

And that’s why they didn’t take me on. Because when someone uses his name and surname, and puts his pictures, and then puts an image of Ben Ali saying no, and posts all sorts of videos, there’s always a risk that it turns out to be police. Because for someone to oppose so openly, it didn’t make sense.

It needs to be noted that the suspicions raised about Lobna’s engagement were possibly also fuelled by the fact that her father was a policeman. Her dissident activities may have been linked to rebellion against a father figure that embodied the police state, and her apparent immunity from repercussions may have been related to his position. There is no means of verifying any of these hypotheses, however. Conjecture aside, her case is particularly revealing of the climate of suspicion and paranoia, and the norms for public engagement enforced directly and indirectly by the regime. These delineated clear boundaries about what constituted permissible interactions between citizens, and this logic ironically led to a questioning of the authenticity of Lobna’s acting on the opportunities that social media provided to communicate alternative information and undermine the regime’s discourse.

This preliminary overview provided some important insights into the political and media contexts before the revolution, from interviewees own perspectives and recollections. Although not comprehensive (as this period is not the main focus of the thesis), this assessment was intended to complement understanding of the pre-revolution context detailed in Chapter 1, and to establish the setting from which the protest movements and associated changes in media practices emerged at the end of 2010. In pre-revolutionary Tunisia, the state rigorously pursued a policy of actively deterring citizens from engagement in public affairs and politics, resulting in a sense of disconnect for many Tunisians between the reality of their everyday lives and the mediated representation of their socio-political reality on national media. A common knowledge formed among citizens of the rules of non-engagement with such matters. The surveillance and censorship of media content significantly restricted the transmission of news via both traditional media (e.g. print,

broadcasting) as well as online media content accessed from within the country, a trend further exacerbated by citizens' self-censorship in public and, to some extent, in private. The cumulative effect of this negative feedback loop was to further inhibit the development of a national media sphere. This enforced disengagement extended to the use of social media in Tunisia before the revolution, where networked communication between citizens was generally of a strictly non-political nature. Crucially, this brief sketch of participants' orientations towards different media, and other information sources, in their everyday lives before the revolution highlighted that although this media context failed to inform citizens in terms of content transmission, it played a role in informing them about the maintenance of the authoritarian regime. It continuously reiterated a core message of an unchanging, and arguably unchangeable, socio-political order, in which the citizen's enforced role was one of passivity, acceptance and disengagement from the public realm and the world of politics. In the next section of this chapter, I explore how this understanding was challenged with the revolution, what information and circumstances signified to respondents a change in this order and in their reading of socio-political reality, and social media's role in these processes.

## **2. Shifting civic conceptions and media use during the revolution**

The revolution period<sup>65</sup> represented a radical disruption of this long-standing, yet increasingly precarious, balance as a new reality established itself, and citizens united in breaking their silence about the regime. The use of social media to share information about the protest movements and to reconnect citizens to a shared public realm played an important role in supporting the revolutionary momentum. For participants in this study, this period was broadly defined as exhilarating, but also as a time associated with much anxiety and uncertainty. Paralleling this transformation, media practices were equally altered. In the following section, I analyse in greater detail how research participants reflected on this period. In particular, I focus on how their knowledge of these changes was formed, how this information was understood and rationalised, and what role different modes of communication and media forms – including social media – played in reviving their relationship with a shared public realm.

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<sup>65</sup> I define this period here as spanning from the escalation of protests in Tunisia and their spread at the end of December 2010 to the departure of former president Ben Ali on 14<sup>th</sup> January 2011, and the immediate aftermath of this event. Whilst subsequent protest movements that continued in the following months can equally be considered as part of the Tunisian revolution as they fought for the dismantlement of further structures and representatives of Ben Ali's regime, I have chosen here to focus the analysis in this part of the chapter on the initial period in terms of it being the first point of radical change and break with the past.

## 2.1. Shifting civic conceptions

The self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi in Sidi Bouzid on 17<sup>th</sup> December 2010 initially only triggered protests in the locality, but gradually spread to other parts of the country. The first regions to experience widespread public protests were relatively deprived, in the Southern and Western regions, and then followed by larger cities in the coastal areas and the capital Tunis (see Chapter 1 for more details). In the closely controlled Tunisian media space, knowledge about these movements was informed by a number of communicative exchanges in which digital media featured to an important extent.

When the first round of interviews was conducted in October 2012, not all of the participants in this study were able to remember precisely how they first found out about the protest movements in the country; only twenty-four out of thirty did. But of these respondents, half of them remembered first becoming aware of the turmoil through photos and video footage of the protests shared by their contacts on social media platform Facebook (P1, P6, P8, P9, P10, P15, P18, P19, P20, P21, P23, P24). Satellite broadcaster *Al Jazeera* also served to initially inform three of the study participants about the protests (P3, P4, P12), and two of them first encountered this information on other Internet sites (P22, P26). Oral communication also played a relatively important role in disseminating this information. Indeed, one third of these interviewees indicated that they had acquired this knowledge through word of mouth, including conversations with colleagues at work, and with family members and friends - either in face-to-face interactions, or over the telephone (P5, P7, P13, P16, P27, P28, P30). This initial observation serves to support the view that, for these respondents, social media appears to have contributed to a significant extent in facilitating and precipitating the transmission of information on a large scale during the initial phase of the protests.

However, it was striking that, although many of the respondents attested to feeling shock at the time in regards to the death of Bouazizi, and by the subsequent repressive police repression of the protests in the region of Sidi Bouzid, the majority of them did not expect the situation to escalate, or for any meaningful political change to be instigated. For instance, several of them cited previous protests that had erupted in the mining region of Gafsa, in the South of the country, in 2008. These had been equally as violently repressed by the regime and had no further repercussions. Study participants expected the protests at the end of 2010 to have a similar outcome. Three respondents also mentioned that there had been precedents of young men self-immolating out of despair, to which public reactions had been

rather muted. As a result, for many of these interviewees, initial knowledge of the protests did not necessarily translate into immediate, deeper, questioning of the maintenance of Ben Ali's regime in power, or in a wider mass mobilisation of the population.

This situation gradually shifted during the first two weeks of January 2011 and, as interview accounts revealed, direct experience and changes in their everyday life context, rather than mediated information, played a crucial role in raising their awareness that a more fundamental shift was underway. This was to result in radical altering of their perspectives on, and reappraisal of, the balance of power between citizens and the regime, and on the possibility of change in the country. Most respondents had found out about protests in other parts of the country through different communicative means. However, several interviewees expressed a sense of disbelief when they first witnessed footage of the protests and victims. One of the respondents, Neila, recalled how a photo that a friend of hers shared on Facebook, showing the bloodied body of a protestor killed by police, was met with suspicion by some other friends of hers on Facebook. They claimed instead that the photo was copied from images of war abroad. Similar to Lobna's anecdote (referred to in an earlier part of this chapter), where her unusual degree of political activism was perceived as inauthentic, some Tunisians were struggling to come to terms with a reality that was dissonant with the habitual image of their country, preferring to transfer the mediated representation of these geographically proximate events to the suffering of distant others in remote conflict zones.

It was equally significant that, even for some of those who joined the protests at a relatively early stage of the revolution, this participation was not necessarily associated with a wish to challenge the regime, or with belief in the possibility of change. This was the case for Anouar, who was in his last year of high school in the town of Thala when the revolution started. Thala is a small town in the mid-Western region of Kasserine near the border with Algeria. A relatively deprived area, it was one of the first regions where demonstrations spread and where, at the beginning of 2011, security forces shot and killed a number of protesters. Like many others, Anouar was initially alerted to the protests in Sidi Bouzid via videos posted on Facebook and did not expect any particular outcome. Nevertheless, he joined his classmates on the streets at the beginning of January 2011 to express solidarity with the people of Sidi Bouzid. For Anouar, this participation was not a new experience. Indeed, he mentioned taking part in a few other small scale marches over the previous years, principally in support of the Palestinian cause. He explained that on the day in question he did not expect leaving class to demonstrate would be of consequence. He further explained that, for most of his

classmates, joining the protests “started more like a joke” as they were not in the right frame of mind to go back to learning after two weeks of winter holidays. He failed to recognise the difference between the expression of public opinion about international and national matters, or between the sensitivity of the regime to public mood about the oppression of Palestinians and that of Tunisians citizens. Consequently, he did not, at first, ascribe this expression of solidarity a particularly political character. However, the heavy police presence on the streets, its apparent overreaction to the protests, and the dangerous escalation in violence over the following days soon altered his perspective on these events. His political stance became even more pronounced following the death of one of his close friends during the protests, who was shot by the police.

## 2.2. Making sense of a changing reality

This trauma that coloured Anouar’s experience of this period was recalled as profoundly shocking and saddening, but for him, this was also a time of solidarity and empowerment that lent it an optimistic, idealistic quality:

[Can you describe your experience of the revolution period?]

Those days went past... mind you whenever I think back on them... I think they were such exciting days. Not exciting because they were persecuting us and killing us and throwing gas at us, but exciting because you felt that Thala was all united you see... those who know, those who read, the unemployed, the dope heads, all the social classes, all took to the streets together. I mean when you look at it, you find for example your old neighbour next to you, or even women who went out and got hurt, I mean you felt Thala was all together, there was no outsider to it.

[How did you think about the police in all this?]

I was looking at it as if it was Palestinians fighting Israelis.

Anouar’s depiction suggests that the sense of unity and common purpose, which spontaneously emerged among the local population was out of the ordinary. He associated the revolution with the breaching of boundaries that usually ordered (and limited) social interactions along educational, class, employment status, gender and age lines. These distinctions temporarily dissipated and were reconfigured during this period into a narrative of unity of all citizens against the oppression of a state seen to be represented by, and embodied in, its security forces. Anouar’s association of this opposition with the Israeli-

Palestinian conflict – a conflict ingrained in the Arab political imagination as an unequal and unfair struggle – is indicative of the profound perceived sense of injustice that fuelled him and others into resisting the regime so fiercely. In the accounts of Anouar and some of the other interviewees who participated in similar protests, the potent image of civic collective protest, composed of a victimised and oppressed population armed only with stones, was often constructed in opposition to the classic portrayal of uniformed repression. Regime security forces' use of tear gas, truncheons, rubber bullets and, ultimately, live ammunition fed into this universally recognisable depiction of organised state brutality, bolstering the narrative of a people's struggle.

With the escalation in violence during this period (see Chapter 1), the perspectives of many Tunisians shifted as the authoritarian nature of the regime and its apparently unconstrained repression of protests was increasingly widely publicised. Individuals broke their silence to express solidarity with others and to demand an improvement in their living conditions, which gradually turned into an awareness of both the regime's inherent weakness and that the political status quo was no longer sustainable. Many people felt increasingly free to openly call for the fall of the regime. During the first two weeks of January 2011, the combination of media sources, communicative exchanges between citizens - including across trade union and professional networks - as well as direct experience of events, contributed to a gathering momentum in favour of political change as protests spread across the country.

Whereas Anouar's perception of the socio-political reality in the country was affected in a particularly traumatic way, for many other respondents, familiarisation with this change in perspective was a more incremental process during the first two weeks of January 2011. Significantly, the understanding that events were not a mere repetition of past scenarios, as had been initially anticipated, was often associated, in interviewees' accounts to direct experience and witnessing of events. Neila, for example, vividly recounted the moment she walked past a building site near her school in the morning and caught a glimpse of men methodically gathering stones from the site in preparation for the days' battle with police, an image that struck her as surreal at first. She claimed that this moment marked a critical juncture in her perception of the situation. For many, it was signs of disruption to their daily life that were memorable indicators that something was fundamentally changing. Zied, for example, remembered seeing unusually high numbers of protestors of all ages in his neighbourhood, an image that directly contradicted the notion propagated by Ben Ali and

state-controlled media that protestors were a “minority of thugs”<sup>66</sup>. When the protest movement reached the capital Tunis on 12<sup>th</sup> January 2011, the widespread deployment of the army on the streets, the forced closure of educational establishments and public institutions, were for many a sign that a critical moment had been reached. For Meriem and Yassine, arson attacks on politically symbolic buildings in their local vicinity - a local supermarket that residents associated with a member of the Ben Ali family, and a police station – were tangible indicators of the possibility of profound political change. Others again referred to the unusually tense atmosphere in cafés or on public transport. Farah recalled the sense of panic which took hold in the capital as people rushed to stock up on food:

[My daughter and I] could see everywhere on the streets how the army was deployed, so we really panicked seeing this because it meant something really serious was happening. We were not used to seeing this, it was scary at first to see big military tanks on the streets and all that. I remember going to a lot of shops but a lot of them were already closed, and the local market stalls had almost no food left so I had to buy whatever food I could find.

A closer connection for citizens to the unfolding revolution movements in different parts of the country was partly informed by the gradual opening of the media sphere (the online sphere in particular) to the transmission of alternative informational content and representations of the socio-political reality in the country that re-established an affective proximity between citizens (Papacharissi and De Fatima Oliveira, 2012). However, this knowledge was also shaped by direct experience and observation of the changes to their immediate environment and daily lives, that marked, first hand, the disruption of the status quo. This assessment highlights again that, although social media played an important informational role during the revolution, this role can only be understood in the context of a more profound shift in perspectives about the socio-political order and the possibility of change through widespread collective civic action, a shift in perspective that direct experience and witnessing of events was crucial in shaping. It is this interpretation that supported the mass-scale participation of citizens in the expression of dissent offline and online, and in the transmission of alternative representations on social media.

### 2.3. Unity in public and in private

The increasingly widespread public expressions of dissent led the regime to attempt restricting contact between citizens through the imposition of curfews and closure of

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<sup>66</sup> A description used by Ben Ali in his speech on 28<sup>th</sup> December 2010.

universities and other public institutions. As families and friends were confined to their homes, this withdrawal from public life translated into two options for many of the study participants interviewed: either to openly challenge the restrictions and join the protest movement on the streets, or to reconnect with the outside world through all the media technologies and means of communication they had available in their homes.

Rim:

We were all at home and the Internet was the only contact with the outside so you had to constantly be connected. There was no other way to find out what was really going on, other than the Internet. There was very little information on other media outlets, so unless you were on the streets directly witnessing what was going on, then you only had Facebook.

This intense desire for information under circumstances which precluded them from participating in normal public discourse was a recurrent theme running through interview accounts of the revolution period. In this transient state where the old reality of the regime still existed, but also the nascent possibility of a wholly different socio-political order, media practices radically changed. The spread of images and videos captured by protestors on mobile phones, and distributed across social networking sites and to international broadcasters, contributed to mobilising citizens on a large scale during the last week of the movement in Tunisia. In a final, fruitless, attempt to accommodate the grievances of the protesters, former president Ben Ali delivered a speech on 13<sup>th</sup> January<sup>67</sup> 2011 in which he announced a series of democratising reforms, including the end of Internet censorship. In its immediate aftermath, all websites previously blocked became accessible, including video sharing site Youtube. However, by this stage, the promised reforms were no longer sufficient to dissipate public discontent with the regime and on 14<sup>th</sup> January 2011, Ben Ali fled to Saudi Arabia.

The political developments during the revolution were accompanied by shifts in media practices, which saw a transition from broadly non-political pre-revolutionary content to more overtly politicised subject matters. As the protest movements reached a critical momentum over the first two weeks of January 2011, a clear distinction emerged between media that served as the officially sanctioned voice of the regime and media that many citizens actively identified with. During this period, Tunisian state television *Tounes7* was drip-feeding information to its audiences and pursuing a strategy which deliberately

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<sup>67</sup> His first speech in Tunisian dialect, rather than classical/standard Arabic (see p.30 for more details)

underplayed the importance and scale of the protests. Marwa and Sonia recalled the national evening news bulletins as providing little more than a daily list of victims by region without elaborating on the circumstances of their deaths. Similarly, Ahmed talked about the profound sense of frustration generated by the daytime broadcasting of wildlife documentaries on the channel at the height of the protests. In doing so, the public broadcaster adhered to a familiar narrative of a regime in full control of the domestic political situation, and it failed to offer a recognition of the significance of citizens' voices, and the lives of those who has died during the protests. The discrepancy between the regime-controlled media's discourse and the parallel reality that citizens experienced in their everyday lives before the revolution had reached a new level of incongruity with these events, with an increasingly wide divide between the general population's direct experience of the protests and the official coverage of unfolding events. The ambivalent duality that many of the respondents had described as experiencing prior to the revolution was, in their own words, untenable in the face of the violent reality with which they were confronted.

As a result of the information vacuum on Tunisian media, the research participants sought access to alternative and, from their perspective, more trustworthy representations of the changing socio-political reality. All respondents mentioned that, during the time they spent home at the height of the revolutionary period, they turned to any available means in order to maintain a connection to the outside world, and to attempt to follow the fluid, highly volatile situation unfolding in the country. In the last few days before the 14<sup>th</sup> January, the interviewees said that they were keeping themselves informed, and forging opinions on the events in the country, primarily through telephone contact with friends and relatives, watching television, and viewing online media at home or at internet cafés if they had no domestic access. Sihem recalled that the owner of her local Internet café stopped charging customers, and opened the premises for twenty-four hours a day, in solidarity with the protest movements. Meriem mentioned during her interview that, in her neighbourhood, even the minaret at her local mosque was used to disseminate information to the local population who were confined to their homes at the height of the turmoil. However, it was largely through broadcast media and the social networking platform Facebook that study participants gathered critical information during the final few days prior to Ben Ali's departure, and the regime's collapse. Most interviewees stated that they were permanently logged into their Facebook accounts, as well as watching television, listening to the radio, and if possible, accessing these different sources simultaneously.

Whilst television was in constant use during this period, it was referred to by respondents as a media format that was continually combined with, and often framed as secondary to, the social media platform. Content was perceived as being more reliable and less mediated because it was transmitted directly between citizens. Participants referred to Facebook as a cohesive and unified media platform rather than a network amalgamating a variety of different sources and opinions, a sort of embodiment of a unified citizenship to which national television in particular, as a perceived extension of the regime, was opposed. Furthermore, this narrative of civic empowerment through social media was strongly emphasised by satellite broadcaster *Al Jazeera* and, to a lesser extent, other international media organisations, depending on their level of reliance on social media content for their coverage. As Ali and Fahmi (2013) highlight, citizen journalism and user-generated content stemming from protest in the Middle East and Arab world, provided a valuable resource from which traditional media organisations and journalists were able to choose and, in this sense, they enabled them to continue to exercise an important role in gatekeeping information and shaping influential international narratives of such movements in specific ways.

Research participants with access to satellite television stated that, in addition to following events online, they primarily watched *Al Jazeera* on television, as the channel was covering the Tunisian protests in extensive detail, broadcasting looped recordings of amateur footage taken by protestors and providing additional analysis and commentary of events. As the broadcaster no longer had any offices in Tunisia, much of their coverage was reliant on content sent to them directly by protestors in Tunisia and by cyber-activists. It also needs to be noted that the role of the broadcaster was not limited to citizens with satellite television access as it was possible to stream the channel live from its website, although limited Internet speed prevented most from doing so. However, shorter video clips from the channel were circulated on Facebook, extending a circle of distribution that started with footage by Tunisian protestors being used by the broadcaster in the first place. In addition to seeing images of their protests circulated across social media networks, Tunisians were thus seeing the mediation of these images on transnational television and their further echoing on their online networking, contributing to the amplification of the revolutionary momentum they were experiencing.

Essentially though, for these respondents, social media best addressed their needs in this volatile period. Facebook not only fulfilled an important informational role that stood in sharp contrast to the dearth of relevant content being broadcast by established Tunisian

media, but also served to further iterate a new and drastically different narrative for users, one that united citizens in an oppositional role as victims struggling to liberate themselves from an oppressive regime. In this context, the shift in civic perspective was accompanied by a change in media habits that centred, for the majority of participants in this sample, around a different and more politicised use of social media. On Facebook, information about the protests in different regions were progressively transmitted on a large scale to networked citizens. The content circulating on the platform was no longer referring to football results and music videos, but was instead dominated by posted imagery of the protests, and of abused, injured or dead protesters, and by information about protests and gathering points. This amalgamation of content was used to reinforce a central message, repeated continuously; that of the need for regime change. Interviewees recalled the transition from using Facebook as a space for socialisation and entertainment to it becoming a central source of information and space for political discussion and communication (this is elaborated further in Chapter 5).

Increasing numbers of citizens were breaking their silence and joining in the mass distribution of such content on their social media networks, and in doing so changing from a position of audience witnessing distant events to constituting themselves as solidary public, and audiences of each other. Whilst those on the front line of the violent clashes (e.g. Yassine, Sihem, Neila) started to become strategically organised into separate street and media teams to relay information, others were spending most of their time indoors on Facebook to follow and further spread this content with contacts in their networks. They connected to dozens of new pages on the platform during this time, and sent or accepted befriending requests from many strangers in order to expand their informational network. Within families, what could be considered as media consumption strategies developed as parents tended to follow broadcast media, whilst their children preferred online media, each group updating the other on the latest political developments as mediated and disseminated through their respective sources.

This trend was reflective of broader generational differences relating to media consumption and technology adoption patterns. However, the use of social media during this period was not exclusive to the younger generation. Whereas young participants in this study were more familiar with using social media, the centrality of Facebook to the transmission of information in this context attracted a wider user base to the platform. It is during this period that most participants who did not yet use social media – older participants in particular - registered a

Facebook account for the first time (P7, P13, P25, P28, P29). Farah, for example, said that she had had several opportunities to learn to use a computer before the revolution but lacked the motivation. It was only during the protests that she changed her mind:

By that time, the kids were constantly on Facebook, and they were telling me about what they saw, how protesters were being dispersed with tear gas... the kids and my husband showed me all this on Facebook. [...] I started using the computer with the revolution... I only learnt to use the computer when I set up a Facebook account.

Paralleling observations about the multiplicity of roles that media use fulfilled in respondents' daily lives before the revolution (i.e. informational, supporting public knowledge about maintenance of the socio-political status quo, a marker of national time and daily habits shared with others), the large-scale change in the way social media was used in Tunisia during the revolutionary period, as assessed above, points to interesting continuities and disruptions. There was a distinct chronology that emerged from interviewees' accounts. Their turn to social media and their participation in the transmission of information through social media, was not necessarily an automatic or direct consequence of information access and reception, but rather was often tied to a more gradual process of becoming aware and making sense of socio-political developments. The participants' personal experience of the radical disruption of their everyday lives, the enforced physical disconnection from the possibility of experiencing the outside public world, and the additional inability to re-establish such a connection through national media, cumulatively engendered radical shifts in media routines. In this respect, social media also addressed a need for information and connection for these respondents at a time of heightened political uncertainty and anxiety. In a different context, Silverstone (1994), points to the importance of symbols and symbolic repertoires in supporting a sense of ontological security in everyday life in the face of modern anxieties<sup>68</sup>:

Ontological security is sustained through the familiar and the predictable. Our commonsense attitudes and beliefs express and sustain our practical understandings of the world, without which life would quickly become intolerable. Common sense is sustained by practical knowledge and expressed and supported by a whole range of symbols and symbolic formations (p.19).

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<sup>68</sup> Silverstone draws on Giddens (1990) who defines the notion of ontological security as tied to the "confidence that most human beings have in the continuity of their self-identity and in the constancy of the surrounding social and material environments of action" (p.92).

Silverstone highlights, in particular, the place of television and media routines in ordering everyday life and contributing to this sense of security. In the crisis context of the revolution, where national broadcast media failed to address informational needs and to reflect citizens' understanding(s) of a profoundly changing context, media routines changed and reoriented themselves around alternative communicative spaces. Social media use, in particular, provided an important connection to the new socio-political order.

#### 2.4. Immediate aftermath of 14<sup>th</sup> January

Rumours of Ben Ali's escape started to circulate on social media before an official announcement by the interim vice president confirmed the event in a live broadcast on national television in the afternoon. Habib vividly recalled a radical change in *Tounes7's* tone briefly before this announcement:

They were talking differently, you knew the channel's director was out because they were talking on TV as if a revolutionary committee had taken over.

Over the following days, media and communication technologies played a significant role in reconnecting Tunisians to the new reality in their country. Reflecting the variety of sources of information that had been employed by the population during the revolution period, a new hierarchy of trust in media forms was subsequently established.

The immediate aftermath of the 14<sup>th</sup> January was chaotic and anarchic in many regions. Many young male study participants had joined ad hoc self-protection groups in their local area, manning street barricades that were coordinated through phone calls and text messages with friends in the neighbourhood. With a night curfew still in place, media continued to provide a vital link for most citizens. The national television channel – which changed its name to *El Watanyia*<sup>69</sup> – as well as private television channels were, by this point, openly covering events and discussing the fall of Ben Ali's regime. Emergency phone numbers were circulated on social media as well as on television channels. In stark contrast to the meticulously controlled and constructed media content of the pre-revolution period, live programmes and debates filled television air space, and citizens were encouraged to contact television channels by telephone to share their experiences. This denoted a marked shift away from its previous alignment to the temporality of the outgoing regime and encouraging a re-connection,

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<sup>69</sup> *El Watanyia* means "the national".

through the television screen, to an instantaneously unfolding reality (Scannell, 2014). Instead of directly contacting the authorities to report criminal activities, many citizens elected instead to call television channels live to broadcast their appeals for help, in the hope that citizens in the vicinity could intervene. Similarly, on social media platforms, numerous messages and warnings were distributed between citizens on a mass scale.

While Tunisian television played more of a role again in reconnecting citizens and providing a sense of collective live witnessing of a shared reality, it was also still perceived with some suspicion by many interviewees due to its close association with the former regime. Social media platform Facebook fulfilled a similar role for citizens with Internet access, but it also played a particular role in helping to make sense of, and adjust and acclimatise to, the new situation in the country. The initial period after January 14<sup>th</sup> had a feeling of “unreality” about it for many study participants. They were able to collectively exchange information and contribute to the construction of different representations of their country, a process facilitated by social media’s enabling of direct contact between citizens. Many participants, for example, researched and exchanged Internet content previously censored under Ben Ali’s regime with other social media users.

## **Conclusion**

Social media can be seen to have played a role in contributing to the transmission of informational messages between geographically removed Tunisian citizens during the revolution, but its role was not restricted to this. Interview accounts highlighted how a deeper shift occurred in study participants’ perspectives. Their belief in the possibility of political change was mainly informed by direct experience and the inability to continue to inhabit the gap between their experience of socio-political reality and its representation by the regime. With this shift in perspective and the enforced disconnection (in the abstract as well as literal sense) of citizens from their shared public realm, came a radical change in media habits for these research participants that served to re-establish this connection. Beyond serving to transmit information, social media played an important role in supporting this connection and providing a communicative space for citizens to reiterate and enact a new socio-political order along more broadly democratic lines, in which their position as citizens mattered. The shift in social media’s use during the revolution closely associated Facebook with this new civic role.

## CHAPTER 4

### POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE AND MEDIATED REALITIES AFTER THE REVOLUTION

#### Introduction

In the first days of my visit to Tunisia in the autumn of 2012, 'tornado' was the word that was on everyone's lips. A tornado was about to make landfall near the capital which, it was widely believed, would devastate everything in its tracks. This had never happened in the country and in fact, the predictions turned out to be based on unsubstantiated rumours spread by social media users in the country. The rumours gained sufficient traction to hit broadcast news headlines, and for an entire day meteorology experts and officials from the Environment Ministry devoted their time to reassuring the population about an event that had not even a remote possibility of occurring.

The anecdote is emblematic of the climate of confusion and anxiety in Tunisia during this period, as well as of an unsettled media landscape in this post-revolution context. News concerning political issues, public figures, and scandals - often predicated on baseless rumours - were appearing and disappearing from headlines on a daily, even hourly, basis. The overall representation of developments in the country at that time was consequently indistinct, and frequently incoherent. By the end of 2012, a year after Tunisia's first free elections since the collapse of Ben Ali's regime, the political landscape in the country was becoming increasingly fragmented and contentious (see Chapter 1), and socioeconomic indicators suggested that the much-needed post-revolution recovery was faltering. Against this backdrop and amid competing political and social pressures, a reconfigured media landscape emerged in which access to resources was still relatively constrained. At the same time, an expanding social media space provided citizens with instant access to information (and misinformation) during a period characterised by recurrent crises.

The outcome of the revolution events was a radical shift in Tunisian citizens' relationship with their shared public world. An eruption of free expression occurred during the revolutionary

period, following years of enforced disengagement from news and political matters, the result of which was to utterly transform the media landscape. The national media, and broadcast media in particular, started to occupy a more important role again in connecting citizens around issues of common concern. Social media also continued to play a significant part in this revived sphere of engagement with the public world, but navigating the vivid post-revolution media scene was also problematic. Many Tunisians were uncertain as to the authority, and veracity, of the different voices which were competing to be heard in the post-revolutionary context, and struggled to make sense of a highly fluid socio-political situation. This chapter examines the relationship with this evolving media landscape as source of public knowledge, for those Tunisian citizens who participated in the study. More specifically, it is concerned with a focus on social media within this framework. It assesses participants' media consumption patterns in October/November 2012 (when interviews were first conducted) in detail, and their reflections on the news sources they trusted in forming an understanding of their uncensored and rapidly changing socio-political environment.

## **1. Reconnection to the public realm**

### **1.1 The informed citizen**

After the revolution Tunisians were presented with new freedoms, and roles to play, in civic society. It thus became important for many of them to be informed about the nature of these changes, to develop deeper knowledge of the nascent democratic context, and to form appropriate opinions about them. Accompanying these changes was a transformation in terms of people's understanding of the place and function of news media, political communication and informational resources in their daily lives. In liberal political theory, the notion of the 'informed citizen' is central to debates on media's role in citizens' relation to the public realm, and to their political socialisation in a democracy. Being informed constitutes one of the key features of a citizen's involvement in the democratic process, and one of the elements through which their citizenship may be enacted (Dahlgren, 2011; Sveningsson, 2015). This ideal is considered as one of the pre-requisites of citizenship insofar as the formation of political knowledge and opinions by citizens supports their political participation, and serves to hold the political sphere and its decisions to account (Gurevitch et al., 1991, p.195). The media's potential to fulfil citizens' informational needs is thus considered as an important – if not essential - contributor to contemporary democratic

legitimation, a rationale on which the funding of public service broadcasting has been based in numerous established democracies.

Over recent decades, the notion of the informed citizen has been of particular concern in western liberal democracies where political indicators and research suggest that, despite increased availability and relative ease of access to news and informational resources, levels of civic and political engagement are, and/or remain, low and particularly so among the younger demographic (Putnam, 1995; Buckingham, 1999; Wilkins, 2000; Loader, 2007). This has challenged the normative framing of news media and public communication as important supporters of the relationship between citizens and the political sphere in a democracy, and arguably signalled a crisis in democratic legitimation (e.g. Entman, 1989; Blumler and Gurevitch, 1995; Wolfe, 2006).

The concept of the informed citizen represents a commonly held, if idealised, notion of what democratic citizenship should entail, but questions over its translation into practice have generated wide-ranging debate. In this regard, part of the argument has questioned media's ability to adequately fulfil its informational role and to support citizens' political engagement. The commercial prerogatives under which contemporary mass media predominantly operate have often been perceived as particularly problematic, with pressure on media organisations to generate revenue serving to limit citizens' access to – and critical engagement with – politically relevant information. Proponents of this view frequently cite the proliferation of entertainment-led content, as supporting their position. Habermas' argument about the decline of the public sphere (1989 [1962]; see Dahlgren, 1995 for a comprehensive analysis) is one of the most notable contributions to this area of debate. In a similar vein, Putnam (1995) contends that, on a more fundamental level, mass media's entertainment values erode social capital and civil society by contributing to individualisation - and atomisation - thus reducing the effort, time and interest that citizens may be inclined to invest in engaging with their communities and the wider public world. Another dimension of the debate surrounding media's support of civic knowledge more specifically questions the role played by news media. Increasing levels of personalisation, tabloidization and drama-oriented coverage of politics have raised numerous concerns about the civic value of contemporary news and journalistic practices (e.g. Cappella and Jamieson 1997; Bennett, 2008). Although it is frequently argued that the boundary between factual and entertainment-led content has become increasingly indistinct (Delli Carpini and Williams, 2001; Hill, 2007), some commentators have contended that this move towards 'softer news' (as opposed to 'hard

news' or hard facts) is a positive development as the assimilation of journalistic quality with notions of objectivity and a level of uninvolved formality in news delivery is misguided, in that it fails to adequately engage the majority of citizens on an emotional level and to relate to their personal experiences and concerns (e.g. Langer, 1998; Macdonald, 2000; Bas and Grabe, 2013).

A different strand of this debate has concentrated less on media's shortcomings, strengths, and potential, and instead focused on the notion of the informed citizen per se, deeming it unrealistic in its expectations on citizens to be adequately informed about - and to fully understand - social and political developments. This ideal has been considered as being extremely difficult - if not impossible - for the majority of members of a society to attain as it necessitates an investment of time, effort, cognitive resources and depth of understanding that only a minority of citizens can realistically achieve. A number of findings in political science, political communication and political psychology support this contention, highlighting important gaps in knowledge and differences in citizens' ability to follow complex public issues (Sniderman et al., 1991; Galston, 2001; Bas and Grabe, 2013) which cannot be easily addressed. Equally, citizens may lack the will or motivation to be informed, invest minimal effort in processing information (Hewstone and Macrae, 1994), or alternatively may process and interpret information relevant to their civic lives in ways that bear little relation to the purported aim of news, and other informational, sources (e.g. Neuman et al., 1992; Graber 1988 and 2012). A notable contribution to this area of debate consists of Schudson's work (1998) on the subject, in the context of the United States. Schudson explores the views discussed above from a historical perspective, and develops them in a novel direction by arguing that the rationalised ideal of the informed citizen not only bears little resemblance to reality, but that this notion, its prevalence in contemporary perspectives on citizenship, and the expectations it puts on citizens, have in fact been damaging to civic life in the second half of the twentieth century. The distance between citizens and the political sphere is, in this argument, actively reinforced if not actually created by the perpetuation of this unrealistic ideal, undermining their everyday involvement and emotional investment in the public arena. However, others have argued that, although it is an insufficient and often unfulfilled element of citizenship, the notion of the informed citizen should nevertheless continue to be considered as one of its most important and necessary components (Delli Carpini, 2000).

Questions about media's role in citizens' political socialisation continue to be debated, and different perspectives are offered on these issues. However, a crucial development in these

debates has been a progressive shift toward more contextualised assessments. One dimension of this evolution has consisted of a move away from views that ascribe media too much influence on levels of civic and political involvement (what Buckingham (1999) frames as overly functionalist perspectives on media's role), which fail to take into account individual backgrounds, everyday experiences and contexts as crucial contributors to informing citizens about their shared public realm. A second dimension has consisted of an increasing acknowledgement in these debates of the particular importance of the political context in shaping citizens' orientation and interest in relation to public and political matters, as this involvement is strongly correlated with citizens' sense of influence over such matters. Citizens' knowledge of their socio-political world, as informed by their direct experience and individual contexts, as well as by the media, may have progressively led to a withdrawal and disconnection from the political sphere if it is perceived to consistently fail to represent opinions and voices of the citizenry or to remain unresponsive to public expectations.

Particularly in relation to established Western democratic systems, this alternative perspective points to a potential widening gap between the citizenry of these states, and the political figures and institutions who claim to represent them. In other words, citizens may well consider that being politically informed is important, and they may invest time and resources in fulfilling this role, but their views might differ in terms of the issues that require the greatest degree of attention, and of the need to translate their political knowledge into participation in elections or institutional politics. Citizens' sense of political efficacy, and their orientations towards existing democratic structures, may consequently be eroded. Bennett et al. (2009) argue in this regard that the way in which citizens themselves perceive the role of news media in their relation to civic and political involvement is undergoing considerable changes, as the notion of political participation through existing electoral mechanisms is being steadily undermined, and with it the turn to traditional news media sources to keep informed and form an opinion about the sphere of institutional politics.

As Buckingham (1999) contends, debates on the notion of the informed citizen have evolved to progressively incorporate more nuanced and contextualised perspectives. These have stressed in particular the need to approach discussion on the issue through alternative vantage points that seek to query the very definitions of news media, of politically-relevant information, and of politics and democracy per se (e.g. Delli Carpini, 2000). Numerous calls have been made (e.g. Buckingham, 1999, Schudson, 2008) in this regard for a more culturalist (and ritual) framing of news media and political communication that takes into account the

many ways in which media can inform an understanding of citizenship, of citizens' role in - and sense of belonging to - a given social and political order, beyond the news and information that it transmits:

Rather than attempting to measure the effectiveness of news in communicating political information, we should be asking how it enables viewers to construct and define their relationship with the public sphere. How do news programmes 'position' viewers in relation to the social order. For example, in relation to the sources of power in society, or in relation to particular social groupings? How do they enable viewers to conceive of the relations between the 'personal' and the 'political'? How do they invite viewers to make sense of the wider national and international arena, and to make connections with their own direct experience? How, ultimately, do they establish what it means to be a 'citizen'? (Buckingham, 1999, p.175).

However, whilst the parameters of these debates have shifted to incorporate a more culturalist perspective on politics, and on media's role in political socialisation processes, empirical approaches to research in the field have not necessarily followed suit. As Coleman et al. (2012) highlight, the value of these debates continues to be problematised by the fact that citizens' own views on what role news and media ought to perform is rarely assessed (p.38). As their findings suggest, citizens have numerous and at times diverging expectations of news media, and one of these is that news media should serve to support them in their civic lives (p.49). In a different context, empirical enquiry into these issues by Hagen (1994) highlights how television viewers in Norway, whilst attributing a sense of civic duty to their news viewing practices, also experience a large degree of ambivalence in seeking to fulfil this duty. For instance, this research reveals that, in this context, citizens internalised an ideal of informed citizenship from which their actual viewing experience sharply differed, leading to an ambivalence that Hagen considers as characteristic of the news viewing experience.

It is the incorporation of citizens' perspectives that perhaps best renders the complexity of media's role in citizens' orientation to their shared public realm. In assessing the role of media as informational resource in the new political context after the revolution in Tunisia, I will take into account the different points raised in the discussion above, starting from respondents' own perspectives on what it means to be informed. I then examine their media and news media habits in detail, and assess the range of issues that emerge from interviewees' accounts of how they relate to different informational resources in their everyday lives, and what motivates their choices.

## 1.2. Civic and mediated engagement after the revolution

During several visits to Tunisia in 2012, I was always struck by how politicised everyday interactions were in ordinary spaces of encounters between citizens, and the pervasiveness of public engagement and political talk. On public transport, at queues in municipal administrations, or at the corner shop, simple observations about bus delays, food prices, or the accumulation of rubbish on the streets, provided triggers for opinion expression that ranged from fiscal policies to gossip about politicians. After being silent for so long, Tunisians were eager to exchange information and perspectives about their shared public realm, to occupy the previously silenced public space with their voices, and to perform their new civic roles, thereby continuously reiterating the new political state of affairs. The revolution engendered a profound change in citizens' perspective of their role, and of the political weight they now carried as individuals, during this initial phase of the democratic transition. In this emergent, popular, view, being a knowledgeable and informed citizen was intrinsic to the exercise of their new freedoms.

Interview accounts indicated that, for the majority of participants in this study, being informed and gaining knowledge about public and political matters, was closely associated to the fulfilment of a number of civic and political roles. A recurrent theme that emerged in this regard, was that being informed meant discovering new civic freedoms formerly denied to them, and performing new political identities that marked a clear break with the past. For instance, Ahmed mentioned in this respect that, for him, gaining knowledge about political developments was important to ensure that history would not repeat itself and that a return to previous political practices and abuses of power could be averted. Similarly, in several respondents' accounts, their eagerness to acquire and exchange news and information about political developments in Tunisia starkly contrasted with their sense of civic and political disconnection in the past. Reflecting on the meaning of their revived interest in current affairs, references to the enforced disengagement and restricted information access of the past were often drawn on, and contrasted with a pervasive desire for knowledge after the revolution. Male respondents who expressed a keen interest in sports and football in the past also pointed out that talk about politics had now replaced talk about football. Such was the case for Yassine and Rafik for example, who both referred to politics as "the new football", thereby also suggesting the popularity of political subject matters and how being knowledgeable about them was no longer restricted to a limited elite.

Other participants expressed more directly a link between being politically informed and a new sense of civic identity. For instance, Narjes associated the formation of this knowledge to a sense of duty that bound her to others. She explained that it mattered to know about social and political issues in the country because she considered them as common to all citizens, as what might affect her neighbour today may have an impact on her own life tomorrow; thus it could not simply be ignored. Against this position, she contrasted the lack of interest in common affairs displayed by a few people in her social circle, deeming it to be a manifestation of egocentricity and selfishness. Other interviewees also made an explicit link between knowledge and a sense of civic and political efficacy. Youssef, for example, believed that people followed the news so closely because they “now [had] hope”, which he associated with change. Likewise, Hanen, who was previously uninterested in Tunisian news, considered that following news on national television was, since the revolution, no longer an activity that had “no point”. The revolution proved to citizens that their collective will could engender profound political change. Thus the subsequent period was marked by a more heightened engagement as citizens’ influence on different outcomes felt within their reach (this point is developed further in Chapter 5).

After decades of enforced disengagement, citizens were able to turn to the national public sphere as a “place for sense-making” (Hagen, 1997, p.413). Tunisian media played a crucial role in supporting civic knowledge and opinion formation. Following news and current affairs provided a way to understand a rapidly changing environment, but also a means of grasping a particularly complex political reality that was, at times, difficult to read. The traditional national media landscape, no longer serving as voice for the regime, sought to play a new role in the emerging democratic context. Broadcast media content, in particular, catered for the need for citizens to reconnect with the national public space and discourse. Evening schedules on public as well as private Tunisian television channels were dominated by news and current affairs programming, as well as political debates and talk shows. During my visit to Tunisia in the autumn of 2012, it was striking that such debates were hosted on the leading television channels on a near-daily basis. Similarly, radio prime time programmes on the leading stations predominantly focused on news and current affairs. The radical change in media content, in turn, also played a role in attracting more audiences and sustaining an interest in news and public affairs. The discovery of new freedoms of expression was accompanied by the discovery of a new media scene, more news outlets, an increased proximity in programming choices to social and political issues that citizens could relate to, and the introduction to new public figures that included political leaders, intellectual figures

and academics, civil society activists, as well as talk show hosts and journalists now openly – and often fervently - expressing their political opinions.

Accordingly, participants' media habits became more centred around the consumption of Tunisian news media content than was the case prior to the revolution. In fact, accessing news and information relating to national matters formed a key part in all of the respondents' everyday lives. Those whose attention was previously turned to international media now focused on national matters instead. For example, Habib, who previously recounted how he had followed the first Gulf war in detail on satellite television, said that he struggled to understand the developments of the Syrian conflict as he spent most of his time following news in Tunisia instead. Similarly, Sonia's attention was now more focused on the new programming offered by Tunisian channels. This change reflected broader trends at a national level, and translated into a decline in viewing figures for satellite television channels and a corresponding increase in numbers watching national broadcasters. Notably, audience figures for satellite network *Al Jazeera* in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings captured this tendency. The broadcaster's role during the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt had to some extent, somewhat paradoxically, undermined its subsequent position as audiences sought local coverage of events instead (The Economist, 2013). Equally, most other participants, who had previously been forced into disengagement from national news, and who had expressed no particular interest in following international events in the past, were now articulating a keen interest in local and national news and politics. When the interviews were conducted, the primary motivation for the participants' turn to Tunisian media content (e.g. Tunisian television channels, radio stations, websites relating to Tunisian subject matters) was to find out about news in the country, and to develop an understanding of public and political matters. Respondents also used media to seek entertainment, watch drama series or documentaries, listen to music or hear about celebrities, for example. However, news and current affairs dominated their descriptions of their national media viewing habits.

The shift in civic perspectives that accompanied the revolution was paralleled, as evidenced in the preceding discussion in this chapter, with radical changes in media habits for the participants in this study. Social media became closely associated with the narrative of civic empowerment. Facebook, in particular, became framed as a communicative space where citizens were able to transmit information on their own terms, and to share expressions of civic solidarity against an abusive regime. In this sense, using the platform to access information about the wider public world was also a way for the participants to have direct

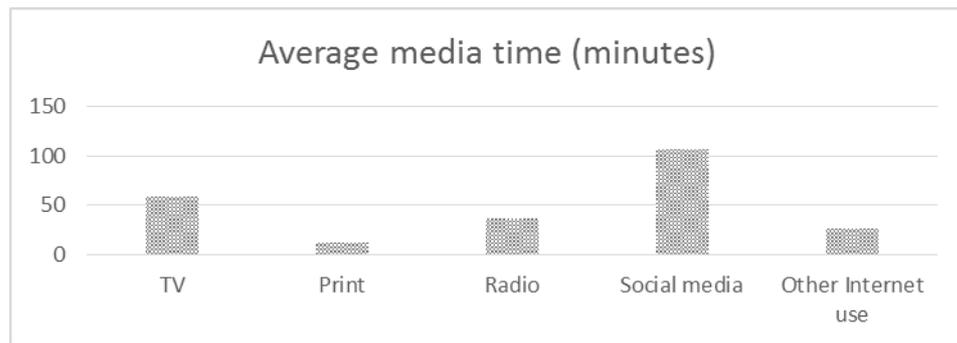
access to other citizens, and to what seemed to matter collectively to Tunisians who used social media. But if social media played an important role for the respondents in supporting this reconnection during the revolution, its role after the revolution was less clearly defined. The opening of the national traditional media landscape and the multiplication of diverging mediated online and offline voices vying for public attention after the revolution, gave rise to a degree of uncertainty about the authority of different information sources and interpretations, and a reappraisal of the media hierarchies that accompanied the revolution. In this context, it is particularly important to determine what place interviewees gave to different media as sources of public knowledge, and what these orientations to various media forms and sources were motivated by.

## **2. Everyday media practices and the place of social media**

### **2.1. Daily media habits**

So what media did these respondents turn to in order to ensure they were informed? As a way into this discussion, I will give an overview of the amount of time that different media forms occupied in their daily lives. Whilst media consumption in terms of time length is not, per se, necessarily reflective of different media's hierarchical superiority, it nevertheless provides a useful initial insight into media habits and a general indicator of significant trends. This initial analysis will then be complemented by an assessment of respondents' reflections on these choices and motivations underlying these media consumption habits.

The graph included below provides an overview of the average time that different media occupied in participants' daily lives. The data on which the graph is based was collected during the interviews conducted in October 2012 by asking the study participants to provide a specific account of their daily media routines and the time they typically spent with different media forms. Where weekday and weekend routines differed, average daily values were used.



GRAPH 1: Participants' average daily media time (Oct/Nov. 2012)

The participants were asked to differentiate between the time they spent online on social networking sites and on other websites, as social media seemed to be particularly central to online routines. A few other points need to be elucidated in relation to the data represented above. The chart is not necessarily an accurate representation of participants' media habits, but rather a representation of their own description and reflection about the time different media forms occupied in their daily lives in the autumn of 2012. Secondly, the data is specific to the sample selected for this study. As detailed in chapter 2, participants were selected on the basis of having access to, and making use of, an Internet connection in their daily lives. The sample excludes any participants who do not use the Internet.

It is also important to clarify at this stage that the data collected refers to time spent with different media for private, as opposed to professional, reasons. Time spent online for professional reasons was thus excluded from this analysis. There were a few instances where the distinction was more difficult to draw as some respondents used the Internet for private purposes at work. For example, Asma, who worked in a public service administration, made use of the Internet connection at work as she did not have one at home and spent several hours per day online on her personal Facebook account. Another participant, Narjes was online all day as she needed the Internet for her research work, and she occasionally used it for personal purposes whenever she took short breaks throughout her working day. But there were also instances where participants checked the news online on their computers at work during their breaks. As Boczkowski (2010) highlights, the distinction between home and work environments, on which news consumption research was based in the past, is difficult to sustain in regards to contemporary media routines. The distinction was discussed during the interviews and, in such cases, respondents were asked to estimate the average time they spent in total online for non-professional reasons.

Time spent with media was not necessarily cumulative, as accounts of media use often highlighted that several media forms were being used simultaneously. Younger respondents in particular were accustomed to simultaneously browsing the Internet or spending time on Facebook whilst watching television or listening to the radio whereas, for older respondents, these activities were more clearly delineated. Interview accounts also revealed that media use was predominantly linked to indoor and static – rather than mobile - consumption habits, with the exception of radio, which was accessed both at home and in vehicles. 3G networks were relatively new and smartphone penetration still comparatively low in the country at the time, which translated into Internet access tending to be focused around the home, at work, in Internet cafés as well as some cafés who had wireless networks available to customers.

As the chart clearly shows, time spent using social media was on average far greater than time spent accessing the Internet generally, as well as in comparison to other media forms. Overall, participants spent eighty per cent of their total Internet time using some form of social media. Within traditional media habits (TV, radio, print), time spent watching television was highest according to interviewees' accounts, followed by time spent listening to the radio, and finally reading print media.

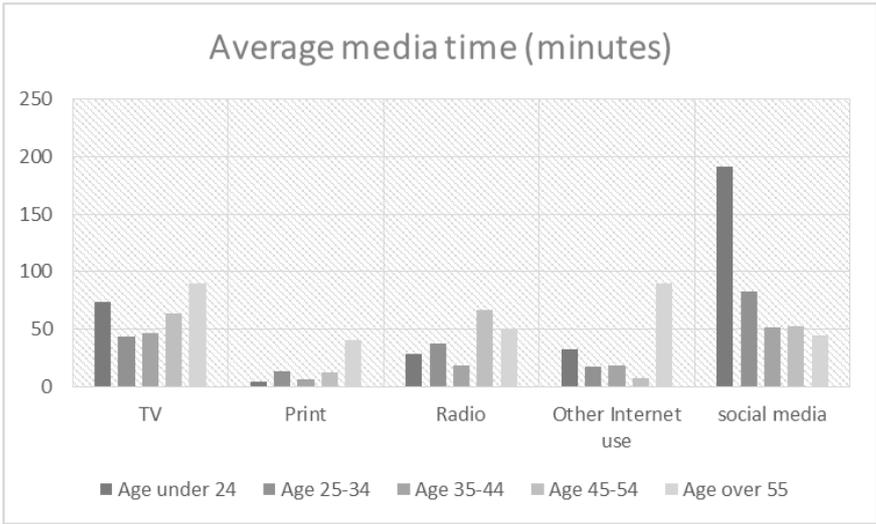
Online, Facebook was referred to as the main social media platform used by participants. In the autumn of 2012, all respondents had accounts set up on this social media platform, although one of them never used it. Additionally, six out of the thirty participants in the sample also had Twitter accounts. Of these, two never used it, two used it very rarely, and two used it on a more regular basis. All concurred in saying that Facebook was the main platform used in Tunisia at the time, whereas Twitter was less popular and primarily used within a restricted circle of cyber-activists, and by some media and political figures. The four participants who did not make much use of their Twitter accounts explained that they “didn’t get their head around it” and “didn’t get into it” as most of their friends were not on the platform. All participants watched television<sup>70</sup> to some extent, although viewing habits differed substantially.

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<sup>70</sup> Here referring to watching live television broadcasts on a television set or on a computer through online streaming, as opposed to on-demand and catch-up television viewing. Nearly all research participants watched live television on a TV set, except one student watching it online. No formal catch-up or on-demand television service existed in Tunisia in 2012. However, as will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter, many television programmes were available online, either formally made available by broadcasters, or informally copied to different online websites. Key excerpts from television programmes were also circulated across Tunisian social media networks on a large scale. These trends are discussed in further detail under the section on social media practices in this chapter.

Six respondents said they watched television for twenty minutes or less on average per day, due to limited access, lack of interest, lack of time or a combination of these factors. Based on their accounts, half of the participants in this sample watched television between thirty and ninety minutes per day. Television viewing was mostly associated with following news and political debates and primarily viewed in the evening. By comparison, radio featured less significantly in their media practices. Three interviewees said they never listened to the radio, and approximately two thirds listened to radio stations for less than an hour per day (of which eleven stated that they listened for less than twenty minutes). Radio was associated to some extent with the dissemination of news, as well as to listening to music. It featured in respondents' accounts as a less targeted activity that acted as an accompaniment to daily activities. Print media, and newspapers in particular, were never read by one third of participants, and six of them said they only had a look at them occasionally, for example if they happened to come across a paper in a café, or in the workplace.

Additionally, the same data, aggregated by age group, also highlights interesting trends as the second chart (below) indicates. The majority of participants in this study are part of the first two age groups: nine are under the age of 25 years old (the youngest was 19 years old when interviews were first conducted), and 12 between 25 and 34 years old, whereas only three participants make up the third age group (35-44), four are in the fourth age group (45-54) and only two are in the last group (over 54). Findings relating to the older age categories thus need to be interpreted with more caution.



GRAPH 2: Participants' average daily media time, by age category (Oct/Nov. 2012)

Overall, the time spent with media was highest for respondents under the age of 24 and over the age of 55. Respondents falling between these age groups, particularly those with more

family and work commitments, spent less time with media in general. As Sarra - who had recently become a mother at the time the interviews were conducted - said when I enquired about her media habits: “Well there’s always the ‘before the baby’ and the ‘after the baby’” to explain that having her child had transformed many aspects of her life, including significantly reducing her media consumption. Social media use dominated time spent by participants online for most age groups, and the younger the participants the more time they spent on social media, compared to other sites online. Compared to other media, more time was spent on social media than with any other media form for all respondents under the age of 45. Participants under the age of 24 spent more time with social media than all traditional media forms together (television and radio and print media). Social media platforms appear to occupy what is arguably an exclusive position for these Tunisian “digital natives”. Television time was highest for participants over the age 55, followed by those under 24, as these two groups had more free time available. Total time spent by all participants listening to the radio made up approximately a third of time spent with traditional media forms in total, and print media accounted for only about a tenth of this time. Respondents in the ‘over 55’ age group were the most inclined to spend time reading print media (over half an hour on average per day), whereas participants under 24 years of age almost never read any printed newspaper or magazine.

As highlighted by the charts discussed above, social media - and Facebook in particular - occupied a dominant part of the time that interviewees said they spent online (excluding Internet use for professional purposes) during this period and, for some of them, of their media time more generally. Ahmed for example referred to only two websites that he visited regularly when he was online, and said that “otherwise it’s all Facebook”. Salma divided her online time between watching Youtube clips and browsing Facebook. Farah said that she researched recipes on different websites online and read the website of one online newspaper, spending the rest of her time online on Facebook. Meriem said that she only looked at sites other than Facebook if she “happen[ed] to have the time”. Sarra explained that she spent most of her online time on the platform aside from time spent checking her emails, and accessing maternity websites. Raouf, Asma and Youssef all said the platform accounted for almost all the time they spent online. Habib even remarked that he used to look at other websites, but that he no longer felt that he needed to do so, as he considered that all the sources and information he wished to access were available to him through Facebook. On the other hand, there were some exceptions to this trend, in particular among older participants. For example, Ghada – in her sixties – started using the platform in 2012,

but she continued to dedicate most of her time online to reading a number of online news websites that friends and family members recommended to her. Among other sites most frequently cited by respondents were blogs and online news sites such as *Nawaat*, *Businessnews*, *Webmanager*, *Tuniscopie*, *Attounsia* and *Babnet*, *El Jerida* and *Tanitpress*, all of which were Tunisian websites. As these findings suggest, Facebook continued to occupy a central (but not exclusive) role in the everyday, post-revolutionary, media habits of the majority of the research participants.

It is also worth noting that there were no significant variations between male and female participants in terms of their media consumption patterns (nor, more generally, in their involvement in politically related interactions and discussions online and offline). There were differences between participants, but these were not correlated to their gender. Male and female participants spent relatively similar time on average watching television for example, listening to the radio, or using social media in the highly politicised post-revolution period. Although gender differences and social norms relating to gender roles were relatively marked in Tunisian society compared to Western contexts, these were less marked in comparison with other contexts in the Middle-East and North Africa region, making the Tunisian setting quite exceptional in this regard, as previously detailed in Chapter 1.

## 2.2. Why social media?

There were a number of reasons why social media occupied such an important place in the time that participants spent using media in their everyday lives. With the revolution social media became positioned, in the view of the majority of the interviewees, as being a superior means of accessing information concerning the rapidly developing and relatively unstable political situation. The participants' primary motivation for using the platform was to access news and information, against which updates on friends' activities and access to other type of content was of secondary importance. The swift access to information, the ability to connect and be instantly updated about the latest developments, was an important factor in this dynamic, as it provided users with a sense of live access to an unfolding reality. For instance, Habib differentiated between different media forms by stating that, on the one hand, watching television or reading newspapers were activities mainly aimed at finding out about various opinions and analyses of current events, whereas Facebook served as a means of receiving information 'hot off the press' (The idiom used in Tunisian was "esskhoun ejjdid" which translates more literally as "the new and hot"). Anis did not explicitly draw such a

distinction but similarly favoured using social media platforms Facebook and Twitter for the speed at which information could be disseminated:

The difference the Internet is making is that when something happens, the information is circulated very quickly. On the radio, you have news every hour. On TV, it may be every six hours. But with the Internet, it's all the time and as soon as it happens.

As in Western contexts (e.g. Sveningsson, 2015), the rapidity of access to this reality as and when it happened, was positively perceived. It was also notable that within the relatively unstable Tunisian setting analysed in this study, this emphasis on immediacy and speed contributed not only to a sense that the content encountered online was not as mediated as that in other media formats, but also it provided participants with a sense of empowerment over the terms of exposure to this reality. Respondents preferred social media, contrasting it with the inadequacy of mass media, whose terms they had to adjust to. For Meriem, following news on the platform was more convenient because she was able to have an overview of the main issues at a glance, and focus in more detail on what interested her in particular, rather than having to listen to the entire content of a news broadcast. Hanen and Sarra compared the platform to print newspapers and considered they were quite redundant in a time when they felt they were able to access all content through their Facebook accounts. Salma made a similar remark in relation to television content:

Now I get the news more from the Internet than from television. I mean I don't watch much television, ooonce<sup>71</sup> in a while a programme or something, but even a programme if it's important and all, and it had a big impact on people, you'd find it on Facebook and everyone would be sharing it [...] everyone then watches that programme, but it's not like they all sit in front of the TV and wait to see what comes up, you understand?

Salma's comment further illustrates how the comparison between different media practices does not only relate to a matter of access to information or media content, but also to its social and political relevance to them as citizens. Social media offered more proximity, by allowing users to be informed about local issues for example, or trivial events relevant to participants that mass media did not prioritize or even feature on its news agenda. Although much of the news and media content that respondents viewed on Facebook was produced by a minority of people, everyone could easily participate in its distribution (by "sharing"), and this had a particular resonance for them.

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<sup>71</sup> Emphasis made by the interviewee.

The platform acquired an important role because it provided the study participants with a sense of access to, and involvement with, a news agenda that mattered to citizens collectively, that they could contribute to producing and distributing. By comparison, television - as a media form that allowed participants in this study to be informed and to develop their knowledge about current affairs and politics - also played an important role, but a number of issues were raised about its inconvenience or inadequacy. This was due to a variety of reasons. Primarily, timing issues were cited. The fixed scheduling of the main national news programme did not suit the routines of some respondents, or they expressed a dislike of its timing. Interviewees compared television to the Internet as a means of accessing news where and when it suited them best, and on a more frequent basis throughout the day. Radio was also referred to as more convenient in this sense, as it delivered more frequent news broadcasts over the course of the day. Three respondents also had issues with the level of formality of the public news broadcast on television. Meriem, for example, expressed a particular dislike for the language used in the national television broadcast as it was delivered in classical Arabic, rather than Tunisian dialect<sup>72</sup>, the main language of everyday communication by a majority of Tunisians. Two interviewees said they generally preferred radio as a media form to follow news because they did not have to be seated to watch the news, and could engage in other activities whilst listening. Cumulatively, the respondents' preference for social media over 'traditional' broadcast media highlights the former's ability to provide a sense of permitting access to a more authentic, instant and less mediated socio-political reality.

Participants' perspectives on what it meant to be informed, as previously discussed, suggested that media played a pivotal role in helping them to familiarise themselves with a new political sphere, and in the performance of new civic roles, but also and equally allowing them to maintain a sense of control, not only over their terms of exposure to media content, but also over a rapidly-changing and relatively volatile socio-political context. For many respondents, the initial post-revolutionary period was both a time of hope and change, as well as of social, political and economic instability. Being continuously up-to-date about the

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<sup>72</sup> Tunisian is an Arabic dialect that differs quite substantially from classical Arabic compared to Arabic dialects spoken in the Middle East. Furthermore, like most of these dialects, it is not a written language. Classical Arabic is taught at schools and serves as main written language in the country (e.g. public administrations, services, legal documents etc) alongside French. However, Tunisian dialect serves as the main spoken language across the country. All written media content in Tunisia is thus either in classical Arabic or in French. Audio-visual content is mostly in Tunisian dialect. Some imported media content is also in Egyptian or other Arabic dialects. However, news broadcasts on television and radio continue to be mainly in classical Arabic as presenters need to use written notes or material as a base. Interviews and debates draw on a mixture of Tunisian dialect and classical Arabic depending on interlocutors' linguistic abilities and the level of formality they wish to associate to their public communication.

latest political developments was consequently extremely important, given the frequency of ongoing crises, as a means of connecting to what some respondents (e.g. Anis, Youssef, Khouloud) described as being in “[their] interests”, and in understanding their collective prospects - “the future of the country”, “where the country is heading” and “what was going to happen to the country”. In this sense, the turn to news partly served to alleviate anxieties and to develop knowledge from different sources about scenarios that were difficult to anticipate. For Sonia, who turned to social media for news updates, the revolution’s development and the rapid escalation of protests in January 2011 had been experienced as events so sudden and unexpected in their magnitude and effect, that constant monitoring of the news was arguably still a way to come to terms with the changes two years later. Her media routine permitted her to maintain a semblance of control over the rapidly changing socio-political reality:

I open the Internet first thing to go through the news, emails and Facebook, so that’s every day, in the morning. Sometimes, additionally, before I go to bed I have to check in case something happened in the meantime. [...] With the revolution I was in a state of shock like many people. Until now sometimes, I can’t believe it, did it really happen, the regime fell, and it’s a new government? We didn’t expect it at all. Since then I got so into Facebook because you miss nothing.

For other participants such as Ahmed, Rim, Zied or Youssef, closely following the news was also directly linked to worries about their personal, professional future. For example, Zied, who was running a small business selling household textiles saw his income plummet after the revolution and was struggling to make a living. For him, being informed also meant understanding if his financial difficulties were likely to last. Similarly, Youssef, a recent architecture graduate who was trying to start a career in the field, associated his interest in news during this period with his insecure professional prospects.

For a number of respondents, the result of these informational and social needs was that the connection, and proximity, that social media provided was articulated as a type of addiction. In nearly half of all the interviews, interviewees phrased their use of Facebook in language which implied necessity; for example, to be “constantly connected”, always “up-to-date”, or to “never miss anything”. Listed below are samples of additional statements that further illustrate this perception:

Sihem: "Tunisians now, they can't live without Facebook, at least when it comes to young people".

Nabil: "I'm not big friends with Facebook, I don't know, but I need to have my daily dose of Facebook in order to be up to date [a la page]".

Hanen: "I'm constantly connected, always, I can't... even if my 3G key ends, I have to buy a new one. My Facebook is always on".

Youssef: "Always that half hour [on Facebook] first thing, with a coffee. I start my day at work with that. If I don't have that half hour, I spend the day thinking about it".

Yassine: "Facebook, now, one can't do without it".

However, beyond this it also reflects the importance of knowledge about news and politics as a way of connecting and socialising with other Tunisians, in this highly politicised everyday context. Yassine, for example, explained how his use of social media had changed since the revolution. For him, the platform was no longer accessed "just like that" to socialise with others. Using the platform was also a more targeted activity for him, aimed at receiving developing news and being "up-to-date, like everyone else, to avoid missing some event rather than finding it out from people". Whilst the platform served, in his case, to attune him to his politicised environment, the actual discussion of news and current affairs was generally conducted in meetings with his friends in cafés. This knowledge served as frame of conversation for many study participants. For Narjes for example, it was "important to be up-to-date, even just to be able to discuss things". Several interviewees evoked the pressure they felt to avoid being "out of synch" (*déphasé*<sup>73</sup>), to be as aware of particular issues as their friends or colleagues.

Daily social media routines were established to fulfil this need to be 'in synch'. Typically, these were initiated with the study participants logging into their social media accounts as soon as the Internet was accessed in the morning, when they sat in front of their computers at home or at work, and - at times - on their phones whilst still in bed. The time between these points of access was, for many respondents, punctuated by brief scans of Facebook in order to receive the latest information throughout the day, depending on work and private commitments. Finally, this routine was completed by a second prolonged session on social

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<sup>73</sup> French term that entered Tunisian vocabulary, particularly fashionable among young people.

media in the evening, time permitting, either in conjunction with television viewing or as a separate activity before going to bed. Whilst these media habits differed depending on individual domestic and professional circumstances, the majority of them nevertheless highlight not only the inseparability of media use from other daily routines (Pink and Leder Mackley, 2013), but also the importance of social media, whether in terms of time spent using Facebook in comparison to other media, in terms of the combination of social media use with evening television viewing habits, or in terms of the positioning of social media as the first and/or last access with the outside world in respondents' morning and evening routines.

To summarise the previous findings, interviews conducted towards the end of 2012 highlighted the importance, for the study's participants, of performing their new civic identities by being informed and developing a knowledge and opinion about political news and public matters. In stark contrast to the context before the revolution, the Tunisian media sphere thus had an important role to play in supporting this revived sense of civic empowerment and engagement. Although national mass media outlets gained in popularity after the revolution by offering a variety of new journalistic content and political programming, social media use nevertheless continued to occupy a particularly central place in respondents' post-revolutionary daily media habits. The use of social media was relatively politicised since the revolution, and was a notable if not key source of political information and knowledge. Respondents stressed the rapidity with which social media enabled access to news in a fairly unstable socio-political context as one of the motivating factors underpinning this trend; traditional media forms were perceived as being far less responsive in this regard. But equally, from a more sociological and cultural standpoint, the findings highlighted the link between social media's popularity and a newly emergent political culture in which being political was an important aspect of everyday socialisation. For the majority of these respondents, social media facilitated participation in this socialisation not only by enabling them to keep up-to-date about the latest issues and controversies, but also by supporting a sense of connection to a public sphere that seemed less mediated, more instant, and that was more directly shaped by their collective civic voice.

### 3. Objectivity, credibility and trust in a polarised informational space

Whilst these participants turned to a variety of traditional and new media sources to be informed and to enact new civic identities, their actual experience and encounters with news and politically-relevant information were more ambivalent, paralleling previous findings referred to earlier (see Hagen, 1994). In the fragmented and frequently polarised post-revolutionary Tunisian media and political landscape, respondents experienced varying degrees of difficulty in orienting themselves towards different information and public knowledge providers. This last part of the chapter focuses in detail on the choices they make in these orientations and how they weigh information stemming from a variety of journalistic and non-journalistic sources.

#### 3.1. Orientations toward traditional media as information providers

I will start this assessment by exploring respondents' perceptions of traditional mass media as an information source, and their expectations of professional journalism. These, it transpired from the interviews, were closely tied to a conception of objectivity. In academic debates on journalism and the mediation of public and political matters, the notion of objectivity is relatively contested. On the one hand, it points to an ideal of journalists and news media as unbiased transmitters of information serving in the public interest and supporting informed citizenship in a democracy. It is based on the assumption that facts can be clearly separated from opinions and values (Hackett, 1984). On the other hand, many scholars have contended that objectivity should be regarded as a social construct (Molotch and Lester, 1974; Hallin and Mancini 1984; Schudson, 1991), the boundaries of which are often fluid whose definition is contingent on localised sociocultural factors. In this respect, Deli Carpini and Williams (2001), for example, note that an objective standpoint to communicate a social and political reality simply does not exist (p.119). Part of the argument has thus centred on assessing the parameters under which the negotiation over different representations of this reality occurs, and the balance of power that underpins its mediation to citizens. Beyond these issues and under a more culturally-oriented perspective, a key question to ask is how particular framings of objectivity contextually relate to an existing social, political and journalistic *culture* (for a more detailed overview, see Schudson, 1997a, p.16-17 and Berkowitz, 2011). For instance, the work of Hallin and Mancini (2004) highlights the links between news media and political culture in different national contexts. Equally, from a historically comparable perspective, Mutz and Young (2011) argue that contemporary notions of objectivity and journalistic

neutrality that are often advanced are very different from the ideals that journalists were meant to aspire to a few decades earlier in the United States:

Instead of an emphasis on facts and objectivity, the diversity they wanted was one of antagonistic vested interests, one in which reporters were advocates for their positions without any pretense of neutrality (Mutz and Young, 2011, p.1023).

In this study, interview accounts suggest that the notion of objectivity particularly mattered to the respondents, and that they had relatively high expectations of journalistic neutrality in the nascent democratic Tunisian context, but that they considered these to remain largely unfulfilled. Indeed, references to the lack of objectivity were recurrent in participants' experiences with mass media. The majority of them referred to the overly politicised nature of Tunisian media and journalism, and the lack of balanced representations of news and socio-political matters in the country. The centrality of these issues in their accounts can partly be explained by the progressive polarisation of the media landscape in Tunisia during this period (a detailed account is provided at the beginning of Chapter 6), of which the study participants were relatively aware. But equally, it is partly reflective of a new political culture among citizens after the revolution. For most of the participants being kept informed was not the only issue at stake. They also deemed media's role in this newly liberated public space, and its neutrality, as key pillars supporting the principle of democratic citizenship. However, the interviews also highlighted a level of contradiction between participants' expectations of objectivity and their personal preference for media that were closely aligned to their own political perspectives. Often, complaints about lack of objectivity tended to be tied to media coverage that failed to reflect their individual political views, rather than unbiased representations of social and political reality. This was evidenced by their reflections about television programming in particular.

Diverging perceptions of objectivity were relatively pronounced in relation to the national public television broadcaster and, especially, its main channel *Watanyia 1*<sup>74</sup>. Its evening news broadcast was watched by the large majority of the participants in 2012, irrespective of their political opinions and their appraisals of its quality, as it provided a common reference point and continued, as was the case before the revolution, to be an important marker of time and daily routines. Nevertheless, concerns about the neutrality of the broadcaster were raised by respondents on all sides of the political spectrum. Habib, for example, who was an

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<sup>74</sup> Public television consisted of two channels *El Watanyia 1* and *El Watanyia 2*.

opposition party supporter perceived that the editorial line of the broadcaster was becoming less neutral and increasingly supportive of the government. Similarly, Khoulood, who was fiercely opposed to Islamist party Ennahdha, had regularly watched the national news broadcast, but considered it to be a mouthpiece of the government and thus ideologically compromised, blandly echoing the state's position on public issues. She subsequently stopped watching the news. Conversely Ahmed - a supporter of Salafist Islam - disapproved of the representation of the Salafist movement in the news, seeing coverage as one-sided, exaggerated and manipulative in its scapegoating of its supporters as purported cause of all newsworthy problems in the country. For Mounir, the financial director of a large factory, the bias he perceived in the national news broadcast was a consequence of the powerful control the trade unions exerted over the Tunisian public broadcaster. As a result, he considered that the broadcaster was too critical of the government and that it failed to sufficiently educate audiences about their civic duties, and how they could support the effort of rebuilding the country after the revolution, rather than participating in constant protest actions and strikes. Mehdi, who had an unusually positive view of the coalition government, also considered the news coverage as being overly critical of the government, and not fulfilling its function as a neutral public institution:

In terms of public television, that's the same it hasn't changed. In the same way it used to work for the dictatorship to make the news reach you in a certain way, now it's the opposite, it's a hundred and eighty degrees turn, it works for people's interests, there's no... there's no neutrality. Because I had doubts on many occasions. You think you have trust in something but there were many events that happened since the revolution that make you have doubts. And there are the presenters, who for example interrupt one of the people they interview too much, and who always attack his opinion, [whereas] the other opinion is given time, and on the contrary [the presenters] may even repeat it. You feel that the channel is trying to manipulate you to understand something specific, it doesn't want you to understand things. So in terms of our public media, it's still far. In all honesty it's still far!

Other interviewees expressed less pronounced opinions on the objectivity of the public broadcaster's news broadcasts, but nevertheless voiced a degree of criticism. For example, when I asked Sihem, a student in her early twenties about her views of the public broadcaster's reporting, she stated quite matter-of-factly that "their news is right and wrong" but that she nonetheless always watched these broadcasts with her flatmates. Similarly, for Nabil, following the national news was a matter of habit but, rather than serving to inform

him, he regarded it as a way of finding out about the specific political perspective of the broadcaster, which he considered to have a pro-government stance. For Nabil, all Tunisian media were politicised during this period, and the public broadcaster was no exception.

The levels of neutrality actually achieved by the public broadcaster were in fact relatively inconsistent due to internal ideological power struggles as well as a result of external pressure exerted on the editorial line of its news and political content. However, regardless of the actual subjectivity or otherwise of the content (which is not the focus of this study), participants' accounts highlight two important aspects about their understanding of the role of news and journalistic objectivity. First of all, the consensually negative view held by respondents that the public channels failed to achieve the required level of journalistic objectivity to some extent indicates the relatively high expectations, and increased level of scrutiny to which the broadcaster was subjected, considering its role as a public broadcaster, and its ties in the past to the dictatorial regime. In this sense, study participants seemed to attach particular importance to - and expressed a wish to be able to rely on - a democratic and independent journalism that supported them in their new civic roles. Secondly, the findings also highlight how these citizens themselves aspired to an ideal of objectivity in their expectations of media's political coverage, whilst engaging in the construction of quite different and, at times, opposing definitions of objectivity within the relatively polarised informational space after the revolution.

Additionally, a number of respondents articulated criticisms concerning a perceived lack of objectivity on private Tunisian television channels, and in particular the two leading private channels at the time - *Ettounsiya* and *Nessma TV*. Opinions about these channels varied considerably. Many participants enjoyed their programming as it was considered as relatively innovative, dynamic and more appealing than the public television channel. For example, they repeatedly referred to a programme called "Lebes" on *Ettounsiya* channel, that tackled controversial political and social issues satirically, mixing entertainment, news, music and celebrity coverage in a talk show format that was considered, by these participants, both appealing and informative. However, respondents who supported the government, complained that these channels were "opposition media". Their content was, in their opinion, overtly biased towards the opposition and unfairly negative in its depiction of the government and of the parties in power. Some of these respondents also considered this bias to be related to the previous links between their owners and the Ben Ali regime<sup>75</sup>.

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<sup>75</sup> See chapter Six for details on this channel, and on the judicial issues its owner faced in 2013.

More generally, expressed concerns over the integrity and quality of Tunisian mass media and journalism were relatively consistent across participants with differing political opinions, but the areas perceived as problematic varied in accordance with their existing political views and level of interest in political matters. For example, Raouf who was particularly negative about Tunisian journalists' perceived lack of neutrality about government achievements, had no issue with subjective journalism when it supported a cause he was sympathetic to, as in the case of broadcaster *Al Jazeera* whose coverage of the revolution he regarded as having been subjective inasmuch as it consciously undermined the Ben Ali regime, and (in his view) aimed at its ultimate overthrow. Similarly, Nabil clarified that his view on journalistic neutrality was relative to his opinion as an opponent of the government:

I consider myself as subjective, I'm someone who's quite critical [of the government], and *Nessma* for example seems to me neutral because it expresses my opinions.

Negative views about Tunisian mass media's perceived lack of objectivity were also the catalyst for some of the participants to reduce their exposure to news and media content. As mentioned above, some interviewees stated that they started to change their media habits due to the level of stress caused by the news, the political infighting on television debates and the recurrent political crises in the country. However, for some of the study participants, adjustments to their news and media practices in 2012 were directly linked to their dissatisfaction with perceived levels of subjectivity in journalistic coverage of events. Whereas for a number of respondents who did not side with the government, or did not identify with any political ideology in particular, awareness of the politicisation of mass media was not articulated as problematic, the majority of respondents who openly supported the parties in government limited their exposure to these media sources to some extent, or boycotted them altogether (with the exception of the public television news broadcast which remained an important reference point for all interviewees, as noted above). For these respondents, dissatisfaction with Tunisian mass media, and television in particular, translated into a move to satellite television channels and to online media.

For participants who boycotted these Tunisian channels, satellite broadcaster *Al Jazeera* offered a preferred alternative. Paralleling this trend of selectivity, several participants on the opposite side of the political spectrum said they boycotted *Al Jazeera* because they perceived it as overly biased in favour of the government and the Islamist party Ennahdha. For instance, Neila, who had participated with her friends in sending video footage of protests in her town

to the broadcaster during the revolution, felt that it had changed and that, in its coverage of Tunisian issues, its main channel was only representing the perspectives of Ennahdha and interviewing its members. Similarly, Farah, Kamal and Zied thought that supporting Ennahdha was part of the Qatari-owned broadcaster's long-term strategy, and said the channel came across as though "there's someone behind it", that it "served specific sides", and that it had "lost credibility in Tunisia".

The highly politicised media scene after the revolution assisted in reconnecting Tunisian citizens to public matters relating to their country, and in acquiring knowledge of, and forming opinions about, political issues and current affairs within an unstable and rapidly changing context. At the same time, as highlighted above, respondents were generally aware of an excessive lack of impartiality in the representation of news on different mass media sources – television in particular – although they did not necessarily perceive it as problematic when it did not directly oppose their personal opinions. When it did, the research participants limited their exposure to these channels. Although participants sought a diversity of sources of information, the politicised mass media scene particularly antagonised respondents who were supportive of the parties in government. Other participants were critical, to different extents, of mass media content and journalistic practices, but found the content of these channels sufficiently appealing to continue to watch them.

As these findings indicate, the participants in this study expressed high expectations of news media and journalistic neutrality, but their individual perceptions of what objectivity actually consisted of were relatively varied, and their preference for informational sources that reflected their political opinions were indicative of the role played by trust in their assessment of different representations of social and political reality. The function of trust in shaping informational exposure was, as we will see in the next section, more pronounced in the social media space where a more pluralised and divergent range of informational resources was available, and where users were able to adjust their exposure to reflect their personal preferences.

### 3.2. Orientations towards different information sources on social media

#### a. Information, credibility and trust

An important aspect of media's role in citizens' everyday lives relates to the level of trust they invest in the information and representations provided to them by journalists and news

media organisations, as this trust is arguably experiencing an ongoing shift away from traditional authority models (Lankes, 2008). The field of journalism has undergone significant changes in the new media era. Much research has focused on the changing work of journalists and news media institutions, or on comparisons between citizen-journalism (Witt, 2004) and traditional mass media journalistic practices in this respect. However, as a number of researchers have highlighted (Coleman et al., 2012; Hermida et al., 2012), less is known about the perspectives and experiences of news consumers in this rapidly changing informational environment. Deuze (2003), for example, points out that the emphasis on interactivity in online environments may profoundly alter perceptions of journalistic authority and values associated to the journalistic profession. Coleman et al. (2012) provide a rare insight into these changes in a British context. Their findings highlight that contemporary shifts in how citizens can interact with news and informational content has implications in terms of their expectations of professional journalism, and the trust they invest in public knowledge:

It is generally accepted that public knowledge should be authoritative, but there is not always common agreement about what the public needs to know, who is best placed to relate and explain it, and how authoritative reputations should be determined and evaluated (p.50).

The assessment provided by Coleman and his colleagues, suggest that in a time of informational abundance, information accuracy becomes a scarce and particularly valued resource. This is because this change translates into increased uncertainty for citizens about what sources and representations to believe in.

In a number of related academic fields (e.g. journalism and mass communication studies, computer-mediated communication, information studies), much attention has recently focused on the question of how information's credibility and accuracy is perceived in the new media environment (e.g. Flanagin and Metzger, 2000 and 2014; Johnson and Kaye, 2004; Cassidy, 2007; Osatuyi, 2013; Sveningsson, 2015). Many of these studies are quantitatively led and tend to focus on the issue through comparisons of perspectives on traditional and Internet news environments. Some commentary, for example, has focused on the relationship of credibility perception and the communicative form that informational content takes (e.g. Osatuyi, 2013 on the role of audio and visual elements). Others, such as Cassidy (2007), provide a different perspective on the issue by focusing on credibility perception by journalists themselves, rather than news consumers, to point out that even within

professional journalism there are significant differences in credibility perceptions, that partly relate to their level of familiarity in working with online news.

Renewed attention has also been devoted to the specific question of source credibility as the trustworthiness and expertise of sources are complicated in an online environment (e.g. Flanagan and Metzger, *forthcoming*), and particularly in a networked context. In fact, the very notion of what constitutes a source online is open to challenge, and some have called for its radical reconceptualization (see Sundar and Nass, 2001). Reviewing the development of debates in this field since the fifties, Flanagan and Metzger (*forthcoming*) note that a key distinction between previous informational environments and the online environment is the more limited transparency of the latter, concerning the identity and underlying motivations of those producing informational content. Equally, they note that despite the relative inconclusiveness of studies in the nascent field of online source credibility perception, early trends suggest that heavier Internet use as well as news alignment with personal political views play a role in supporting a perception that sources are credible online. Furthermore, as Sundar and Nass highlight in their study (2001), the type of source to which information is attributed online has an impact on its credibility perception – notably, that information attributed to other online users is perceived as more credible by their study’s participants than the same information attributed to online news editors. Garrett (2011) and Hermida et al. (2012), identify similar trends regarding news and information consumption on social media, in terms of the prevalence of the role played by other users in people’s online networks. In this sense, the relative lack of transparency about online sources, particularly tangible in a social media environment (Sveningsson, 2015), translates into a relative increased credibility perception when information is circulated across trusted networks and connections, as tends to be the case on social media platforms.

Research about news and information circulation on social media is a relatively new field of exploration. Whilst studies such as Sveningsson’s - referred to above – provide insights into information credibility perception among Swedish youth, the majority of research on the subject tends to be focused on the United States (Hermida et al., 2012; Kümpel et al., 2015), with even fewer studies relating to non-Western settings. Furthermore, Kümpel et al. (2015) highlight that much of this research suffers from a lack of contextualisation, as it tends to focus on quantitative methods at the expense of qualitative insights into the cultures of news and media consumption that findings emanate from. What this field of research nevertheless

highlights is the importance of Facebook as platform among social media news consumption habits (Olmstead et al., 2011; Hermida et al., 2012; Kümpel et al., 2015).

b. An increasingly corrupted informational space:

As a consequence of the highly politicized nature of Tunisian media content, of the relative lack of regulation of the media sector, and of fledgling professional journalistic standards in the year following the revolution (see chapter 1), online and offline media content were providing relatively different, and at times contradictory, versions of news and events in the country. These issues also routinely translated into the distribution of misinformation online and offline, at times followed by subsequent rectifications and retractions. The central role played by Facebook during this period was also the catalyst for the rapid dissemination of misinformation, occasionally on a very large scale, which in turn increased pressure on under-resourced journalists to report news items without subjecting them to an adequate verification process.

The Tunisian social media space in which the study participants operated was naturally not immune to conflicting agendas and political interests. In fact, it was less transparent and accountable than traditional mass media. In this environment, hundreds of Facebook pages emerged that produced information and commentary on Tunisian events and current affairs, and which supported different political parties in an orchestrated manner, yet affiliations to these parties was not overt, and insights into the identities of the owners or administrators of these pages were very limited. Some of the contextualizing interviews I conducted in 2012 indicated that a number of Facebook pages that had gained in popularity during the revolution had been acquired by political parties as a means of reaching a wider online audience, and that administrators were funded by parties to run a number of these pages. One of the interviews with a page administrator provided, off the record, an account of how these acquisitions were covertly conducted. As the political economy of this online space is not the focus of my thesis, this issue was not further investigated. For the purposes of the current assessment, it is sufficient to draw attention to the lack of transparency in this social media space and its vulnerability to potential infiltration, unbeknownst to its audiences, by different interests.

The sense of trust in media in the Tunisian context rapidly evolved after the revolution. After the initial crisis and euphoria of the revolution, during which social media helped to connect

citizens and contributed to a sense of national unity, respondents started to perceive that different agendas were shaping content to their advantage. As a result, the spontaneity associated with the freeing of public expression, and collective exchange of information on social media, progressively dissipated. The perception of a possible control or manipulation of media content by vested interests necessitated, for many participants, a need to increase their level of awareness and to exercise a degree of caution in their media consumption habits. Social media was also soon perceived as a corrupted informational space as it started to be used to transmit both misinformation and disinformation, rumours and defamatory content. With this realisation, participants developed more nuanced interpretations of media content.

### c. Typical use of Facebook for information access

The way that research participants used social media to access news and information was fairly typical. On Facebook, the content they encountered originated from friends in their network and from pages they had chosen to follow on the platform by 'liking' them, and it appeared in their newsfeed based on Facebook's algorithms and their level of interaction with content from specific pages or friends' profiles. Participants who provided consent to access their social media accounts had between one hundred and two hundred 'friends' on the platform on average, although a few exceeded this number considerably. Based on interviewees' accounts, many had accepted 'befriending' requests from, or in turn asked to connect to, strangers on Facebook during the revolution, but when interviews were conducted in 2012, the majority of respondents said that the 'friends' they had on the platform at the time primarily consisted of people they knew offline, and these acquaintances mainly included friends, family members and colleagues.

Approximately half of the participants followed a significant number of pages on Facebook, whereas the remainder followed a far lower number. The number ranged from the low twenties to nearly one thousand pages for some. On average, approximately ninety pages were followed per participant. A number of these pages related to leisure and entertainment activities such as accounts of celebrities from the music and film industry, as well as sports, fashion and cookery related pages, and connections also included numerous international pages. However, content relating to national news, information and political issues features notably in the list of pages followed by the participants. These pages include social media accounts of political and public figures, traditional as well as online media and journalism

sources, but to an important extent also the accounts of a less clearly defined ownership and genre that mixed jokes, photography, music, news stories and political opinions on a single page, often categorised by its administrator(s) as “community page”<sup>76</sup>. When questioned about how they initially discovered these pages, most respondents explained that they encountered them through content that others in their network had distributed and that, having enjoyed it or found out about important issues through this source, they chose to follow it. The act of ‘liking’ a page in order to follow it was often taken quite literally. Participants were more likely to come across representations and perspectives different to theirs through content circulated by people in their network than through pages they actively chose to follow.

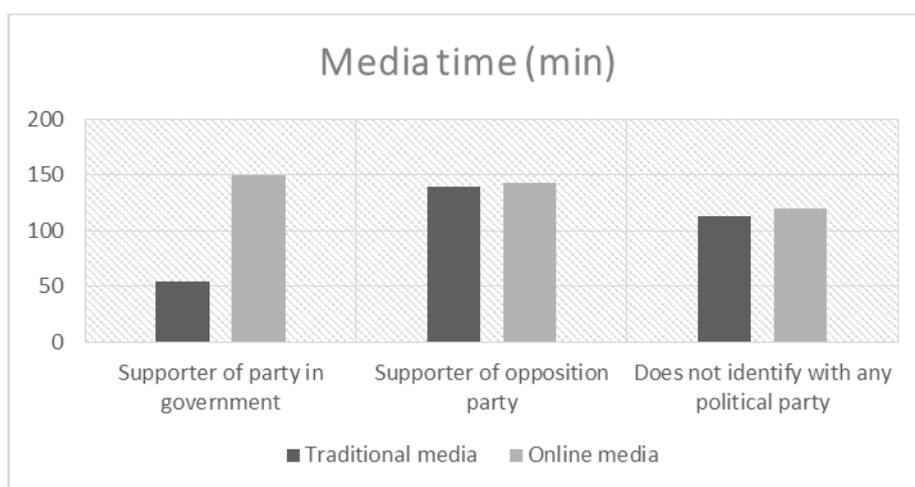
Study participants had access to a very wide range of content on Facebook. They were able to directly look at specific social media pages or accounts, but mostly they followed content that appeared from these pages in their Facebook newsfeed and followed the typical tendency of online news readers to scroll information from top to bottom (Adam et al., 2007). Compared to traditional media, respondents enjoyed the variety of content and sources that social media enabled them access to. It was perceived as appealing and less stressful than television viewing in terms of the mixture of news and entertainment content it provided. It was also considered as appealing due to the variety of sources of news that it provided. For many respondents, Facebook was referred to as a convenient aggregator through which they accessed content from offline and online media organisations, from friends, politicians, media figures, bloggers and celebrities. Relatedly, two participants (Sonia and Youssef) compared their use of Facebook to reading a personal newspaper.

Whilst variety in terms of types of content and source was, as referred to above, overall positively perceived by the majority of the respondents, diversity in terms of political opinions and affiliations they were able to come across on social media had less appeal to them. Only a few of the respondents (five in total) directly referred to the latter as a positive opportunity. Most respondents instead stressed as positive the possibility to customise their informational networks on social media in order to view content they enjoyed, and to avoid exposure to media sources they deemed as antagonising or divergent from their own views. This was particularly evident in relation to the participants who supported the parties in government. The time spent on average online per day, compared to other media, was

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<sup>76</sup> A more detailed assessment of a sample of these pages, and of political figures and institutions followed by participants, is included in Chapters 5 and 6.

noticeably higher for respondents who felt particularly antagonised by the media content of the leading Tunisian broadcasters. As highlighted by the chart below, supporters of parties in government were more inclined than others to spend their time using online rather than traditional media sources. As with the majority of participants, most of this time online was occupied by social media use - Facebook in particular, as well as Twitter to a lesser extent (two participants).



GRAPH 3: Participants' average daily media time, by political perspective (Oct/Nov. 2012)

Rim, an Islamist party supporter, explained that she spent increasing amounts of time on Facebook because she found content that reflected her set of interests. She contrasted this to “other media” that she felt was “ripping off” people. Using social media for news content consequently afforded her the possibility of accessing alternative sources of information and opinions that she could identify with.

An analysis of the sources followed by research participants on Facebook, indicates that most of the pages followed by government supporters were pro-government pages, and most pages followed by opposition supporters were opposition pages<sup>77</sup>. Many participants, independently of their affiliations, described that they were conscious that they predominantly followed Facebook pages whose opinions they tended to agree with, and recognised that problems could arise from the significant discrepancy between content on social media (these issues are discussed at length in Chapters 5 and 6). Zied described these differences as “domains” within Facebook. Others, like Sonia, explained that they came to

<sup>77</sup> What is meant here by pro-government and opposition pages is not necessarily related to official party pages, but rather pages whose content tends to be clearly aligned with one side or the other of the frequently polarised social and political spectrum in the Tunisian context.

realize the differences between these online ‘territories’ through the content that some of their Facebook acquaintances, of different political opinions, were posting:

I can see what they’re sharing and there are huge differences. (...) You feel as if it has become a media war.

In this specific context, these findings tend to support the argument that exposure to a pluralism of opinions is actually undermined in favour of more selective and opinion-reinforcing informational exposure on social media. As the following and final section of this assessment indicates, the verification strategies that these participants develop further elucidate the role that individual perceptions of trust play in orientating them towards different representations of socio-political reality in the country.

#### d. Verification strategies and hierarchies of trust in media

This issue of news credibility and informational authority was particularly problematic in the Tunisian context addressed in this study, as journalistic practices were evolving in an informational environment in which they had previously broadly lacked credibility, and in which citizens’ relation to national news media was still relatively ambiguous. The construction of public knowledge was not only problematised due to the expansion of the informational landscape with new media and related changes in perceptions of authority, but further complicated by mass media’s identification with the state’s propaganda apparatus under the Ben Ali regime, and – conversely – social media’s positive (for many) associations with revolutionary movements in the country. The following analysis thus seeks to establish what hierarchies of trust in information and public knowledge emerged from this context, and on what basis the respondents placed their belief in the accuracy of the representations of their socio-political reality that they came across.

All the participants in this sample, except one, were aware that misinformation was transmitted on Facebook during the initial period of interviews, and most of them referred to the issue before I had an opportunity to ask them about it. Participants developed a number of strategies and routines to verify the information they came across when they were in doubt about its veracity. Many of them had at some point come across or shared information on the platform that they believed at the time of posting to be true, only to subsequently discover that it was not. Mounir, for example, recalled what he referred to as the Abdellia

affair. El Abdellia is a palace in the suburbs of Tunis that hosted an art exhibition in June 2012. This exhibition was the centre of controversy because a number of art works were deemed religiously offensive. A group of Salafists stormed the exhibition and vandalised its contents. Much of this controversy unfolded on social media where photographs of the works were widely disseminated. Several of these images were later revealed to have been taken from different exhibitions in other parts of the world. Mounir recounted being among those who believed the images were genuine, and actively involving himself in debate surrounding the controversy. He considered the issue an important indicator of how easily public opinion could be manipulated.

Whether or not to question the veracity of media content and information encountered on social media was largely a matter of personal judgement for participants. Half of them considered that significant factors in trusting what they came across were; the extent – real or otherwise - of their own knowledge; their ‘gut feeling’, or; a matter of logic or plausibility. Much of this also related to the degree of trust that respondents placed in individuals they were, or perceived to be, relatively familiar with. For instance, only two interviewees said that they checked the source of the information (e.g. Facebook page, website, journalist) and subsequently based their trust in the content on what they knew, or had discovered, about this source; whereas eight of them instead stated that their judgement was based on the person in their network who shared the content. For example, Rafik stated that he knew that some of his friends could not be relied on as they often inadvertently shared rumours and misinformation, whereas others were more cautious about the information they posted. Two respondents also mentioned public figures as the basis of their assessment, but not necessarily of their trust. Meriem, for example, referred to the case of a politician she did not trust, whose version of events about an incident in her town helped her assess the veracity of the news about this incident. In the case of Mehdi, part of this judgement was based on factors such as the tone of the media content and/or how rational or emotive its author seemed, and also rested on an assessment of the profiles of other social media users who shared the same content. However, this was a rather unusual process of verification. Two interviewees (Anis and Youssef) also grounded their degree of trust in the veracity of information on the social media platform accessed, considering Twitter users to be more “educated and responsible” (Anis), or less “ignorant”, and more “noble” (Youssef). Both respondents considered Facebook to have become a mainstream platform, used by too many people lacking adequate political knowledge and expertise, in contrast to a minority of more educated, discerning and informed social media users who used Twitter.

One third of research participants also referred to the role of repetition of information across different sources as indicative of the likelihood of its veracity. Respondents had come across misinformation on so many different media outlets and social media accounts, that they found it difficult to fully trust any media source in particular. As a result, they tended to seek exposure to a variety of sources. The repetition of news across different online and offline networks and its resonance on a large scale played a part in forming their assessment of news. Only one participant (Anis) specifically referred to repetition as an unreliable way to judge whether news items were correct or not. However, many said that regardless of how they tried to verify information, for some content there was simply no way of adequately judging its veracity. Four participants also stated that they had no trust in any media source, whether online or offline. In the occasional occurrences where respondents encountered news content relating to their local area, they directly verified information and sought more details through their networks of friends and families. This was usually established over the telephone, and a third of interviewees mentioned that they adopted this approach of 'first-hand' verification, where feasible.

Two further points in relation to participants' trust in news are particularly emblematic of the difficulties encountered in making sense of news and information in this media sphere. The first point relates to the level of trust that respondents had in visual content. It was striking that as many interviewees said they trusted news more when it was supported or complemented by still or moving imagery, as those who said they did not. Indeed, several respondents explained that they had come across images or videos that were later revealed to them as fake, "photoshopped" or edited in a misleading manner. Ahmed, a supporter of the Salafi movement, referred in this context to the example of the photo of a young man purportedly beaten by Salafist extremists. The photo, he said, was largely transmitted on Facebook as part of a campaign to vilify the movement, but some of his friends on the platform proved to him that the image was taken in Morocco instead. Similarly, he quoted the case of a video showing the Interior minister supposedly engaging in homosexual activities when he was in prison under the Ben Ali regime, and Ahmed described how another Facebook user revealed that images in the video had been modified. The same example was equally quoted by two other participants to explain their mistrust of visual content.

The second point relates to the role of mass media in this context. Only seven respondents directly referred to mass media sources, radio and television in particular, as a way of

establishing the veracity of a news item they accessed on social media. As already discussed earlier in this chapter, a number of participants felt antagonised by traditional mass media coverage, in particular government supporters. A few of them expressly emphasised that they did not trust mass media and professional journalists. Other interviewees articulated fewer reservations in this regard. In this context, Sarra commented:

[Do you trust the information you come across on Facebook?]

I mean, Facebook, if it's urgent news [khabar aajil], it always has to be verified.

[How do you verify?]

No, I mean, if you find it on [online newspapers like] *Businessnews* or... or *Tanit Press*, those ones mmm... you have to take it with a pinch of salt, but it's really when you find it on *Shems FM* [radio], when it's relayed by the media, or when really you find the information eeeeeverywhere<sup>78</sup> then maybe, but other than that you have to always check.

[So if you find the information on TV or on the radio then it's confirmed because it's journalists who relay it?]

Yes but even then [laughs], it depends, is it something too pro-Ennahdha?... If it's something that is too pro-government, you have to be wary also. I mean because I have the impression that we're going back a little bit to propaganda [tbendir] you see, but ok in general if it's on the radio and all that...

The closing comments in the above extract, indicating the participant's mistrust of overly positive news about the government, are particularly revealing, being explicitly anchored in her knowledge and prior experience of propaganda under past regimes in Tunisia. Beyond this, the hierarchy of trust she establishes is significant, where online newspapers always assume a lesser position in relation to other mass media sources - radio journalism, in particular, which is seen as a more reliable source. However, this trust was heavily contingent on the alignment of the media message with her existing, highly critical, views of the government.

This contrasted starkly with the opinion of Rim, who supported Ennahdha. Rim held little regard for Tunisian journalists in general:

The problem with journalists in Tunisia is that all the ones I have come across are subjective. Whether we are talking about newspapers or television or Internet, I have lost trust in all of it.

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<sup>78</sup> Emphasis by interviewee.

She recalled reading one of the national and publicly owned Tunisian newspapers and feeling very upset about an article that she considered to be providing an extremely exaggerated, one-sided and negative representation of events that were linked to the party. This incident was the last time that Rim read this newspaper. Her use of most traditional mass media sources had been affected in similar ways over time and her exposure to media was almost exclusively limited to what she came across on Facebook. She did not place her trust in the information she came across online either. Her verification strategies relied on networks of people she felt she could trust and these primarily consisted of supporters of Ennahdha that she communicated with online and offline. She further explained:

To check if an information is true or not, usually I start with using my own logic, whether something makes sense or not. Then as a second step if I'm not sure, then I would go to people I know to check with them by asking them directly if something had happened or not, and these are people in whom I trust.

For Rim, a perspective shift came when, earlier that year, she found temporary employment, and was exposed to the opinions of numerous colleagues who, to her surprise, held very different viewpoints to hers. This led her to question her informational practices. She continued:

[These] people were really against Nahdha and some of what they said appeared to me to make sense at times. There were several times though when I felt that what they were saying sounded like what's in the media, that they were influenced by the media. I can't fully follow their reasoning but they showed me another point of view on politics, and it got me thinking – ok I trust the Nahdha people whom I get information from and I trust that they're not lying to me, but I wonder sometimes how did they get their information to start with? [...] So that meant for me that I was only following one angle on things, in the same way that the article I was talking about earlier was very one-sided.

Despite this awareness for a need to be exposed to alternative points of view, she admitted that “in reality, I don't manage to do it”. She explained that this was due to the fact that, on social media, the large majority of her contacts and acquaintances were closely aligned to her perspective, and that, additionally, she found no enjoyment in the media sources that supported opposing perspectives.

## **Conclusion**

These findings underline the important role played by trust in how different sources of information and news were perceived on social media. Selective media exposure was apparent in the research participants' traditional media practices, but was more pronounced in their social media usage, as they were able to align their informational exposure with their own judgements and opinions amid a significant plurality and divergence of representations of their public world. A large majority of participants were aware of the increasing corruption of the informational space in Tunisia, including on social media, and they developed a number of verification strategies to orient themselves in this sphere. However, in an increasingly polarised context, as the interviews and online data highlight, existing notions of journalistic authority seemed to be undermined in favour of drawing on sources that broadly reflected the political stance of the respondent. It was also noteworthy that, in most verification strategies, personal value judgement and political opinion assumed precedence over other factors; equally that the Facebook pages from which much of this informational (and 'misinformational') content emanated were rarely quoted as part of their assessment criteria, whereas such source mattered when it came to mass media, and to a lesser extent also, to online news sites. In the social media context, the distributor of such content frequently appeared to be of greater relevance in the decision-making process than the information producer. Within this polarised political and media space, choices and habits of informational exposure were relatively polarised too. Whilst it mattered to be informed and politically engaged after the revolution, respondents had very different and at times quite opposing perspectives on what constituted objective, credible and trustworthy information. The next chapter examines how these diverging informational resources serve to support participation in political talk and other forms of communication and interaction between citizens.

## CHAPTER 5

### POLITICAL INVOLVEMENT AND THE NETWORKED SPHERE

#### 1. Introduction and theoretical framing

##### 1.1. Introduction

I vividly remember seeing one of Ben Ali's last speeches prior to his self-imposed exile, in January 2011. I was visiting Tunisia at the time, and meeting a cousin in one of the new mixed-gender cafés in the capital. The atmosphere was lively, as a football match was being broadcast live on a large projector screen, and the place was buzzing with conversation. My cousin and I were not paying particular attention to the football match, but at some point we noticed that the noise had abruptly died down. When we turned around, we saw that Ben Ali's figure had filled the screen. His impromptu address to the nation was in response to the rising protest movements in the country. This speech was to be the last one in which Ben Ali spoke in classical Arabic to his people. In another announcement a week later, he spoke to the nation in the local Tunisian dialect for the first time in his presidency; an apparent last ditch attempt to appeal directly to the population, and to regain their trust. Two days later he fled the country to what was to become permanent exile in Saudi Arabia. In scheduling his speech to air in the middle of a national sports event, the former president was seeking a wider reach and proximity to Tunisians, and in particular the youth demographic who were at the heart of the protests. The decision was also arguably an attempt to reassert his authority, by demonstrating that he still possessed the capability to intrude into their personal space by appearing, unannounced, within one of the few public spaces of social interaction in which they could gather relatively freely. After the short speech, the channel returned to the football match, yet it was apparent that the atmosphere had dramatically changed. Everybody in the café was staring at each other in silence, and no-one openly commented on, or even referred to, the speech. Eventually the silence gave way to the murmur of hushed conversations amid a general sense of unease and suspicion. This experience starkly contrasted with that of my next visit to Tunisia, two months after the revolution, when private and public spaces were completely dominated by discussions about current affairs and politics.

This chapter focuses on forms of political expression and involvement that research participants adopted in the post-revolution Tunisian context. Whereas the previous chapter assessed how they accessed news and other matters of public concern, and the role of social media within this process, this chapter extends the discussion to how the participants acted, interacted and communicated in relation to their knowledge of, and interest in, these issues. I explore the various communicative possibilities provided by social media, and whether they made any difference to the participants' ability to act on their opinions, or possibly even influence their shared public world. Whereas the previous chapter addressed content reception issues (news in particular), here I focus on questions of production and distribution of communicative messages and media content. I am interested in the ways an understanding of socio-political reality, and the civic and political identities it relates to, are expressed and externalised in the networked, and ambiguous, public-private communicative context. I aim to better clarify how this process unfolds in relation to social media's communicative possibilities, and what meanings respondents attach to these opportunities in what could, arguably, be termed a public sphere.

I approach this analysis through three main areas of enquiry. First I explore forms of participation in, and connection to, the formal political sphere. My aim is to establish whether the heightened politicized context in Tunisia translates, for the respondents in this sample, into involvement with formal organized political structures and institutions and what this form of participation is motivated or undermined by. This contextualization provides an important background to the subsequent question of whether social media makes a difference, for the study participants, in terms of proximity to this formal political sphere. My second area of enquiry focuses on the communicative space between citizens. I explore the participative dimensions of different forms of political talk and communication between citizens online and offline, and seek to assess the meanings and purposes that respondents associate with these forms of interactions with other citizens in both communicative contexts. My third strand of inquiry more specifically examines the differences in levels of privacy and publicness of this communicative space on social media, and what the visibility of citizens' political opinions and identity expressions on social media means in terms of their sustained communicative participation in this networked sphere.

## 1.2. Action, participation and communication

At heart, this chapter explores what forms of participation the opening of the public and political spheres, has translated into, after decades of authoritarian control, for the web-connected Tunisian citizens who took part in this study. It is consequently important to better frame the notion of participation, its relation to media, and the debates that arose about social media's participative potential. Whilst the scope and focus of this project does not allow for a detailed theoretical examination of the notion of participation - an extensive area of debate in a number of academic fields<sup>79</sup> - the following discussion provides a sketch of the main elements relevant to this chapter.

In political theory, the notion of political participation emphasises the possibility for citizens to influence decision-making processes (Verba et al., 1978), opportunities that need to be distributed relatively equally for democratic governance to be effective. However, it can also generate extremely varied understandings of what constitutes forms of citizens' involvement in a democracy (Carpentier and Dahlgren 2011). These variations relate to different ways of conceiving the balance and distribution of power between citizens and their representatives in a democracy, ranging from what Carpentier (2011a) calls 'maximalist' to 'minimalist' perspectives on participation. In simplified terms, minimalist viewpoints consider that citizens' democratic participation ought to be limited to voting and that power should, thereafter, be exclusively delegated to designated political representatives, a political elite who, under this viewpoint, is considered as uniquely positioned to evaluate decision-making processes (e.g. Schumpeter, 1976). At the other end of this continuum, the maximalist viewpoint considers that it is important for citizens at large to be involved in relevant public matters and decision-making processes, and that their participation, even at a minimal and indirect level, is crucial to sustaining democratic citizenship and to holding decision-makers to account. Within this range, participation includes what is more traditionally understood as forms of involvement in formal democratic processes and structures (e.g. voting, participation in political parties and civil society associations), as well as less structured activities such as participation in protests, or the signing of petitions. The maximalist perspective equally incorporates, as a form of participation, citizens' involvement in the public sphere, where information and opinions related to matters of shared concern are communicated, a sphere in which media are thus central as they "are the main mechanisms of creating voice and visibility in society" (Fuchs, 2014a, p.70).

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<sup>79</sup> For an overview, see, for instance, Lamprianou (2013) and Carpentier (2011b).

Two categories of participation can be distinguished in relation to media, what is termed 'participation in media' on one hand, and 'participation through media' on the other. The former refers to citizens' direct involvement in media structures and content production, whereas the latter points to the way that the media supports citizens' participation in a more oblique manner by providing an informational and communicative space in which public debate, opinion expression and self-representation in the public sphere can be based (Carpentier, 2007 and 2011b). As resources available to citizens for the production of media content have been, traditionally, relatively limited, and as symbolic resources have been predominantly concentrated in the hands of a limited number of mass media institutions, media's role in supporting participation has mainly been considered as relating to forms of participation *through* media. In other words, media's participatory dimension was, traditionally, mainly identified as mass media's provision of a communicative space that informs citizens, supports public debate, represents public opinion, and contributes to civic and political culture more broadly. However, this paradigm has been increasingly challenged over recent decades (Blumler and Coleman, 2013) as disengagement from institutional politics and electoral processes reached unprecedented levels in western post-industrial societies, most notably among the younger generation (Fieldhouse et al., 2007). Among other things, this has suggested an apparent failure of the media sphere in supporting democratic citizenship, insofar as sustaining the relationship between citizens and their representatives - and encouraging active participation through media - is concerned.

Against this backdrop, the drastic increase in opportunities for citizens to participate directly *in* media, through new digital communication technologies, has raised many hopes about the emergence of new social movements and of alternative structures through which citizens may be able to exercise a more tangible influence on the decision-making process, and engender a new form of power that is autonomous from institutional political structures and control (Sormanen and Dutton, 2015). These changes have often been captured by a shift in terminology from mass media reception to new media usage, and 'produsage' (Bruns, 2006), and from passive media consumerism to online activism. The possibility of realising this has been heightened in the networked Internet age, in which the opportunities for public communication have been vastly expanded, coordination of political action and mobilisation facilitated, and where citizens' access to alternative information sources, or the ability to produce and distribute media content, is far greater. Social media carry the potential to substantially extend participative opportunities, to increase and diversify democratic

mobilisation, and to facilitate a path towards more personalised and flexible networked action (Shirky, 2009; Carty, 2010; Castells, 2012; Bennett, 2012). Perhaps most notably, it has a marked potential to counter the issue of voter disengagement and to support the politicisation of new sections of the citizenry (Anduiza et al., 2012).

New media can support the emergence of alternative communicative, affective, and socio-political structures, and spaces for action among activist groups, as well as among uncoordinated groups of citizens. Furthermore, it destabilizes the hierarchies of political communication in substantial ways, not only by altering opportunities for horizontal communicative interactions between citizens and supporting civic culture (Dahlgren and Alvares, 2013), but also by framing in new ways communication between citizens and the institutional political sphere (e.g. Blumler and Gurevitch, 2001), with potentially important ramifications for how politics, and the role of media within it are conceived. For example, possibilities for new forms of less centralised digital or electronic government have been the focus of much attention, and been heralded as a catalyst for a profound shift in citizens' relationship with institutional politics. The implementation of this vision continues, in practice, to be relatively limited, however, and it still faces a number of unresolved challenges (e.g. Di Maria and Rizzo, 2005; Rios Insua and French, 2010; Gil-Garcia, 2013).

Most prominently perhaps, new media's communicative opportunities revived hopes of a thriving and more egalitarian online public sphere, as alternative and citizen-led journalistic initiatives emerged (Forde, 2011), news distribution possibilities were radically overhauled, and spaces for public debate and deliberation were significantly expanded. The notion of the public sphere – in its original Habermasian conceptualisation (1989 [1962]) or its various reassessments (e.g. Fraser, 1992; Dahlgren, 1995; Meyer and Moors, 2006; Dahlberg, 2007; Murphy, 2011) - has served as one of the dominant frameworks for the exploration of the media's role in supporting citizens' communicative involvement in political matters they consider to have in common. As a sphere that mediates between state and society, in which individuals and groups coalesce to form public opinion, the Habermasian public sphere (1989 [1962], 1996) provides an ideal of how, within a deliberative democratic model, political power can be counter-balanced through communicative means. Habermas conceived of this sphere as relating “neither to the functions nor to the contents of everyday communication”, but instead “to the social space generated in communicative action” (1996, p.360). He defined the terms of this concept as follows:

By the public sphere we mean first of all a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed. Access is guaranteed to all citizens. A portion of the public sphere comes into being in every conversation in which private individuals assemble to form a public body (...). In a large public body this kind of communication requires specific means of transmitting information and influencing those who receive it. Today newspapers and magazines, radio and television are the media of the public sphere (1974 [1964], p.49).

Habermas' original account of the public sphere was anchored in a discussion of the historical transformation of the structure of private and public realms. He framed the emergence of the public sphere by tracing the fall of a feudalized social order, and the concurrent emergence of an alternative political space through the development of a new communicative sphere where critical exchanges on public issues took place, thus a space that carried the potential of holding political institutions to account. This idealised conceptualisation has been widely debated and critiqued<sup>80</sup>, giving rise to alternative concepts of the evolution of the public sphere. Nevertheless, it continues to serve as an important reference point and useful framework for discussions on the participatory affordances of citizens' communicative and politically-oriented activities, and the notion has once again gained currency in conjunction with the expansion of new media use.

Indeed, if print media led to the emergence and development of a public sphere, a space subsequently re-feudalised - as per Habermas' account - by a mass media industry driven primarily by profit, many have seen in the emergence of new media the hope of the rise of a new online public sphere. Under this perspective, new media can support the destabilisation of and ultimate transcendence over the dominant influence of media and political elites in the production of media content and the framing of public discourse. For instance, Benkler (2006) argued that the Internet has a profoundly democratising impact as it transforms citizens' relationship to the public sphere, facilitating their communicative participation in public conversation and freeing them from former passive consumer-oriented modes of engagement with media content (p.272). In *The Wealth of Networks*, Benkler frames the shift from a mass-mediated public sphere to a new networked public sphere (2006, p.10), whose democratising impact stems from overcoming a number of obstacles which, he considers, face traditional media forms in liberal contexts. Benkler considers mass media to be characterised by a limited representativeness, a disproportionate influence in shaping public

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<sup>80</sup> In particular, its historical accuracy has been contested, as well as its narrow and exclusionary delineation of the social actors participating in this sphere, and the rationalist terms under which deliberation ought to be conducted.

opinion, and as having a vested commercial interest in avoiding in-depth engagement with political matters. Instead, he argues, the newly opened avenues for the use, production and diffusion of information now offer “a range of possibilities for pursuing the core political values of liberal societies” (*ibid*, p.8). The power of mass media to set the agenda for political deliberation is gradually being challenged by an increasingly organised new communications field where “non-market, peer-produced alternative sources of filtration and accreditation” (*ibid*, p.12) are emerging and allowing individuals and groups to engage in issues of shared concern.

The emergence of social media has further facilitated and expanded access to new opportunities for civic and political engagement (Freezell et al., 2009) that include swifter, easier, and cheaper means of opinion expression, creative exchange, support, collaboration and self-representation, and concomitantly, it has intensified the debate about the participative merits of online communication and interaction (Theocharis, 2015). Jenkins (2006), Castells (2009) and Papacharissi (2010) saw in social media’s reconfiguration of communicative flows in society an important democratising feature that supports the emergence and development of new virtual spheres for political expression among citizens, and the integration of private political identities to new public spheres. The role of social networking platforms such as Facebook has been of particular interest in terms of their facilitation of civic and political exchange, and their broadening of this space to social groups formerly considered as politically marginalised and/or disengaged (e.g. Fernandes et al., 2010; Christensen and Bengtsson, 2011; Bode et al., 2013).

However, whilst possibilities for involvement in the networked public sphere are unparalleled, numerous limitations to this line of argument have also, rightly, been highlighted by a number of researchers and academics in the field. For instance, as Fuchs (2014a) argues, the materiality and political economy of public spheres online tend to be, somewhat alarmingly, overlooked in idealistic readings of the new communicative opportunities that social media can offer. Furthermore, traditional mass media continue to play a relatively important role in framing the representation of public issues and, thus implicitly also in shaping public perceptions and opinions (Redden, 2011). As evidenced by the previous chapter in this study, access to alternative media and information sources also generates a number of problematic issues as hierarchies of trust in new and old media are altered, news consumption practices are more fragmented, and opinion enclaves are, at times, reinforced. Assessments of the theory and practice of democratic debate on the

Internet have also progressively drawn a much more nuanced picture than early hopes of a revived online public sphere had initially raised (Jankowski and Van Selm, 2000; Papacharissi, 2010). The quality of democratic exchange taking place in this context, and the capacity of this sphere to generate constructive debate have been an area of concern. Howard (2006), for example, argues that, rather than expanding opportunities for exchange and deliberation, the online communicative space may favour expressions of outrage by the opinionated (as opposed to the informed), thus thinning citizenship roles.

Paralleling previous debates about traditional mass media's role in citizens' political involvement, questions arise about the meaningfulness and participative merits of different forms and formats of online communication in relation to the broader political realm. For example, a number of critiques of over-simplified and de-contextualised positive accounts of so-called 'clicktivism' (activism through clicks) have emerged in this context (e.g. Gladwell, 2011; Morozov 2013), as well as calls for more cautious appraisals of the participative opportunities facilitated by social media (Loader and Mercea, 2011). Beyond this, doubts have also been shed on the extent to which online media use supports democratisation rather than empowering authoritarian regimes' control over their populations (Morozov, 2011), and whether or not the online space simply reflects offline political hierarchies (Hindman, 2009). Some have even argued that the use of new media may be undermining people's very capability to intellectually engage with their surroundings (Carr, 2010).

Equally, these developments, perhaps most markedly than before, threaten traditional notions of what political action actually consists of, and intensify contemporary debates on what can be characterised as political participation (Hoffman, 2012; Della Porta, 2013; Hooghe et al., 2014; Zuckerman, 2014; Frame, 2016). Although the exact delineation of the term has always been open to debate (as mentioned earlier), its definition becomes even more problematic in the new, networked media age, making it increasingly over-stretched, as Carpentier (2011b) observes. Not only is it difficult to reach a consensus over the forms of online behaviour that can be considered reflections of, or equivalent to, formerly recognised offline participatory actions, but arguments are being raised in favour of the inclusion in the definition of new forms of action specific to the digitally networked environment. Bennett and Segerberg (2012), for instance, identify the emergence of a new form of action with social media use, which they characterise as "recombinant digitally networked action (RDNA)". This large-scale form of participation, they contend, at once facilitates personalised

engagement and collective action, whilst being largely freed from the challenges inherent in the organisation and management of large group actions and ideological collectiveness.

Conversely, issues also arise when widening the definitional scope of participation. Carpentier (2011b), for instance, highlights that mere access to, and interaction with, media do not necessarily constitute forms of participation, albeit being preconditions of media-related participation. Instead, he contends that the definition of participation should continue to emphasize dynamics of power, influence, and their distribution in society<sup>81</sup>. The distinction between participation and access/interaction is located, according to Carpentier, within the “key role attributed to power” (2011b, p.174), arguably a crucial distinction, but one that also leaves unexplored, in my opinion, the question of whose perspective this attribution of power is based on. Indeed, whilst I agree that many media interactions may have no participatory dimension, it is difficult for an outside observer to evaluate the impetus underlying some online interactions and the intended influence ‘those doing the interacting’ may attribute to their acts, a perspective that remains under-explored in debates on social media and participation. This question is particularly relevant in the context of networked online communications where user interactions and modes of communication are relatively new, unestablished and susceptible to rapid change. Such new communicative forms also serve to blur the distinctions between not only interaction and participation, but also the private and public spheres, identity expression and political act, as well as the delimitation of the intended audience of a specific communicative act (Marwick and boyd, 2011; Baym and boyd, 2012). In exploring questions relating to social media participation, it thus matters for the purposes of this study to adopt a particularly wide definitional scope of what constitutes participation, but furthermore to query the level of power and influence that users themselves attribute to their online practices and interactions on social media.

## **2. Participation in formal politics online and offline**

To start this exploration, I first turn to forms of involvement and activism in institutional politics. I aim to assess respondents’ engagement and participation with formal political processes, parties, organisations, and representatives in order to determine, on the one hand, to what extent their interest in developments in the country and their desire to

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<sup>81</sup> The distinction between participation and access/interaction is located, according to Carpentier, within the “key role attributed to power” (2011b, p.174), but the question of whose perspective this attribution of power is based on, is not explored.

influence them translate into involvement on this level, and on the other hand, what forms this involvement takes offline and online. I argue that, overall, the highly politicised post-revolution context does not translate into heightened levels of participation in formal political structures and institutions due to a number of obstacles (distrust of political sphere, perceived freedom restriction, difficulties of access, unwelcoming environment for newcomers), but that social media, beyond opportunities for the organisation and coordination of political actions, enables more proximity for citizens in their everyday lives to the formal political sphere.

### 2.1. Participants involved in formal politics

At first glance, it appears that a non-negligible proportion of participants in the sample had acted on their interest in the socio-political developments in the country by seeking involvement with formal political structures. Although the majority of participants (twenty-one out of thirty) did not pursue this form of participation, seven research participants in total indicated that they had been involved, or experimented with involvement, in a political party since the revolution. Additionally, two respondents had participated in civil society associations. Levels of participation in party structures varied. For example, one respondent (Sarrah) had temporarily campaigned for a party during the election period in October 2011, but was no longer involved; two were not registered with a party but regularly attended party meetings, and four were registered and active party members. The majority of these interviewees had no previous experience of participation in politics. The early post-revolutionary phase in Tunisia engaged many citizens in the political developments of the country and provided new opportunities to become part of the sphere of institutional politics. The first elections after the revolution (October 2011) saw a total of 81 parties and hundreds of independent candidates present themselves on the electoral lists<sup>82</sup>. Only Habib, the oldest participant in this particular group, had been politically active in the past. All the others were under the age of thirty-five and new to party politics.

The participants' reflections on their motivations for becoming politically involved in this manner illustrated - with some poignancy - the depth of emotional connection and sense of idealism that individuals associated with their activities. Although some of them were at opposite ends of the political spectrum, shared aspirations, and similar notions of freedom and justice were nevertheless expressed. Those affiliated with the governing Islamist party at

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<sup>82</sup> A total of 11,686 candidates across 1,517 electoral lists.

the time of the interviews in 2012 referred to the injustices suffered by Islamist supporters in the past. A heightened sense of identification with the victims of the repression, many of whom were imprisoned or were forced to live in exile or in hiding during the latter half of Ben Ali's regime, gave a particular sense of urgency to the party's supporters to value the political freedom gained with the revolution, and to participate in the construction of a new social and political project. Rim, who was twenty-six years old when I first interviewed her, articulated this motivation by sharing the story of one of her close relatives who was affected by the Islamist persecution in the nineties. Reflecting on her involvement with the Islamist party after the revolution, she did not refer to any particular aspects of its political programme or activities, but instead to her hope for change and prior inability to express that need. Her political activities with the party thus offered a real emotional release:

As soon as the revolution happened, for me, something had to be done for those people who suffered so much and were humiliated so much, including [my family member]. So for me, personally, after the revolution, I felt like I could breathe again. I have always been looking to solve that problem, so for me to adhere to a political party seemed to be one of the possible solutions I was looking for.

Political involvement in this instance appears to offer a solution for Rim that fulfils both socio-political and personal needs. Paralleling this discourse on the other side of the political range, a similar lack of reflection on the political merits of party programmes or activities was found. Instead, subjects often placed more emphasis on identification with social groups positioned as victims, and they referred to the threat they perceived to stem from the party coalition then in power. Nabil reflected on his attendance of an opposition party's meetings as follows:

Now there are almost no people who are inactive any longer, they are all<sup>83</sup> in a party, in an association, it's become like an automatic thing because... in order to express your opinion and defend yourself, because we feel we have to defend ourselves.

In both examples, political affiliations are based on existing identifications and a sense of group belonging, rather than an articulation of social or political goals and strategies.

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<sup>83</sup> This was not reflected in the study findings. As previously mentioned, under one third of the sample was politically active in this way. Research by the UNFPA (2015) and the National Youth Observatory / Observatoire National de la Jeunesse (2013) indicate an even more pronounced trend among Tunisian youth in subsequent years with ninety per cent of respondents considering participation in public and political life as important, but only six per cent participating in civil society organizations and three per cent in political parties.

Furthermore, a closer assessment of the backgrounds and motivations of this group of respondents indicates that their political participation is heavily tied to political activism within their families. Indeed, when I enquired where their above-average engagement in the political scene stemmed from, most of them referred to family members with a keen interest in politics, and four of them had family members who were also active supporters or members of the same party as them. Thus, despite the politicised transitional environment, the strong emotional impetus to motivate involvement, and the new opportunities available for participation in institutional politics, making the step to cross over to activism on the ground, whether within a party framework, or independent civil society organisation, often seemed to be linked to an instilled political awareness for the need to act within these types of structures, rather than coming from a more autonomously articulated reflection. Indeed, party politics in particular seems to be a rather difficult and intimidating world to enter. Rim encapsulated this rather well in her account of how she came to join her party. Despite her motivation and her family's encouragement, actually attending party meetings and registering with the party was not easily achievable. She revealed that the main reason for her to finally concretise this was largely accidental, as the party happened to open an office in her area.

## 2.2. Distrust and disillusion with politics

The remainder of the study participants were not involved with political parties or civil society associations. Although a large majority of them considered themselves to be interested in politics, following current affairs or discussing socio-political issues in their everyday lives, most were not interested in getting involved with institutional politics or organised forms of participation beyond, for some, voting or occasional participation in protests.

A great variety of civic and political actions occurred after the revolution, in support or against a number of social, political, and economic causes. These included marches in support of women's rights; protests and strikes at work to change management; boycotts by students to ask for changes in curriculum or examination processes; strikes by employees to demand pay rises; road blockades and protests to denounce poor living conditions and demand employment; protests about unfair dismissals; counter-protests by students against their teachers' strikes; and sieges of media institutions to protest against their coverage etc. They also included, for example, civic campaigns in support of charitable causes, to clean streets or

beaches, or to commemorate historical events. During my visits to Tunisia between 2012 and 2014, such actions were very frequent and reported on a nearly daily basis. These actions were organised through offline as well as online communicative means and networks.

Participants in the sample referred to taking part in such actions occasionally. However, these references did not feature in a significant manner in their reflections on their political involvement. Often, a sense of disillusion and fatigue transpired relating to the context of recurrent crises, protests and strikes. When I asked about levels of participation, several research participants also expressed a wish to get involved in civil society and charity organisations but admitted to lacking time or motivation to act on these aspirations. None of them however expressed the wish to participate in political parties. For example, for Mehdi - who overall supported the coalition government and could identify with much of the discourse of Ennahdha - joining the party was considered as a limitation of his freedom to express his feelings about politics and public matters, as he felt he would then have to act as a spokesperson for it and defend all its activities and choices. Neila made a similar point upon reflecting on her disinterest in participation in formal political structures:

I don't belong to a party, I never accepted that a person comes to dictate what I do and puts himself higher than me.

In this regard, political participation also needs to be understood in the context of the specific dynamics of citizens' past relationship with politics. Due to the authoritarian nature of previous regimes, and the different structures that served to uphold its power, a rather narrow interpretation of party membership and of its problematic nature still prevailed.

Equally a distrust of the political sphere was particularly pronounced in this Tunisian context. Whilst interest in politics was framed as an important civic, and even religious duty at times, respondents were not particularly motivated to act on their political convictions by joining or supporting a political party. Partly, this was exacerbated by the lack of experience of part of the political class in the newly democratic post-revolution context, as it contributed to demystifying and de-legitimizing its authority. For instance, during debates in the National Constituent Assembly<sup>84</sup>, as well as a number of political programmes, political figures at times lacked the skills to articulate their arguments with clarity and others resorted to raising their voices or to verbal abuse to impose their perspectives. But often, organised politics also

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<sup>84</sup> Some of which were transmitted on national television.

continued to be perceived with suspicion, as something potentially risky or to be avoided, indicating that many interviewees did not regard the new political groupings as having either adequately severed their connection with past (mal)practice, or sufficiently re-established trust in the political system. Youssef, for example, who had been keenly following the political developments of the transitional period, reflected on the issue of participation in the following terms:

In my personal opinion, now is not the time to take a specific political orientation. I wait, and then I wait some more, and I wait longer, until the time comes where I can affiliate myself with a particular direction. Why? Because there will come a time when the country will need clean people. What does it mean clean people? It means people who didn't enter politics before, who didn't need politics before, nor who got dirty with politics before.

Ahmed also drew on metaphors of cleanliness, similarly referring to murky or corrupt party politics as justification for maintaining a distance from this sphere:

I don't have any party, I don't belong to any party. Preferably I draw my views from someone who works for the interests of Tunisia and not someone who's calculating and wants to sit in government. I want clean people, I want technocrats, I want people who want to serve the country. I want them to do a bit for the young kids and for the poor who are dying of hunger and that's it. But to say I point to that one there and I want him to stay there, I don't have anyone. I would rather not follow any of them.

Similarly, Zied who ran a small business selling household textiles, considered that it was too early for him to actively participate in party politics, as bitter memories of Ben Ali's party practices still lingered in his mind:

[Before the revolution] there was no choice and in a way many like me were forcefully involved in supporting the RCD [party]. I used to regularly get visits by the party mobs that took whatever they wanted in goods from my shop or money and there was nothing I could say. One day they did so and I was quite angry, so less than fifteen minutes after they left, I received a visit from the police, just to pass on a clear message to me that I better play their game. [...] Now I don't want to support anything, I follow more and more, whoever is closest to my way of thinking or who could get the country out of the current situation. And it may be that later I will join a party, why not.

It is also interesting how some of these views place technocratic values in opposition to party politics. This was reflective of a growing dissatisfaction with the transitional political scene, leading an increasing number of individuals to question the rules of democratic legitimacy, both on the sides of people who voted for the governing parties and subsequently felt disillusioned, and people who voted for opposition parties to start with. The perception of legitimacy and trust in political institutions are crucial elements for understanding citizen involvement with politics. Whereas study participants who were more politically active within organised political structures tended to have previous knowledge and access to this world through family and kinship connections, those less involved here tended to have some commonalities in their views, and shared perceptions of this world as inherently untrustworthy and consequently less legitimate.

Anouar, who had risked his life and lost a close friend through participation in the revolution protests, expressed no interest in any further involvement. He had not participated in any other protests since and had not voted in the 2012 elections either. He was deeply cynical about the Tunisian political scene after the revolution, and considered that: "Politics in general now it's a mess. We don't have politics in Tunisia." He further complained that everyone talked about politics despite their lack of knowledge about political matters and democratic conduct, and preferred to abstain from any such involvement. Khouloud, who was unsuccessfully attempting to shield herself from news and talk about politics, expressed her disillusion with the lack of change and the difficult transition to a more egalitarian society after the revolution. She considered that the sense of unity and hope she identified with during the revolution gave way to political account setting, manipulation, and the return of corruption and similar abuses by those in positions of authority to what characterised the situation before the revolution. The outcome of the elections in 2012 marked a further turning point in her interest in politics. Prior to these elections, she had made an effort to inform herself about different parties and went to vote, but her lack of identification with the electoral outcome increased her sense of disillusion and disconnection from the political scene.

Not all research participants had such pronounced negative opinions about the political sphere. Those who positioned themselves as being in opposition to the governing coalition claimed, perhaps unsurprisingly, to being more frequent participants in protests. Many protest actions were organised to denounce negative developments occurring during the transitional period that the parties in power were perceived to be responsible for. However,

participation in such protests was usually framed in these interviewees' views as being independent of any affiliation to political parties. This was particularly evident in young interviewees' reflections on this participation. Hanen, a twenty-two-year old student, described her participation in protests with most of the other students in her university class as follows:

When we hear about some protest, we always go. We try to find out about them. Like once, I don't know if you'd heard about the woman who got raped by policemen, we came across a protest in her support, and we didn't go to class and joined the protest instead, we talked to the people there, and later we went to study. But in general, you don't find that many students go to political meetings or other activities, it's all on Facebook. The other day, there was a meeting of the Jebha [party], I wanted to go to find out and I mentioned it to other students but they found it really stupid, they couldn't understand, why would you go to a meeting they were saying. And these are the same people that you'd find on Facebook talking about nothing but politics. Even normal things they would make them political.

The above quote can be seen to tie in with issues of youth disengagement from - and the unpopularity of - institutional politics, a pervasive distrust of ruling elites and structures not dissimilar from some Western democratic contexts. However, what is particularly noteworthy about the above quote is the apparent (extreme) disconnect between Hanen's fellow students' engagement with party politics as opposed to political activism on Facebook, as per her framing. However, particular care should be exercised to avoid an unequivocal support of this reading, implying as it does a separation between online and offline participation. Instead, such differences in views on political participation may reflect the disassociation between structured party politics in this case and everyday discussion about political issues which can equally take place online or offline, although its online forms are more prevalent, according to her account. Nevertheless, her last comment, on how seemingly apolitical issues become political online, is perhaps indicative of how communicative parameters online may increase the level of politicisation of everyday communicative exchanges (a point further developed later in this chapter).

### 2.3. Connections to the sphere of politics online

As contextualised in the previous chapter, political matters formed part of these respondents' everyday lives during the transitional period, both within and outside of the media frame. However, as I have so far suggested in this chapter, taking the further step to act on political

beliefs through involvement in institutional or organised politics represented a form of participation that most respondents did not necessarily wish to pursue. Against this backdrop, the analysis will now compare these trends with forms of interaction and involvement with institutional politics online. The popularity of social media in the transitional phase in Tunisia, as contextualised in earlier parts of this study, offered new possibilities for ordinary citizens to engage with political developments in the country. I have previously referred to the role played by social networking platform Facebook as source of news and information on the transitional political scene. Similarly, the use of Facebook seems to be making a difference in terms of increased possibilities for connection and proximity to the political sphere as many study participants specifically chose to follow a number of political figures, parties and institutions through their social media accounts.

Unsurprisingly, respondents who were politically active offline (as previously discussed) were generally more involved than other interviewees in connecting with the political sphere through their social media accounts. They generally did so via discussion groups, and by 'liking' or 'following' a very large number and broad range of social media profiles associated with political figures, parties and institutions. The interviews suggest a more strategic use of such network formation aimed at increasing their knowledge of political developments and official discourses. Their activities within political party structures tended to also be coordinated and discussed via closed online groups. However, these were not assessed in more detail as they are not the specific focus of this study.

Interestingly, respondents who were less active in party politics also made numerous connections to this sphere on social media. These tended to be less strategically informed and more tied to personal identifications and forms of political fandom. Online practices for this group varied quite extensively. Research participants were occasionally part of Facebook groups that discussed political issues, but not party-related ones. A number of interviewees also mentioned occasionally finding out about protest actions, charity organisations and a number of civic campaigns online through pages they followed. About half of them also 'liked' or 'followed' social media accounts of a variety of political figures and state institutions. This could arguably be viewed as confirming the availability of, and indeed partial acting upon, new possibilities to connect to the political realm in a way that was not previously possible. Access and proximity to this sphere may be seen as facilitated to some extent by platforms such as Facebook. However, it was striking that research participants were also shaping and individualising their exposure and connection to institutionalised

politics, being more inclined to follow political leaders rather than parties. This paralleled similar type of connections established by respondents with a diverse array of other public figures, from musicians, film stars, TV presenters and other forms of celebrity to individuals who had recently acquired special status in the post-revolution public arena. These new voices articulated their ideas primarily through social media, and included bloggers, civil society activists or academics who effectively assumed the roles of public intellectuals.

Research participants were also more inclined to follow political pages on Facebook that mirrored their opinions. There were exceptions to this, such as the page of the leader of the Islamist party, Rached Ghannouchi, whose political stature was such that many individuals from all sides of the political spectrum connected to his profile. However, more generally, individuals were Facebook 'fans' of parties or politicians they actually liked. This correlates with the interview data referred to in the previous chapter, suggesting the individualisation of informational environments formed by social media users who chose not to be exposed to sources in their newsfeed that differed significantly from their own opinions. The wording of the 'like' button that participants needed to click on in order to follow these pages tended to be taken literally in such acts. In this regard, Meriem for example, explained that she did not chose to follow pages related to a political party she did not identify with as this might be interpreted as siding with it. Although she occasionally had a look at such pages, she did not chose to have them as part of the sources she followed and received regular updates from. Her dislike of the party thus translated into a lack of public recognition of a connection with it, even though she did at times access such accounts to form a more complete political perspective:

I don't put that I like the Ennahdha pages because anyway everybody knows that I'm not Ennahdha so even if I put that I like it no one would believe me. But anyway I don't put it because I don't like it. I want to be a little sincere in my Facebook, because it's me, because it talks about me so I want to be honest with it.

It was further observed that politicians had occasionally been expressing their opinions exclusively through their social media profiles, supporting an understanding of the social media space as enabling a new form of proximity to the political sphere. In such instances, particularly when their views related to controversial issues, content from their social media account was transmitted virally online and further brought to the public's attention through mass media outlets. For instance, on a regular basis, radio and television news bulletins were directly quoting Facebook status updates by politicians. Thus, regardless of individual choices

to follow particular political figures via social media, such platforms were partly extending political communication possibilities, and perhaps narrowing the perceived gap between citizens and party politics. Concurrently, it has also exposed political figures to new risks and challenges in an environment where communicative parameters and citizens' perceived proximity to political figures were more difficult to control. On a few occasions, for example, large-scale 'flaming' actions by groups of dissatisfied citizens directly expressing their discontent on politicians' social media pages temporarily disabled their activity. Similarly, violent and derogatory language was at times used by social media users in this context. However, more generally, connections to the field of institutional politics tended to be used as a means of a more disengaged reception of updates from these feeds rather than more active forms of online interactions.

A few other interesting points can also be deduced regarding the type of politically-related pages followed by the research participants. Most of the connections established by respondents with politicians on social media related to the Tunisian political sphere, but there were a few exceptions. For instance, the Facebook page of Barack Obama repeatedly featured among pages followed by study participants, and was ranked as the third most followed political page in the country, with almost as many followers in Tunisia as the leader of the Tunisian Islamist party (Socialbakers, 2013). Similarly, several of the participants also followed the social media feeds of political leaders in other Arab countries, such as former Egyptian president Mohamed Morsi. Very few connections and interactions were made with social media feeds from government institutions. These tend to be managed by administrators and adopt a particularly formal style, primarily communicating with its audience(s) through official press releases and statements. A notable exception within this type of social media accounts was that of the Interior ministry, which had a significant following. The Ministry's page on Facebook had the highest following among all pages relating to institutional politics in the country, with over 400,000 followers in 2013 (*ibid*). This can be partly explained by the historical importance of this ministry in Tunisian politics as well its particularly active use of social media to release important updates and safety advice to citizens directly through its Facebook page during the transitional period that saw at times very rapid political developments. To contextualise this, according to the same source the second most followed page in this category, that of the leader of the Ennahdha party, attracted roughly half the number of followers at the time.

To summarise so far, on the basis of this assessment of participants' engagement and involvement with institutional politics, a number of preliminary findings emerge. The new political freedoms available to Tunisian citizens after the revolution include opportunities for involvement in the emerging political landscape. Although the degree of interest and engagement with public affairs was high during the initial post-revolution period, more specific involvement within formalised party or civil society structures tended to be low overall. It appeared that the psychological and practical steps that this form of engagement necessitated as well as a wider distrust of, and disillusion with, the newly emerging political sphere were problematic for many research participants. Connections to the political sphere were facilitated within the predominantly social-media-centred online environment, and not as narrowly tied to formal participation in this sphere. There was some evidence that social media use enabled closer connection with this sphere. However, such connections primarily consisted of passive forms of interactions where participants chose to follow social media feeds from political figures as part of the formation of individualised informational and fandom networks. Overall, the level of engagement with such pages beyond the act of becoming a 'follower' was rather restricted.

### **3. Political communication between citizens**

As a space within which individuals are able to bring their opinions into 'the open'<sup>85</sup> and debate them, the public sphere (in a broad sense) marks a significant transition from pre-political forms of subjective engagement to participation, a more tangible and visible manifestation of civic agency (Dahlgren, 2009; Dahlgren and Alvares, 2013). Although the notion of the public sphere (again, in a broad sense) points to citizens' communicative participation in a wider public deliberative space, in practice the translation of this ideal is often reduced to involvement in political talk and debate about public issues that occur in relatively private or semi-private spaces, such as the home or work environment (Wyatt et al., 2000; Mutz and Mondak, 2006), and within a relatively limited zone of interaction between citizens who are usually familiar with each other. It is no coincidence that much of this discourse occurs in the home or at work, the two locations in which many people spend the majority of their time. These are also areas of encounter with other citizens with whom specific links - whether professional, or in terms of kinship or friendship - have already been

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<sup>85</sup> To parallel the original term used in German by Habermas 'oeffentlichkeit', literally openness, later translated in English as 'public sphere'

forged, and can be assumed to at least partially matter. The existence of ties between those taking part in political talk and debate may at the same time facilitate its occurrence thanks to the existence of a greater degree of trust between interlocutors, and limit it when it may threaten socialisation. But a number of observers have also pointed out the difficulties that the expression of political talk in public space can be fraught with (e.g. Eliasoph, 1998; Conover et al., 2002).

The Internet now challenges how these questions can be understood. From one perspective, contact and direct communication between distant citizens is enabled on a formerly unparalleled scale, and signifies the potential attainment of a more *public* sphere than that of the mass media age. However, the extension of the public sphere through new media can also be problematic, both in terms of extension to a wider public, and in terms of the public character of the space in which political talk may occur (Jang et al., 2014; Thorson et al., 2015). New questions arise particularly in relation to social media's extension of communicative and deliberative spaces, as the boundaries between public and private also become more indistinct, and a new form of "networked publicness" (Baym and boyd, 2012) emerges whose nature is particularly ambiguous.

Social media also destabilises previously held conceptions of what it means for citizens to participate as a 'public'. Media content and news coverage have traditionally provided an important basis for political discourse between citizens, in setting the agenda on what matters, raising issues and providing "conversational resources" for citizens (Gamson, 1992, p.117). Audiences of news and other media formats, in articulating their opinions on such content and engaging in political talk about it, were then perceived as becoming part of a public. In this respect, Dayan (2005) makes an interesting distinction between what he calls audience-talk and public-talk, a distinction that parallels Schudson's differentiation between conversation and formal debate (1997b, 1998). But for Dayan, this distinction is more specifically related to the communicative circumstances under which such talk occurs. Although the two modes can resemble one another, and audience-talk may indeed lead to public-talk, a distinction between them nevertheless exists which is predicated on the degree of privacy and/or public visibility of such talk. Dayan highlights that the theoretical construction of the public is intrinsically tied to the question of its visibility, and the visibility of its performance as a public, for "any public requires another public watching it perform" (Dayan, 2005, p.52). In consequence, public-talk (or talk by publics) is similar to a performance on stage and typically requires mediation, whereas audience-talk forms invisible

'backstage' activity. More private backstage forms of political talk, traditionally associated with audiences' conversations and everyday discussions in relation to news and other media content of shared relevance, is of interest here as this dissertation explores notions and manifestations of citizenship in everyday life on social media.

One of its focal areas is the transition of these prevalent, but previously more concealed, forms of communication between ordinary citizens to a networked online space where the boundaries between the private and public, the stage and backstage, and between audiences and publics are obscured; where every-day political communication between citizens occurs under very different conditions of mediation; and where communicative acts of audience-publics are not limited to speech, but further extended to new forms of symbolic, audio-visual, and digital communicative acts whose meanings are arguably even more open to interpretation and negotiation than any previous modes of interaction. These changes may, for instance, require the development of very different communicative strategies by social media users in managing politically-related interactions, as some research highlights (e.g. Mor et al., 2015). The political implications of these shifts in a variety of contexts constitute a relatively new area of debate that requires further investigation and more detailed exploration.

The majority of social media users today base their online accounts on their offline identity, in the sense that they often use their real names, share information that relates to their everyday lives, and connect to people they relate to on some level, even if they have actually never met in person (e.g. family and friends, professional links, common interests, fandom). In other words, the identities they represent online tend not to be anonymous, nor fictional, but to some degree reflect personal identity and opinion. In this sense, communicating politically enables individuals to tap into these networks to raise awareness, engage, or mobilize others, for example. It is the link that social media provides between the online and offline worlds that has proven particularly empowering for a number of social movements in recent years.

However, as boyd and Marwick (2009) have pointed out, it also introduces a "conundrum of visibility" as hierarchies of online and offline attention become reconfigured. As a result, new pressures have been placed on offline actors to increase their online visibility, primarily in order to maintain a level of influence, but also for social media users to adopt and develop strategies to manage their reputation and present a coherent identity across online and

offline social space (Ellison and boyd, 2013). Furthermore, where political opinion is relatively consensual, such networks have allowed engagement for like-minded citizens to be emboldened, for participatory actions to be aggregated, and for belief in the possibility of change through political involvement to be revived. The “collective externalized mind” (Naughton, 2012) that networked online communication enables is potentially profoundly transformational of the relationship between citizens and political institutions. Yet when opinions are more divided, it is questionable as to whether or not political communication, expression, discussion, and interaction, between citizens in their public-private networks, is genuinely empowering (Thorson, 2014; Fox and Warber, 2014; John and Dvir-Gvirsman, 2015). Being political in this space may also entail, for citizens, the management of a more public image and identity, necessitating the accommodation of everyday socialization with differences in political identifications, and require the legitimation of opinions as well as the right to author them. Furthermore, political communication between citizens in this context can no longer simply be equated to what is said, nor be restricted to what is written. Through their externalization and projection across networked publics, citizens’ opinions become doubly articulated as, on the one hand, a form of political communication through which they can advance their own voices and seek to influence decision-making, and on the other hand, as its mediated image over which they are able to exercise considerably less control.

Novel forms of communicative relations also emerge. Through clicks such as ‘likes’ and ‘retweets’, new ways for citizens to express consent, solidarity, differences and oppositions toward each other become part of a new vocabulary whose political implication and meaning are open to negotiation. The image that is constructed from such communicative forms within networked publicness, frames citizens’ political identity and fixes it in new ways. Its digital inscription blurs the lines between engagement, as pre-political subjectivity, and participation as its enactment. These changes can be understood on one level as the continuation of the rise in mediated visibility that Thompson (2005) highlights as a source of empowerment for politicians, but which equally leaves them more exposed to criticism and scandal in an age of image politics. With social media, these opportunities and pressures are naturally extended to a broader citizen base.

### 3.1. Political talk in offline public space

The freeing of public expression and the highly politicised context in Tunisia after the revolution translated into a vivid and inescapable engagement with political and public issues

in everyday life. Whilst citizens' participation in politics (in the formal sense) and their interactions with the political sphere faced a number of limitations, communication between citizens about public and political matters was widespread. In this sense, it can be regarded as offering an alternative to the expression of a political will within a more trusted, less hierarchical and more easily accessible communicative environment. Political talk and interactions were evident in both offline and online environments and served for the exchange of news, information and opinions about these matters. Interviewees referred to the pervasiveness of politicised talk and communication, and there was ample evidence of their participation in such conversations and communicative exchanges, except in some cases where respondents – as in the case of Khouloud – who was referred to in the previous chapter – took active steps to limit exposure to, and involvement with such issues.

In a marked contrast to the pre-revolutionary context of enforced silence, citizens were not only openly talking about public and political matters, but much of this communication occurred in public spaces. For instances, participants referred to shops, streets, bus stops, outside mosques, bank queues, and university campuses as settings for some of these conversations. Cafés – most of which are only attended by men in Tunisia – were also important spaces for such exchanges, and these were referred to in the interview accounts of eight (out of fourteen) male participants. However, overall, there was limited data to suggest that political talk and exchanges were more broadly gender-specific. During interviews in 2012, most research participants, male and female, articulated a level of interest in these issues and their participation in exchange and opinion expression related to them, although there were less public spaces available for such expression to take place on a larger scale for women than for men.

More private environments, such as the home, were often indirectly implied as spaces where political talk took place, but mostly these were not explicitly demarcated as such. For example, Hanen who lived with other students in a flat-share said that they often talked about events and socio-political developments and watched the televised news bulletin together in the evening, but most of her references to political discussions offline related to more public spaces (“at university and everywhere”). Kamal, in turn, referred to his family as being “like the Constituent Assembly [mejjess ta’sissi]” to describe the variety of political opinions it comprised, implying that debating them also occurred in the home environment, but asked where he talked about politics, other than online, he only mentioned cafés. It matters that this talk was framed as a public activity. Whereas in the Ben Ali era, the

expression of a political opinion was associated with a level of risk, even in the most private of settings, the post-revolutionary effervescence marked a way for citizens to reclaim public space and occupy it through the exercise of their newly acquired political freedom.

### 3.2. Forms of civic and political communication on social media

The other context that the large majority of respondents referred to as space where such political talk and communicative exchanges occurred was on Facebook, a space of an ambiguous public-private nature (a point I will consider more extensively later in this chapter). Politically-related communication between citizens took a number of forms on the platform that further blur the lines between talk and action, engagement and participation, private identity expressions and publicly-oriented political messages. I will consider some of these forms in more detail.

#### a. Written political talk

One such form consisted of the written equivalent of political talk and conversations. None of the participants in this sample included oral forms of their political opinion captured on video or audio messages, or exchanged opinions in this way<sup>86</sup>. Primarily, written exchange took the form of comments typed by respondents in reaction to content from Facebook pages or from other users in their social media network. For example, where a participant shared a news item on his/her social media account, contacts in his/her network occasionally commented on it to support or contest the political perspective it related to, and a written exchange at times ensued between the participant and this contact, that others in this network reacted to or supplemented with their own opinions. To a more limited extent, participants' opinion expression also included status updates and "Facebook notes" written by respondents and published on their Facebook wall, as well as private messages they sent to friends to exchange news and political perspectives. Overall, politically-related communication was less frequent in secluded communicative settings such as through the exchange of private messages on the platform. Instead, it tended to occur in more public contexts, such as community Facebook pages they followed and the personal walls of their contacts, a communicative space more visible to users' wider social media network than bounded communicative exchanges.

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<sup>86</sup> Audio-visual exchange through 'Facetime' was not accessible to participants at the time interviews were conducted.

b. Politicised profile images

Political talk between citizens on social media was not restricted to verbal forms of communication. A number of communicative forms stood out in terms of how the possibilities that social media offers were used by respondents to express their involvement, positions, opinions and identities in the post-revolution Tunisian public sphere. The use of imagery in research participants' personal profile pictures to present themselves on their social media accounts was one noteworthy form in this respect. Indeed, the revolution period marked a turning point in the use of this imagery by many participants to express collective identities, affiliations and political opinions. Based on social media data I had access to, it transpired that, in 2011 and 2012, only one fifth of participants exclusively used personal photos (e.g. of themselves, their children) as their profile picture. The other participants employed a mix of personal photos and abstract images, photos from nature, text and different symbols including religious references, as well as images carrying civic and political messages. The majority of participants used their profile image to express an opinion or identity in this way at some point during this period. The use of this imagery varied over time, respondents switched their profile images, in particular during times of crisis to express their identification with particular causes or perspectives. At other times, they changed their images back to personal photos. A few interviewees suggested that they disliked using their own photos for their account profiles and preferred instead the use of abstract images. This was particularly the case for older research participants. However, they also tended to switch between images of nature, for example, and more politically-related imagery. In January 2011, when the revolution was underway, nearly two thirds of participants switched their profile picture to one that contained the Tunisian flag in various forms. Some examples are provided below:



FIG.1: Participants Facebook profile images in Jan.2011

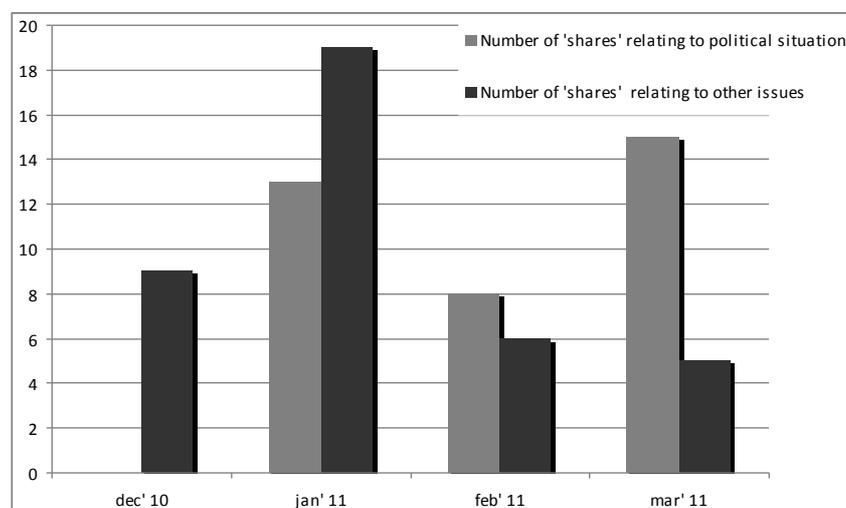
Accounts from interviews conducted in 2012 indicated that, in switching their profile to these images, respondents were seeking to express their solidarity with other Tunisian citizens across the country. For example, Imen recalled the different stages of this image use during the revolution period. At the beginning of January, when she started to hear about the increasing number of citizens killed during protests, she changed her profile picture to a “black flag” to express her sadness and mourning. With the 14<sup>th</sup> January, she joined in switching her profile to the image of the Tunisian flag whose central circle was formed by hands holding each other (as illustrated above) - a symbol of patriotic unity and solidarity that was used on a mass scale on the platform at this point in time. Later that month, she changed her profile image to the photo of a Tunisian flag surrounded by candles in memory of the victims. For Kholoud, using the Tunisian flag was a way of expressing solidarity as well as her happiness to “have [her] country back”. Most of the interviewees referred to changing the use of their profile imagery with the revolution and continued to use it to express a national and political message in this manner for a period of time after the revolution. Marwa, for instance, kept using the Tunisian ‘solidarity flag’ for a year before returning her own photo as profile identifier. A few other respondents, such as Rim, continued to occasionally use her profile image to represent her opinion and identification with a number of public issues that she felt related to, and that extended beyond the national realm, such as the Lybian and, later the Syrian, protests for instance.

However, overall, most of these forms of identity expressions revolved around national and local public matters. A few research participants also drew on this communication option to express party political allegiances. This was particularly the case during the elections in October 2011 where they changed their profile images to logos of the political parties they supported. This trend was not particularly prevalent and was only observed in relation to respondents who were active in formal politics.

#### c. Sharing practices

Research participants also used other communicative possibilities on Facebook to express their support of different political causes or opinions such as by clicking the ‘like’ button in reaction to content they came across on the platform through the pages they followed or other users in their networks. Particularly noteworthy was the content they chose to “share” as it formed the major part of the social media activities that were visible to others in their network. Interviewees repeatedly referred to drastic changes in the way they used social

networking site Facebook at the outset of the January 2011 uprising, and in the type of content they shared. The interviewees all stated that, prior to the revolution, there was a generalised fear of posting any content related to politics on the platform, and it was instead utilised for relatively innocuous social interaction such as contacting friends, sharing music or discussing football results. However, during the two weeks prior to the 14<sup>th</sup> January<sup>87</sup> and in the ensuing few days, nearly all of them published content relating to the political situation on their personal profile page for the first time. Like many, Khouloud had mostly used Facebook to share personal photos, but from mid-January 2011 the content of her posts changed as she started to upload patriotic songs and political caricatures to her wall. Similarly, prior to the outbreak of widespread civil disorder, Narjes had used her page to entertain friends in her network by regularly posting proverbs, amusing quotes and music videos on her profile. As in Khouloud's case, this pattern dramatically changed in January 2011 when political commentary made its first appearance on her personal profile, content which became increasingly prevalent over the following months as the graph on the next page illustrates<sup>88</sup>:

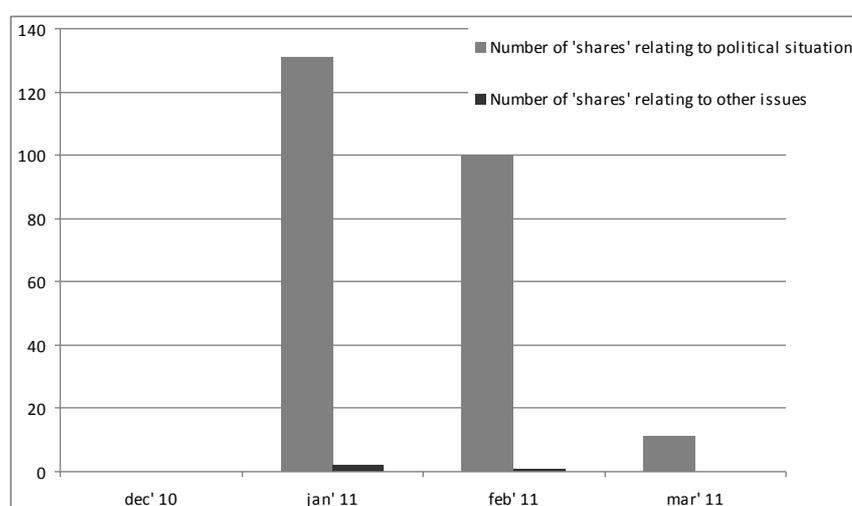


GRAPH 4: P.14: Changes in political content sharing on Facebook (Dec.2010 - Mar.2011)

<sup>87</sup> Date of the departure of Ben Ali from power.

<sup>88</sup> The separation between what constitutes political and 'other' content, in this graph, can be seen as quite an artificially enforced delineation here. For example, can the publication of religious text on a participant's personal wall be considered as political, religious, personal, or other? Should the distinction be made only on the basis of the media text itself, or further contextualising parameters? How should the example of a research participant sharing a love song be categorised when the seemingly non-political lyrics about regret and making up for past mistakes strike a particularly political chord on the first anniversary of the elections? Clearly, there is no easy answer to such questions and in a sense the sharing of every piece of content within each individual's network has an element of public communication and potential political dimension. However, through the categories of 'political' and 'other' issues, I have attempted here to distinguish on a case-by-case basis between forms of expression of knowledge and opinion related to socio-political developments in the country, and forms where no such dimensions could be clearly distinguished. Thus, for example, religious text was mostly categorised as "other", except when it was quoted to directly address a political issue.

An even more striking example of this trend was evidenced in the case of Sonia whose visible activities on her Facebook profile before January 2011 were extremely limited. Before the revolution, she mostly consulted her account to communicate with friends and family members, some of whom had migrated abroad. Most of her activity on the platform consisted of chatting with them via private messages, occasionally she wrote more publicly visible comments to congratulate friends on their birthdays for example, but she hardly ever posted any content at all on her personal wall. As can be seen in the graph below, Sonia shared no content in December 2010. This, however, changed dramatically in January 2011 during which she shared over one hundred and twenty pieces of content on her wall, nearly all of which related to national issues, news items and political commentary:



GRAPH 5: P.1: Changes in political content sharing on Facebook (Dec.2010 - Mar.2011)

The visible levels of engagement with material relating to the socio-political situation on participants' social media accounts were very pronounced in most cases. The type of content included in this category varied: some consisted of a status update written by the participant on his/her personal wall to assert a political opinion for example; other content assumed the form of longer 'Facebook notes'. However, political content principally consisted of text and still or moving imagery forwarded by participants from other sources. In fact, less than twenty per cent of content shared by participants on their personal wall was generated by them. Rather than the expression of a personal political voice, the large majority of politically-related media content on participants' personal accounts instead consisted of giving resonance to the opinions and representations of others, to which they occasionally added a brief contextualising comment or reaction. Most of this content stemmed from pages that participants followed or were 'fans' of. A closer analysis of these sources revealed the large

number, and diverse array, of pages from which the content was sourced. These included the pages of other friends in participants' networks, public figures' pages, or pages of traditional mass media broadcasters and newspapers. However, the shared content mostly originated from online news sources, blogs, and Facebook pages unique to the platform. Their titles frequently encouraged individuals to cluster around shared socio-political stances. Although content from such pages tended to have a clear political orientation, nothing in their titles or the information about the pages provided insights into their ownership or political affiliations. Some of their titles are listed below to exemplify this point:

Smile a lot you're not from Sidi Bouzid <sup>89</sup>

ابتسم كثيراً فأنت لست من سيدي بوزيد

Ennahdha Dégage <sup>90</sup>

Haters of Bourguiba and Zine and RCD <sup>91</sup>

كارهي بورقيبة و الزين و التجمع

Tunisian People الشعب التونسي

Secularism scandals <sup>92</sup>

فضائح العلمانية

It could be argued that this very lack of transparency and identifiable political allegiances was part of their appeal, compared to pages of political parties for example, although many of the contextualising interviews I conducted in 2012 and 2013 indicated that political parties were in fact behind the financing of a number of popular and seemingly unaffiliated Facebook pages at the time.

The high level of politicisation of content that research participants shared was not sustained and, over time, it became a more varied mix including more entertainment-led content and references to personal matters. However, news and politically-related content continued to

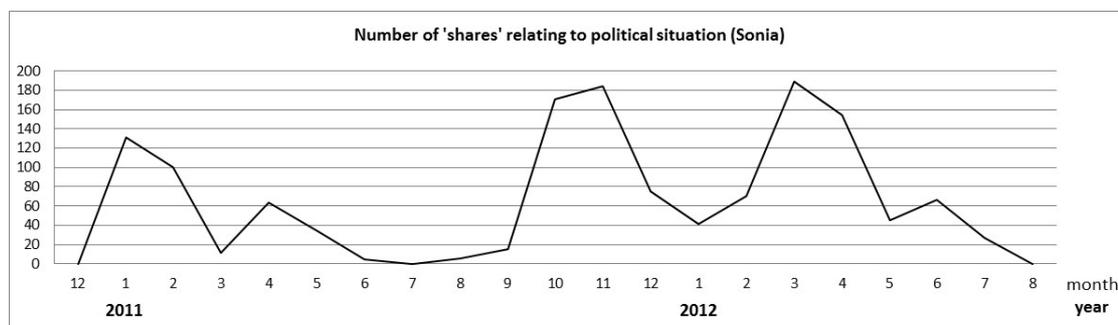
<sup>89</sup> My translation from classical Arabic (fous'ha). Sidi Bouzid is the town from which Bouazizi came and where he set himself on fire, which triggered the first wave of protests of the revolution. The name makes a statement about regional inequalities in Tunisia and continually difficult living conditions in Sidi Bouzid, despite its crucial role in triggering the civil unrest.

<sup>90</sup> Original name in French. 'Dégage' is the slogan chanted by protesters during the revolution to demand that Ben Ali 'go away'. Ennahdha is the name of the Islamist party that led the transitional government coalition. The page calls for the party to be ousted just as Ben Ali had been. Its French title suggests closeness to urban middle classes.

<sup>91</sup> My translation from Tunisian Arabic dialect (derja). Bourguiba is the former president of Tunisia from 1956 to 1987, regarded by some as national hero for his role in the liberation of Tunisia from colonialism and his subsequent very pronounced modernising agenda, and disliked by others who saw this modernisation as an imposition and critiqued his long stay in power. Zine refers to Ben Ali's first name, and RCD to his party (see Chapter 1).

<sup>92</sup> My translation from classical Arabic (fos'ha).

feature to a significant extent within this mix, and more prominently so during periods of heightened crisis. In the case of Sonia – referred to earlier – a closer look at the politically-related content she shared in 2011 and 2012 shows these peaks in activity during important events, whereas her holiday periods during the summer were particularly quiet, as the figure below suggests:



GRAPH 6: P.1: Changes in political content sharing on Facebook (Dec.2010 – Aug.2012)

In this graph, we can see very high peaks of activity in 2011, during the revolution period, as well as during the election period, and later in March and April 2012 following a number of incidents that were indicative of a rising, and increasingly violent, political polarisation in the country<sup>93</sup>.

### 3.3. A networked public sphere?

To some extent, this networked communicative context and the new forms of political discussion and interactions it supports, suggest the existence of a vivid online sphere for public exchange between citizens. Overall, as a space for the communication of opinions in relation to news content and mediated representations of the socio-political issues that respondents considered to be of common concern, it could be referred to as a form of public sphere. Communicative participation in this sphere enabled the expression of individual and collective opinions as well as political subjectivities, identifications and allegiances. Furthermore, in its networked form, this sphere seemed to extend deliberative opportunities by enabling communication on a larger scale than what tended to be possible offline, and between Tunisian citizens of a plurality of backgrounds and opinions across distance.

<sup>93</sup> These related to the lack of reaction by authorities to the rise of a more radical Salafism in the country, as well as a number of developments considered by part of the opposition as indicative of the coalition government's increasingly undemocratic nature. These included, for example, the violent repression of protests by police forces during the celebration of the national Martyr's day in the capital in April 2012, and the sentencing of a blogger to seven years in prison in March 2012 for the online publication of Mohammed cartoons and other content supporting atheism.

However, it would be simplistic to consider the occurrence of such communicative exchanges online as a mere reflection of face-to-face political conversation and exchanges, or an extension of offline deliberative possibilities. By the nature of its communicative architecture, this social networking platform mediated and transformed politically-related talk and communication, and a number of issues arose out of this context.

Whereas the majority of respondents considered that the role of social media was - despite the issues discussed in the previous chapter (misinformation and propaganda) - relatively positive in terms of enabling and supporting the dissemination of news and information, opinions about its role as space for opinion exchange and debate between citizens was less optimistic. There were some exceptions to this perspective. In articulating their thoughts about what they perceived as the difference between this type of communication online and offline, only two interviewees (Rafik, Kamal) considered that social media offered a reflection of offline interactions in this respect. Additionally, for Raouf and Ahmed, a number of positive aspects regarding such exchanges on Facebook were pointed to. Raouf considered that his use of social media enabled exposure to - and communication with - people of more varied opinions than he was used to offline. His rejection of much mass media content and reliance on social media to access news and information often led in his opinion to challenging, yet constructive, exchanges with people he chose to engage and have a conversation with. Ahmed, in turn, considered that social media was a powerful tool to share religious content and communicate with others through more visual means that enabled better emotional connection than would be possible offline. However, overall, participants were far more ambivalent, and often negative, about the role of social media in supporting political opinion exchange.

One of the key obstacles to more sustained and constructive political conversations and interactions was, from respondents' point of view, the opening of such exchanges to citizens with a varying range of political knowledge and familiarity with debating political matters. Unrestricted freedom to express and the extension of political communication to larger publics, paradoxically, also undermined this public sphere. This complaint applied to political talk in general, in both offline and online contexts. Whereas the majority of interviewees indicated that the freedom of expression since the revolution was a very positive development, for many, the downside of the equation related to the poor quality of debate and difficulties of discussing issues that everybody had opinions on and different levels of knowledge about, depending on the news and information they followed. Frequently, male

respondents were making an analogy between talk about football and politics, the latter having replaced the former in everyday exchanges regardless of knowledge and familiarity with subject matters. Raouf, Yassine, Anis, Youssef and Ahmed engaged in conversations about public and political affairs to different levels, but all made similar points relating to the responsibility that came with the new freedom of expression. In this sense, they considered that abstaining from talk was preferable when people lacked adequate knowledge. Whereas they all considered that such knowledge legitimated opinion expression, they always considered others (“people”, “they”, “some people”) – never themselves - as being “ignorant”, “not understand[ing] a thing”, or “not hav[ing] a clue”. In this sense, the terms of inclusion in this legitimation of opinions tended to be aligned to their personal opinions. On social media, these issues were reinforced, partly because exposure extended outside of the network of connections that participants had personally chosen to form (for example they were at times exposed to the opinions of people in their friends’ networks, or to comments by strangers on pages they followed). Here, social media’s networked nature posed new issues in terms of maintaining control over their exposure and involvement in political commentary and interactions. Even more problematic was the fact that they were exposed - within their personal networks on social media - to opinions of people they were not necessarily close to (work colleagues, distant acquaintances, members of their wider family circle). This translated at times into difficult social negotiations when opinions differed. But even among closer contacts, the balance between political talk and socialisation was at times difficult to maintain.

This form of communication in the networked sphere led to problematic issues in terms of occasional exposure to unwelcome political opinions and uninvited interlocutors, but also meant that users had less control over the subjects of conversations they encountered. Unlike political communication between citizens in an offline context where conversation occurred around chosen topics of common concern, social media users were exposed to a significant number of unsolicited politically-related content. As nearly all research participants typically used Facebook by scrolling through their newsfeed rather than seeking content from specific sources, they encountered a variety of content that also diverged from their sought interests and perspectives. Furthermore, respondents articulated a number of problematic issues in relation to talking about politics and current affairs on social media compared to a face-to-face offline environment. The limited moderation of debates and political communication between citizens on the platform translated into, at times, the use of aggressive terms and abusive language by some users of the platform, and generally more

difficulties in managing the terms and boundaries of such exchanges than in offline and face-to-face communication. Over half of the interviewees made reference to the rising level of aggression in political communication on the platform, the majority of them having had direct experience of it in their interactions online, whilst others had witnessed such arguments and abuse in interactions between contacts or other sources they followed on their networks.

I have so far assessed the relationship that respondents had to the political and public realm and have highlighted that, in the initial post-revolution context of Tunisia, levels of involvement and participation in formal politics remain relatively limited, but that expression and communication between citizens about public and political matters was highly politicised. Interactions on social media reflected this context, but also extended the forms that political talk took in an offline context, providing new opportunities for civic and political communication, albeit ones that were not necessarily supportive of deliberation and constructive debate. Most of the issues identified at first glance in relation to political talk and communication on social media, related to the publicness of this communicative space. In order to better understand why these issues arose in this context, I will now analyse in more detail how research participants used the platform to exchange political opinions and communicate about matters of shared concern, and what meanings they associated with the new and different forms of communication and interaction available to them on Facebook. As I will highlight, the publicly-oriented use of the platform in this Tunisian context, whilst empowering individual and collective expression, also reinforced divisions.

#### **4. Political identity and visibility in the networked sphere**

As discussed earlier, an understanding of the meanings and participative character that social media users ascribe to their online interactions is of key importance to this study, as content to which an outside observer may assign a political character may, in fact, have been created with no such intention in mind. The notion of intent is incorporated in the definition provided by Theocharis (2015), who argues that a revised conceptualisation of political participation is necessary in order to account for new and digital forms of action:

[...] digitally networked participation can be understood as a networked media-based personalized action that is carried out by individual citizens with the intent to display their

own mobilization and activate their social networks in order to raise awareness about, or exert social and political pressures for the solution of, a social or political problem (p.6).

For Theocharis then, a crucial element in defining participation is not only tied to intent, but also to the act of publicising, or making visible, one's own engagement and positioning vis-à-vis a given cause. But what also emerged from the previous discussion is the need to account for online interactions that unintentionally acquire a political character as, in the networked age, social media users are not in full control of the mediation of their expression on social media.

The way in which social media challenges pre-existing conceptual frameworks of political participation, and the findings so far, call for an equally extended delineation of what may be considered as political. There are naturally limitations to how specific any such definition can be in the context of research that seeks to account for new modes of being politically active. Distinctions between the social, the political and other realms, could be seen as specific to western conceptions of society as Lefort (2001), among others, has highlighted. Nevertheless, the establishment of certain parameters is useful, I contend, in order to examine, and elucidate, the dynamics and processes under consideration. As Carpentier (2011a, p.20) highlights, concepts such as Giddens' "life politics", Beck's "sub-politics" or cultural studies' use of the term all highlight the significance of a broader framing of what politics involves, but perhaps Mouffe's differentiation between formal politics and 'the political' (2000, 2005) has been particularly pertinent in recent debates around the Internet and democratic politics, providing a powerful contrast to the deliberative Habermasian definition of the public sphere. Mouffe rejects a view of democracy that is consensus-driven, pointing out the potential dangers inherent in a conception that fails to recognise antagonism as an inherent dimension of social relations. She calls instead for an agonistic model of democracy where this antagonism can be positively transformed. Her differentiation between the social and the political is equally helpful in clarifying what the political refers to. For her, the social refers to the "realm of sedimented practices" whereas the political relates to "acts of hegemonic institution" (2005, p.17). From this perspective, the origins of a particular social order are politically instituted, but in becoming widely accepted and taken for granted they lose their political character. These sedimented practices remain contestable, however, and retain the potential to be reactivated and once more become political (Carpentier, 2011b). In Mouffe's model, the latter situation is triggered when a querying of the social status quo occurs. This perspective goes some way to elucidating how the political may arise through the circulation,

on a much larger scale, of cultural and symbolic representations of the social on social media; it also serves as a prism through which to view, and understand, the possibilities that new communications technologies and channels afford in making alternatives visible that may challenge the widely-held acceptance of particular meanings. However, this line of argument also leaves open to question forms of power that continually reassert or legitimate the social as non-political, or 'only' social, in everyday life.

To explore what being political means in this context, different conceptions of citizenship can also be drawn upon. Isin's work (2002, 2005, 2008) in this area helps to frame citizenship as a way of constituting oneself as a political being through acts that are purposive but not necessarily intentional, and by engaging in agonistic *as well as* solidaristic and alienating orientations (2002, p.276). Citizenship is then a dialogical enactment of different subject positions that implicates subjects and, in doing so, necessarily also marks their differentiation from others (Isin, 2008, p.18-19). The notion of visibility, discussed earlier, is a useful complement to this perspective on citizenship in the context of online social networking. There are two important aspects to the question of visibility that arise with respect to being political on social media. The enactment of different subject positions that Isin refers to, by virtue of its digital inscription in more publicly visible ways on social media users' accounts, archives and fixes these positions and differentiations from others in new ways not available in an offline context. By being more visible across networks of like-minded (or not) citizens, the sedimented 'social' that Mouffe refers to becomes more difficult to ignore, and easier to challenge on an individual and collective basis, meaning that spaces for the political to arise are potentially significantly extended. Similarly, subjects can also become more accountable for this enactment and less flexible in navigating across different positions. Secondly, the enactment of subject positions by citizens and the unavoidable differentiations they imply, can be produced, distributed and seen by other citizens on a much larger scale. To be visible is not simply to be seen in public (Voirol, 2005), but requires attention to a subject to be acknowledged. Media's power resides in conferring regimes of visibility to subjects in the social arena (Brighenti, 2010). Where such power becomes more widely distributed through social media, it in part resides in how platform-specific network architecture frames these regimes. However, this power also extends to citizens as they ignore, recognise or reject each other's subject positions in ways which are more public than ever before. Participation on social media then also opens the arena to the collective negotiation of these regimes of visibility. To be political then also involves the dialogical enactment of subject positions in relation to this negotiation.

#### 4.1. Being public on social media

The public-private nature of networked communication on social networking platform Facebook is ambiguous. It is both a space for the expression of an individual identity and personal perspectives, as well as a space for networked interactions, connection to a wider public, and identity performance visible to others in users' personal networks. In this regard, respondents' perspectives on and relation to the ambiguous public-private nature of communication on the platform was interesting. These suggest that their use of the platform was oriented – during this initial research period – towards communication about more public than private matters, and served to extend everyday offline political talk and interactions in new ways.

Most participants had one social media account on Facebook, and all of them based it on their offline identities. Typically, this was achieved through the inclusion of their real names rather than pseudonyms, photos or information about their personal lives and activities, or by drawing on their offline family and friendship networks for their online connections. In this sense, participants were not using the platform under anonymous profiles and their communication and interactions about public and political matters were linked to their personal identities. Furthermore, similar to other national contexts (Mor et al., 2015, p.2), research participants tended to have limited awareness and rarely make use of the privacy parameters available to them on the platform to adjust the visibility of their communication (mainly on their personal walls) to different groups in their social media networks. Instead, most of it tended to be visible to all contacts in their networks and beyond. Two participants (Raouf, Asma) made their profiles completely public and enabled anyone to follow its content, and nearly two thirds of the sample did not use privacy parameters and relied on the standard profile settings through which their content was visible to all contacts in their network in the same way, and at times it was also visible to friends of friends in their networks if they interacted with the same content (liked, shared or commented on the same Facebook post for example). Mostly, respondents expressed little concern or a lack of knowledge in terms of adjusting these visibility parameters. The remaining interviewees occasionally made some use of these parameters, but only three of them (Nabil, Rim, Meriem) said they made quite advanced and more systematic use of these adjustments to customise content to different groups in their network of social media contacts. Equally, what participants shared on their personal social media profiles in 2011 and 2012 included

relatively little personal information. Based on online data available, this included a mix of audio-visual and written content ranging from religious quotes, cultural content and music, jokes, proverbs and anecdotes, to news and political commentary. Furthermore, in articulating their use of the platform, only six participants indicated that they regularly disclosed more private details and photos relating to their social activities, families and friends, whereas the majority of them limited their expression on their personal profiles to communication that seemed to be aimed at an exchange of a wider and more public nature.

Respondents' reflections on why they didn't use the platform to interact with others in their networks about more private issues were quite undeveloped: "I just don't like it", "I don't know why", "others do but I don't feel like it" and similar comments were a recurring theme. Whereas there was only limited evidence of instrumental use of privacy parameters, there were other ways in which research participants more spontaneously shaped their communication on the platform to a more publicly-oriented form of interaction and exchange, in which politically-related communication between citizens featured prominently. This was achieved, as previously indicated, by adhering to a collective interpretation of the platform as a space primarily suitable for public and politically-oriented interaction in the initial post-revolutionary period. Whilst a limited number of respondents mixed more personal and public content in what they disclosed, none used their personal profiles exclusively to communicate about personal matters. As a result, for respondents who did not wish to participate in this public exchange, their use of the platform was entirely limited to the reception of mediated content. Habib, for instance, who is one of the oldest participants in the sample, only used Facebook to access news and did not see any point in any other form of interaction on the platform. Youssef, a much younger respondent, used it in a similar way but made a conscious effort not to participate in any form of communicative expression on Facebook because he did not wish to disclose anything about his opinions at all. He associated the disclosure of his political opinions and positions on the platform with a level of risk. Whereas he talked about politics extensively with his friends in everyday face-to-face encounters, he considered that any form of communicative interaction or expression on Facebook was problematic because of its traceability and visibility by a wider audience. These examples are exceptions rather than the norm, but they nevertheless confirm the broader trend that the ambiguous public-private nature of the platform was primarily interpreted by participants in this sample as a public space or a space oriented to communication about public matters.

#### 4.2. Communicating in the public interest

The new forms of communication accessible to users of the platform were also relatively ambiguous. What the act of sharing content, for example, means can be extremely varied, depending on perspective. However, in this context, paralleling the publicly-oriented nature of political conversation offline (as discussed earlier in this chapter), the meanings that study participants associated with sharing content on social media also tended to frame it as a publicly-oriented and politically-inspired use. Indeed, it was striking that when respondents reflected on their own sharing habits, most of them associated a sense of public purpose with such acts. Some interviewees recalled the first time they shared content that was related to the socio-political situation during the revolution period. The decision to join in the dissemination of videos about the protests and their repression was, at the time, associated with great risk whilst Ben Ali was still in power, but interview accounts indicate that many respondents considered it as a necessary act out of a sense of collective duty. Such was the case for Sarra who was too scared to join in the protests herself, but felt that transmitting information and dissenting messages online was a way to make a contribution in her own limited way. Similarly, Sihem vividly recalled joining in these online practices at the height of protests in her region and feeling torn between the urge to join in denouncing the regime's repression and the disapproval of her mother who worried about the consequences of such overt dissent on her daughter's safety. Overcoming these fears and breaking her silence online by disseminating footage of the repression and victims marked a sort of boundary that Sihem and others crossed through participation in these sharing practices on social media. Doing so after the revolution continued to be considered as a means of benefiting others, informing, raising awareness, and positively contributing to public debate. For instance, Sarra and Raouf considered that sharing news and content providing a political commentary or analysis was aimed at helping as many people as possible to access content they deemed as important for others to see or read. Similarly, Sonia wanted people to "find out" about specific points of view or information through the content she helped to transmit.

The act of informing others was often framed as being politically motivated and aimed at swaying the opinion of people in their network and influencing their understanding or interpretation of the situation in the country. For example, Kamal only chose to share content when he considered that it brought a "benefit" ("bech nfid bih") and Neila when it was "in the interest of [her] country". This sense of duty or responsibility was associated with such

practices in the accounts of several respondents. In this context, Meriem recalled the first time she shared politically-related content after the revolution:

Before, I was using Facebook just for me to take information without sharing anything, you could see that on my wall. This was until the period of all the nominations<sup>94</sup>. I was talking with my friends about politics on Facebook, but for me to share, I didn't want to, I don't know why. But afterwards when they started to... When there were a lot of things starting to go wrong in Tunisia, I started to feel responsible myself in some way, so I felt I had to try... not to bring awareness... but to play a little part in the things I could do, even if it's a very small thing among the things I could do but at least I can share information to make people aware, to try to do the maximum.

In this context the act of sharing content, or the decision not to transmit it, was perceived by a number of participants as requiring careful consideration. Only one fifth of participants articulated their sharing practices as more spontaneous communicative acts. In the case of Meriem, who felt that such opinion expression might not be unanimously met with approval in her network of online contacts, much reflection went into taking this step. Meriem considered that she had to overcome these personal reservations and her worries about being negatively perceived by others, out of a sense of wider public good. She continues:

I thought a lot before I shared my first video, whether what I was about to do was right or wrong, because this wasn't about a nice dress you like or don't, I mean this was to do with the country and its future, a small thing can have an impact, so I thought a lot whether I should be sharing things or not, but then like I said, I have friends who are Ennahdha and it seemed that the information that reached us was different so I thought let me share what I am receiving so they can see it, and if someone wants to comment on it I am prepared to listen, even if his opinion is very different or provocative. And I think that when someone shares he has to be prepared for everything, that there will be people telling him 'lol'<sup>95</sup> and laughing with him and other people who'll tell him what you're doing is wrong and disagree. So when I started sharing I directly had images of some people in mind and how their reaction will be [...]. I was thinking about them and I asked myself whether I was ready to face these people or not. And I felt yes I was ready.

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<sup>94</sup> During its first months in government, the coalition government nominated large numbers of its parties' supporters and members - Ennahdha members in particular - to key positions in regional governorate administrations and at the head of national companies, as well as in a number of other leading public administration roles. Opposition leaders and the Tunisian Public Service Union denounced these nominations as overly partisan and estimated that in total approximately 2,000 of them were implemented in the first eighteen months of the government (Mosaïque FM, 2013).

<sup>95</sup> 'LOL' (acronym for Lough Out Loud) was, here, said in English by the interviewee.

Although sharing other type of content was referred to, across all sides of the political spectrum, as a more spontaneous action that was done “without even thinking”, that they “felt like”, that depended on “the mood of the day”, politically-related content required more consideration. Beyond the purpose of spreading information and opinions, the act of sharing such content was also aimed at engaging others in debate and related to the hope of influencing their opinions. In this regard, Zied differentiated between what it means to ‘like’ and to ‘share’ content in the following way:

It’s as if there was a scale, if you put like it’s I think you’re saying okay I enjoyed it but I don’t fully agree - at least for me; but if I share, it’s that I adhere to that idea and I encourage other people to do the same and look at it.

Two respondents (Ahmed, Rim) also made a correlation between participation in such communicative acts on social media and their religious beliefs. For Ahmed, it was a way of inspiring others religiously and to fulfil a duty of spreading religious messages. Rim, in turn, considered that involvement in public matters was a form of positive contribution in line with her beliefs. But even when sharing political content was less targeted and a more spontaneous activity, it required a level of consideration. Farah expressed her sense of freedom and enjoyment of sharing all sorts of content that she “liked”, yet at the same time she was also careful not to offend anyone by doing so:

The things I see on Facebook are of all sorts and if you look at my profile you won’t understand what’s my political view. I share all sorts of things from all directions, if there’s something I like I share it, it can be religious, or it can be to do with Bourguiba... I don’t want to show through Facebook one and only one direction that I’m taking or propagating that political view. I do think about the kind of things I share, but I share things that don’t do any harm, I don’t want to make any enemies.

Upon a more detailed examination of the content that participants shared on their personal social media profiles from different sources, it was striking that while many tended to share numerous items on a daily basis, interaction with this content by fellow users in their network was quite limited. Although some entries generated comments, ‘shares’ or ‘likes’, these broadly remained low in number, and yet participants continued to extensively share material on their profile pages. It could be argued that - as expressed by Nabil and Zied - rather than debating political issues as such, many users instead chose to “answer each other via their (own) shares” (comment by Zied, Nabil articulated the same idea in very similar

terms). In this sense, respondents seemed to participate through the content they helped to disseminate through sharing practices in delimitating collective representations of the socio-political reality they identified with. In other words, rather than more in-depth discussion and opinion exchange, much of the politicised communication that could be observed on the research participants' social media accounts consisted more of putting forward content that represented or signalled social and political opinions and positions they identified with.

#### 4.3. Visible expressions of consent and dissent

The previous analysis highlighted a variety of ways in which respondents engaged in communicating about news and current affairs on social media, and in which forms of political talk between citizens are extended on the Facebook platform. These forms were quite different from verbal deliberation, exchange and debate in an offline face-to-face context, and they were shaped by the communicative architecture and affordances provided by the platform, but equally, these possibilities and the communicative framework were embraced in different ways by the users to bring across their messages. These forms were not deliberative on the whole. Primarily, respondents participated in forms of public communication through collective expressions of consent or support of particular issues, and on the other hand of their dissent or disagreement.

There were a number of options for users to express their consent and support of particular issues or opinions. By clicking the 'like' button, research participants expressed agreement, enjoyment, consent or support. Respondents were unanimous in defining the meaning and their use of this option closely to the literal meanings – 'like' in English, 'I love' in French (*j'aime*), or 'I enjoyed/liked this' in Arabic (*a'jabani*), depending on the linguistic choices they adopted on Facebook. No equivalent option was available on the platform to express dislike or other nuances of 'liking' at the time the research was conducted. As I have also indicated in the previous analysis, the act of 'sharing' content was generally associated with a strong message of support, or a message that respondents wished to draw attention to and put on the public news or political agenda. Occasionally, content that participants sought to denounce as problematic or offensive for example, was shared by them. However, such instances were rather rare. Overall, sharing indicated a strong identification or agreement of research participants with the content they transmitted.

A brief exploration of large-scale patterns of interactions from the sample of publicly accessible Facebook pages (see chapter 2 for details), illustrates how political views are exchanged through interactions such as 'liking' and 'sharing' that support the construction of contrasting notions of citizenship and of political legitimacy at the height of the political unrest in July 2013. For instance, among content most interacted with at the end of July on pages that opposed the transitional government<sup>96</sup>, were images of the 'Rahil' protests that offered a specific interpretation of political events. The protests were represented as an important turning point and an indicator of citizens' unity against the transitional government. Such was the case for example for a page called "Wezir dhaght eddem w'essouker"<sup>97</sup> that had over three hundred thousand followers at the time. On this page, the most shared and liked entry at the end of July 2013 by far exceeded interactions with any other content, and generated over four thousand shares by social media users. The content consisted of a video of the protests in front of the National Assembly the previous night, with a caption that emphasised the significance of the event in historic terms, and implied a positive framing of the protestors' representativeness of the civic body.

By contrast, on pages supportive of the government, similar videos of large crowds of protestors were widely interacted with, but these provided very different interpretations of the events. For example, on a page called "I love you Tunisia"<sup>98</sup>, over four thousand social media users shared a video of the protests on the night of the 30<sup>th</sup> that in fact defended the government. Its caption explained that the video confirmed that more than three thousand protestors gathered "in support of legitimacy" (here meaning democratic legitimacy of the elected government), a video that is said would come as a shock to "traitors of Tunisia" and those attempting a coup. There were indeed a number of counter-demonstrations by government supporters during this period, many of whom assimilated the turn of events in Tunisia to the ones in Egypt that brought the military back to power earlier in the same month. However, there were significant divergences about the number of protestors in each camp and much of the battle over the representativeness of these numbers and the representation of the will of the majority of citizens took place on social media.

Through such large-scale interactions, Tunisian social media users, who were divided into these two groups, were gathering around opposing representations and, in a sense, setting

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<sup>96</sup> Opposition here in the broad sense as opposition to the government, rather than in the sense of opposition parties.

<sup>97</sup> This translates as "the minister of high blood pressure and diabetes", denoting a sarcastic comment on the impact of institutional politics on people's lives and health.

<sup>98</sup> My English translation, the original name is a mix of Tunisian dialect, English and French. Similarly to the opposition page previously quoted, this page also had over three hundred thousand followers in 2013.

them apart from other content as collectively significant. Other content that generated large-scale interactions further supported this reading. For instance, this included content that related to the scale of the protests, and the representativeness of the protestors. On opposition pages, some of this content consisted of satellite imagery to approximate the number of protestors based on the space they spatially occupied. Such content was aimed at demonstrating the dominance of the anti-government crowd. By contrast, alternative interpretations were provided on pro-government pages through content that sought to portray the number of opposition protestors in relative terms, for example by comparing them to the number of supporters in a football stadium, thereby implying that they were not significant. Again, in these cases, contending representations over the protests' meaning were 'liked' and/or 'shared on a similarly-large scale at both end of this polarised networked sphere.

To express dissent, disagreement or difference of opinion, users mostly drew on the options available to them on the platform to either express in writing, or to ignore an issue. Because the content that respondents posted on their social media accounts was to a large extent drawn and transmitted from other sources rather than produced by themselves, sharing it was a form of endorsement, an act of association between a personal communicative space and a more publicly-oriented message. It was therefore less likely for users wishing to express disagreement about an issue to resort to sharing content they were opposed to on their profile. Furthermore, the visual structure of the platform draws more attention, in terms of size and central position in a newsfeed, to visual rather than written content. If users in this context were to share content they wished to denounce for example, their only option was to add their own written comment to accompany such content. Such comment would have been less significant visually than the content they expressed dissent to, and in doing so they would nevertheless provide more exposure to issues or voices they opposed. This fundamental contradiction meant that, rather than sharing content they disagreed with on their personal profiles, respondents were more likely to remain silent about them, or in turn to draw on other content and counter-discourses whose messages they endorsed.

As a result, dissent and opposition were mostly expressed in written form. Only a fifth of content on respondents' personal profile walls consisted of content they had produced themselves as I have previously established. Of such content, more than half of it consisted of photographs uploaded by participants, and very occasionally of videos. Thus written 'status updates' and 'notes' created and posted by participants on their personal walls to express a

view or share a message of any type made up an extremely low proportion of this content. The majority of expressions of dissent or disagreement consisted of comments written by users below a Facebook 'post' or piece of content shared by someone else, and in reaction to it. Such interactions thus mainly occurred on the user profiles or pages of the authors of such content rather than that of the author of the dissenting comment. The communicative space in which such dissent, disagreement or expression of difference of opinion was visible mattered because this communicative architecture put more of an onus on those authoring an opinion or distributing content from other sources to defend their views and endorsements in front of others in their network of contacts, than on those issuing the opposing view (whose comment does not necessarily become visible to others in their network as content authored or shared was given priority over comments in Facebook's newsfeed algorithm at the time).

The architecture of the platform thus shaped politically-related communication and exchange along quite specific lines in this context, and in ways that encouraged endorsement of others' voices on the one hand, and reactive dissent or silence on the other, rather than any more nuanced form of debate, personal voice and deliberation. However, there are also some exceptions to this trend and some interesting ways in which this architecture is appropriated in turn by users to express collective support and voice in written and quasi-ritualised forms.

Whereas the closest form to offline political talk can be found in written exchanges and comments through which users articulate their personal opinions, written comments were also used at times to express solidarity with other users. This can be observed for example in the case of trolling campaigns where hundreds of users copied the same wording in large numbers on a social media account or page as a way of silencing it by occupying its space and crashing the site. This occurred a number of times during the research period where such campaigns targeted the pages of public figures and politicians. But such repetitive written communication can also be observed in contexts where they serve to support specific media content on the platform and set it apart.

As a means of analogy, such patterns could be observed in interactions with religious text, such as excerpts of the Qur'an, where its sacred character was upheld through repetitive comments, as in the example provided in the screenshot on the next page<sup>99</sup>.

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<sup>99</sup> Screenshot drawn from content transmitted by one of the research participants from a Facebook page.

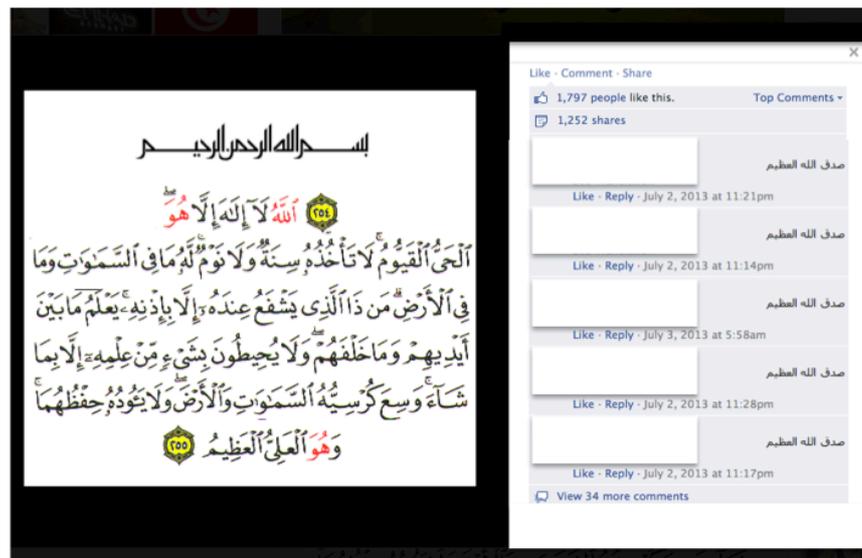


FIG.2: Communicative patterns in comments to religious text shared on Facebook (Jul.2013)

The sacred status of the Qur'an text was reinforced in this instance through collective ritual invocation of a phrase uttered in Muslim practice at the end of Qur'an reading or recitation. As illustrated in the example, the phrase (it translates more or less as 'Allah almighty has spoken the truth') is repeatedly typed in the comments section adjacent to the sacred text content. In this sense, although interactions between citizens were framed by the platform's communicative architecture along specific lines that shaped the expression of support and disagreement with representations of their shared socio-political reality, there are also instances, as in the case of religious content seen above, where formalised and socially-embedded patterns of communication were re-established on the platform to express solidarity with others through participation in ritualised norms of interaction that set apart this type of social media content.

The special character of interactions with such content on social media was also confirmed by interview accounts. Whereas numerous research participants engaged in contesting what others in their networks shared, religious content "[could] not be touched" as one of the respondents (Sihem) said. In the early phase of the post-revolution period and following the rise to power of the Islamist party, religious content was transmitted on a larger scale across the Tunisian Facebook sphere than was the case before the revolution, and this was partly the result of the freeing of religious expression in public after its control under previous regimes. However, the prevalence of such content, particularly on the social media accounts of Islamist party supporters, also gave it a political dimension that some interviewees found problematic. These considered themselves as Muslims yet had more secular views, and clarified that they viewed religion as a private matter that should not to be aired on such

platforms. These participants found it problematic to publicly react to the circulation of such content on social media and only discussed these difficulties within the interview setting. Although they would have liked to express their disapproval more openly and react to those sharing a lot of religious content, the risk of their reaction being interpreted as being anti-religious was deemed too high. Participants in that case preferred to remain silent. The following quotes reflect the difficulty some of these respondents encountered in expressing their disapproval:

Habib: “When someone shares something like that, you can’t say anything, at most you can press like that’s all. Impossible. Nobody would dare. Either you don’t like it and ignore it or you press like.”

Slim: “I don’t like it when people put religion on Facebook. It’s just to show off as religious, to stand out.”

Nabil: “With the religious stuff, you stop there, you can’t talk or comment... Otherwise you’re a keffer [unbeliever] and all that, you get into trouble. And even in the comments, you never see a video with that kind of content that someone comments on. Nobody discusses these things. You can’t, you can’t.”

The quotes point to a clear social boundary that cannot be crossed. This suggests that religious norms are not only reproduced in such instances, but also that the association of those interacting with sacred content provides them in turn with a certain communicative authority that demarcates them from other platform users not participating in the process. This pattern was almost exclusively observed in relation to religious content during the research period. However, it was also replicated, in the content sample from July 2013, in interactions with representations of the protests. For example, the comments that accompanied one of the most shared videos of the protests on pages opposed to the government, illustrate a dynamic not too dissimilar from interactions with sacred text, whereby here comments repetitively and collectively echoed and upheld the sacredness of the nation. Hundreds of such comments repetitively invoked Tunisia in this manner. A translation of a short excerpt from these comments is provided in the table on the next page.



#### 4.4. Issues with 'seeing' political opinions on social media

The new political freedoms after the revolution, whilst not necessarily translating into forms of participation in the sphere of institutional politics, were enacted by citizens eager to make their voices heard and express their opinions in public. In this context, the use of Facebook was oriented towards public and politically-related communication between citizens, and supported the performance of political identities. These two aspects need to be distinguished. Communication on the platform is both about the information or content communicated as well as about an identity performance. The association of the two in this networked environment supported the large-scale transmission of information and mobilisation messages across networks based on trusted offline connections and identities during the revolution. It further sustained the expression of solidarity and support for different causes afterwards. However, it also undermines the levels of autonomy in political and public expression when it came to divergences of opinions, and reinforces divisions. At times, this networked paradox resulted in difficult situations for study participants to handle as their social media accounts served as a source for a more public interaction and media dissemination on the one hand, and as a site of personal identity expression and reputation management on the other.

As Tunisians broke their silence about socio-political issues after the revolution, many discovered for the first time their mutual opinions and political orientations. The lack of freedom to express them before the revolution meant for several respondents that they were not aware of the views of friends and acquaintances in their networks, and for some this came as a surprise. Nabil, for instance, referred to one of his close friends. Whilst he shared with this friend a hatred of the Ben Ali regime before the revolution, he had no idea that this friend supported Ennahdha and that his father was an Islamist activist. This led to a number of problems after the revolution as Nabil was a fervent opposition supporter. Similarly, Rim who supported Ennahdha said that expressing her support of the party on her social media profile must have come as a surprise to many people in her network and that she noticed that a number of contacts had 'un-friended' her.

While research participants provided a relatively consensual framing of the publicly-oriented use of the platform to express and influence opinions, more ambiguity was associated with the communicative norms surrounding their reception. Overall, respondents considered that political talk offline was more likely to support dialogue and listening to different voices than

a social media context in which attention was sparse, and misunderstanding more rife. The lack of contextualising information typically available to interlocutors in face-to-face communication was an issue. For example, Meriem considered that the lack of clues based on body language and tone could result in misunderstandings and misinterpretations. She considered that debating opinions online allowed to bring across one's conviction, positive intent, and authenticity of message in more constructive ways. Similarly, several respondents pointed to occasional issues of potential misinterpretation of the intended message or aim that social media users had when they expressed a political opinion on their social media accounts. In the same sense, Raouf, who was relatively positive about debating politics on social media, nevertheless highlighted that, because of the potential for misinterpretation, it was necessary to invest more care, effort and subtlety into communicating opinions on the platform than in everyday face-to-face encounters. Furthermore, this type of communication on social media was often considered as problematic because the intended recipient of a message wasn't as clear as in an offline context. When people posted content or comments on their personal social media accounts, it was not always clear if it was aimed at one of their contacts in particular, or at a wider public, as it was typically visible to all contacts irrespectively. Generally speaking, and as previously discussed, the difference of opinions in respondents' social media networks meant that reactions to what they shared wasn't always supportive. Interviewees were not necessarily aware of who was co-present or part of their network and likely to be offended by what they said. As Baym and boyd (2012) contend, social media are particularly challenging in terms of understanding "who is out there and when", thus they raise "the potential for greater misalignment between imagined and actual audiences" (p.323). Equally, this meant that many perceived the social media space as less inhibited and controlled than an offline communicative environment where the potential consequences of such expression was not spatially and temporally separate. Other respondents also referred to the difficulty of avoiding contentious subjects online compared to when they communicated with their close friends face-to-face. In this respect, Neila, for example, mentioned friends she studied with who involuntarily offended her because of what they shared on their Facebook accounts about the importance for women of wearing a veil in public. Neila said that this subject was exhausted during conversations with these friends offline and they had come to avoid it so as to no longer argue about it, but that it was more difficult for her to ignore what she was exposed to of her friends' opinions communicated on Facebook.

The reception of political expressions to extended networks on social media users that included citizens of radically opposing perspectives was particularly problematic. Regularly, it led to the use of aggressive terms and insulting language during arguments on the platform. The use of verbal abuse can be seen in this context as an exercise of power aimed at silencing specific opinions, contesting their visibility and limiting their recognition in this networked sphere. To some extent, it reflects the rising socio-political polarisation in the country, as well as a fledgling democratic culture in which tolerance of differences and norms of deliberation are still in the process of becoming established. For instance, it can be seen to parallel some of the interactions between politicians during televised debates, who often resorted to shouting and where moderators struggled to contain the terms of the debate. On social media, the written form this type of exchange took between citizens, translated into other forms of aggressive communication. The contrast between more publicly-oriented terms for communicative expression and more privately framed terms of reception made such interactions problematic. In this regard, Zied considered that the opportunity that social media offered to communicate about public or political issues with complete strangers (e.g. on public pages, or friends of friends on their social media page), led among others to less inhibitions and more pronounced disrespect in confronting divergences, that he perceived as particularly hurtful:

Sometimes when I comment on something I find other people insulting me or attacking me and it really brings up an emotional reaction, it really affects you [...]. Even the word war or battle can seem sometimes quite light compared to what happens. Because war... at least it doesn't affect you in your own house in this way, whereas this it touches you in your house, on your table, as you're sitting in your chair. You feel like people have crashed into you. It may be people who know nothing about you and all you did was to share something on Facebook or you commented [about some content] for example.

#### 4.5. Managing the visibility of politicised communication

Over time, study participants deployed different strategies to address these issues and manage the use of their social media accounts, for both political expression, and more sociable interactions. Approximately one third of participants felt it was important not to limit the expression of their opinions and they continued to share such content regardless of the consequences. For Hanen, who was quite vocal about her opinions and critiques of politics and Tunisian society more generally – especially in relation to women's rights – expressing her opinions freely on social media was important but came at a cost:

I do take into consideration how people react to what I post, but that doesn't stop me from posting it. I mean I think in advance how they're going to react, and I do it. It's like a battle. I prepare in advance how I can respond to each type of criticism. It's true sometimes it's like a war, but it's no longer like it used to be, people know me better now and they understand where I'm coming from, so I don't receive so many comments any longer. I never had this problem before the revolution, it all happened after.

Zied, referred to earlier, did not wish to restrict his political expression on his social media account either, but he learned over time to ignore critical comments about the content he distributed as this always led to a negative escalation. In both cases, these issues come at a cost, leading to either more difficult or more limited exchanges.

However, for the majority of participants (two thirds), these issues progressively led to adjustments in the visibility of politically-related content and restrictions of the publicly-oriented nature of these interactions. This was achieved through a number of strategies. Some respondents retrospectively acted to divert attention away from content that attracted negative reactions in their network. For instance, Slim's strategy was to "drown" opinions that provoked such reactions by increasing his activity on the platform and producing or distributing numerous other pieces of content in rapid succession in order to avoid a potentially unpleasant escalation of debate. Narjes had on a few occasions erased content she had previously shared due to reactions to the opinions she expressed or suggested through her social media activity. She recalled one case, in particular, where she transmitted an article commemorating the anniversary of the death of former Tunisian president Bourguiba. When she shared it on her social media account and commented on his battle to lead the country to independence, one of her contacts wrote a critical comment listing the negative impact of his rule and his secularising agenda, which led Narjes in turn to provide counter-arguments. However, the debate became increasingly heated and lengthy and she decided to delete the entire thread of the exchange and the content it related to, whilst keeping the person in her social media contacts. Other respondents considered that it became necessary, after a number of arguments on social media, to adjust their communication on the platform to more private and easily manageable exposure levels. Sarra, for example, mentioned that her use of privacy parameters on Facebook was relatively basic. When it came to personal photos of her and her family, she ensured that she only shared such content with a close network of friends. With other forms of content, she made no restrictions to who could see what she wrote and shared. However, this changed over

time as a few contacts in her network, whose political opinions were opposed to hers, made comments she perceived as unpleasant. As a result, she changed her privacy parameters to ensure that they could no longer see content she produced on her profile. Nevertheless, she kept them in her network of friends because she wanted to continue seeing what they in turn shared. Similarly, Anis made the point that, over time, he had resorted to only discussing his political views in closed social media groups with like-minded individuals. His previous experiences meant that “otherwise [he] would be spending all [his] time replying to comments from people.”

Whilst some study participants restricted the visibility of their and other’s political opinions and positions, in a few instances, the ability to freely express necessitated the use of more than one social media profile. In the case of Neila, it led to the drastic decision to shut down her profile and start a new one. Neila was particularly active in disseminating information through her Facebook account during the revolution period. To do so, she connected to a large number of users and significantly expanded her network to contacts she was not personally familiar with. As she continued to share information and express her political stances after the revolution, the size of this network made the wide-scale communication on her profile difficult to manage in the context of an increasingly polarised political space. After receiving death threats because of the opinions she published, she considered that she had to start a new profile. In a less extreme context, Rim considered that the public nature of the platform and the visibility of her communicative expressions to her contacts in her network were limiting in terms of the diversity of opinions she wished to interact with. As a result, she created a separate account under a pseudonym to do so. She explains:

At a certain point I set up two additional accounts in addition to my Facebook account. But these two were not in my name. They were in the name of people I had imagined, and I created them as two different types of people. One of them was pro government, and the other one was against the government. It was just to find out how people were talking [...] I used different accounts from my own because if you wanted to follow the pages you had to go on them and mark that you like them. And it could be the case that these pages would not be in my interest. Because people would see that I like the pages when they’re different from my personal convictions.

In this sense, the assimilation in one and the same communicative space of a personal identity and the expression of a political identity was limiting. The public visibility of this political identity signified, in her perspective, an accountability towards others and fixed it in

such a way that made a more flexible exploration and experimentation with different opinions impossible.

The visibility of political identifications and positions on social media also impacted, for a number of respondents, on their social relations offline. Such was the case for Ahmed, who supported the Salafi movement and had many issues in terms of managing exposure to opinions, in his social media network, that he found politically or religiously offensive. He recalled the example of a close relative he decided to remove from his contacts as a result. However, the decision led to further difficulties as his relative was offended by this act and confronted him when they met face-to-face. Ahmed had to reverse his decision and reinstate his relative in his network of contacts on Facebook as a result. Equally, Ahmed said that many of his online acquaintances had blocked him out of their social media network due to the religious and political views he expressed, and this made their real-life interactions very awkward and difficult to manage. Mehdi, in turn, mentioned that he had many concerns about the political opinions that one of his childhood friends was sharing on Facebook and, as a result, waited until they met in person to clarify that these were not aimed at offending him personally. Similarly, Sarra who, as previously mentioned, felt the need to block one of her friends from seeing what she posted on social media in order to avoid her aggressive comments, said that, although she occasionally still met this person during social gatherings, she hardly spoke to her any longer because of the opinions she had posted online.

## **Conclusion**

A closer assessment of political communication between citizens on social media highlights the importance of understanding the specific context, meanings and consequences of the use of the platform as a space for public expression. The networked architecture of social media and its link to offline identities and networks, are empowering of civic expression and interactions but equally undermine personal opinion autonomy and can reinforce divergences in this context. Over time, users adapted their communicative practices in this regard to adjust the visibility of their and others' political opinions, identifications and identity expressions to a more privately customised exposure. As highlighted in this chapter, the type of political communication that citizens took part in on Facebook was less conducive to debate and deliberative exchange than political talk in an offline context. Instead, interactions on the platform were aimed at supporting or undermining the visibility of

opinions, representations, and political positions. The logic of these social media interactions in this post-revolution context were predicated on the association of a private identity and image with specific interpretations of public and political issues. The visibility of politically-related interactions on social media thus mattered on two opposing levels. On the one hand, it mattered to respondents how their own identity came across and as a result they sought to manage their personal image on the platform. In this sense, it could be argued that by extending opportunities for political communication from the political sphere to 'ordinary' citizens, networked communication between citizens exposed them to public scrutiny, paralleling some of the problems that Thompson (2005) refers to in his assessment of the consequences of the rise of visibility for politicians in the television era. On the other hand, the new communicative opportunities on social media, shape public debate along the lines of a negotiation over the terms of visibility of different issues and opinions in the public realm. The forms of communication on the Facebook platform in this context (e.g. like, share), support communicative construction of a different type and articulations of terms of inclusion and exclusion in what is considered as collectively permissible and legitimate in the broader socio-political space. Whereas only a few respondents chose to act on their engagement with public and political matters through the structures and institutions of the formal political sphere, their involvement in politicised forms of communication on social media can be regarded as participative in as far as it is tied to the desire to influence not just other citizens' opinions, but also to shape the representation of their shared public world and its boundaries. In this sense, the use of social media in this context can be considered, rather than a revival of a deliberative public sphere, as more of a relative extension to citizens of the power of naming (Melucci, 1996), formerly associated with mass media institutions. But as becomes more evident in the next chapter, the discrepancy between this communicative participation and political outcomes only serves to increase perceived disillusion, nurture de-politicisation and undermine a sense of civic and political efficacy.

## CHAPTER 6

### SOCIAL MEDIA'S CHANGING ROLE

#### Introduction

This chapter follows research participants in the rapidly changing post-revolution context of Tunisia a year after the first round of interviews were conducted. Similar themes are explored to the previous two empirical chapters, with a focus on better understanding longer term processes that underpin the use of social media by users. In particular, an assessment is undertaken of the changes, one year later, in respondents' media practices aimed at informing themselves, connecting to a wider public realm, and influencing it through different participative forms. The findings of research conducted in 2012 indicated rapid changes not only in socio-political context, but also in media use by respondents and in the role played by social media over time. By revisiting some of these findings a year later, my aim in this chapter is to better capture these changes and explore participants' evolving perspectives about their perceived relation to a wider public realm and the different ways their media practices co-evolve with these views. The chapter starts with an overview of developments in the Tunisian socio-political and media contexts between the autumn of 2012 and the end of 2013, then assesses participants' media and news practices in this rapidly changing and polarised landscape, and finally explores their participatory activities online and offline one year after the first round of interviews. Fundamentally, I argue that, social media contributed to further reinforcing this polarised socio-political context and, as a result, there was a relative shift back in the role adopted by respondents from participating and interacting public to social media audience. Empirical evidence in this chapter suggests that, when it comes to communication between citizens about public and political issues, concerns about the ability to socialise with others ultimately dictate the terms and limits of involvement in the networked communicative space. Paralleling this shift is a reframing of participants' perceptions about their role and influence as citizens, an understanding that decreasingly associates the social media space to the opportunity to advance their own views and representations of the public world or to make their voices heard.

## 1. One year later: a changed context

### 1.1. Growing political polarisation and rise in violence

The tense and increasingly violent socio-political context referred to in the previous chapter continued to escalate in 2013. The country was beset by a number of difficulties. Two years after the start of the revolution, the socio-economic demands that originally fuelled it, unsurprisingly failed to translate into rapid improvements and better youth and regional employment opportunities. Instead, the economic recovery after the revolution was somewhat stagnating and rising inflation levels were making living conditions increasingly difficult, whilst the informal economy was expanding (Ayadi et al., 2013; Trabelssi, 2014). Equally, more fundamental structural and institutional reforms failed to make meaningful progress over time (Hachemaoui, 2013) and the drafting of the new constitution was stalling. Meanwhile, different strands of radical Islamic and Jihadi movements were gaining ground among socially and economically disenfranchised youth, and within a context of rising political tension and ideological polarisation (Merone, 2015). As previously mentioned, the government's initially muted stance on the rise of such movements, as well as questions as to its competence in handling a difficult economic recovery and complex regional inequalities, were feeding progressively sharper criticism by the opposition. Furthermore, the use of excessive and unjustified force by police to quell dissent at times provided a painful reminder that little had changed since the Ben Ali days, as was the case for example in the socially and economically marginalised region of Siliana in November 2012, where bird shot pellets were fired indiscriminately at protestors (Human Rights Watch, 2012).

However, the major turning point for the first democratically elected government after the revolution, came with the assassination of a leading opposition figure of the left, Chokri Belaid, at the beginning of February 2013. The death of other public figures during this transitional period had aroused a level of disquiet, notably the lynching of a regional coordinator of the opposition party, Nidaa Tounes, in October 2012 (Chouikha and Gobe, 2013). However, the shooting of a leading political figure such as Belaid in front of his home and in broad daylight, marked a profound shift in popular opinion about the troika government. Indeed, Belaid was one of the fiercest critics of Ennahdha, who denounced what he considered the instrumentalisation of religion to political ends and, shortly before his death, he directly accused the party of increasingly resorting to violence to impose their rule. Belaid had also been accused by Ali Laarayedh, a leading figure in the Ennahdha party and

head of the Interior Ministry, of being the instigator of the violence during the Siliana protest. His death translated into growing distrust of Ennahdha and fuelled suspicion about the party's implication in his murder (Hachemaoui, 2013). The ensuing political crisis saw the resignation of Prime Minister Hamadi Jebali (of the Ennahdha party), followed by the formation – to the dismay of many in the opposition ranks (Amara, 2013) - of a new government led by Laarayedh. These developments did little to appease socio-political polarisation and a number of conflictual readings of the events were influential on public opinion (Scheuerman, 2013). Whereas the government accused a group of Salafi extremists as perpetrators and vowed to crack down on jihadi movements in the country, some of Belaid's immediate entourage pointed fingers at Ennahdha for complicity in masterminding the murder and covering up details of the subsequent investigation (Scheuermann, 2013; Auffray, 2013). Part of the political opposition, in turn, pointed to the government and Ennahdha's indirect complicity in the attack, considering it a predictable consequence of a previously passive handling of the rise of religious extremism and the lack of clear condemnation of religiously-divisive discourses. The distrust between Islamists and their opponents fed this climate of suspicion and polarisation (Merone, 2013).

During the month of Ramadan in July 2013, the country was further immersed in deep political crisis by a second assassination - of left opposition figure and member of the Constitutional Assembly (ANC) Mohammed Brahmi – and the killing, a week later, of six soldiers on a patrol in the Chaambi Mountain in the West of the country (Carboni, 2015). These developments resulted in a political lockdown by the opposition, with a group of opposition deputies boycotting the ANC's activities and occupying the square in front of it, a movement that became known as the "Rahil" (departure) sit-in (Boubekeur, 2015). At the end of July 2013, this space saw the largest scale protests in the capital since the beginning of the revolution, leading to the resignation of the troika government and a renewed commitment by the political parties to reach a compromise (*ibid*). When I returned to Tunisia at the end of October 2013 to conduct the second round of interviews with the same respondents, a 'national dialogue' process was starting, with the aim of resolving the crisis and negotiating the composition of a caretaker technocratic-political government in which key posts were to be allocated to relatively independent or non-partisan ministers (Thornton, 2014). Crucial to these negotiations was a group of four organisations comprising two unions (the workers' Union UGTT, and the employers' Union UTICA) as well as the Tunisian Human

Rights League (LTDH) and the Lawyers' Association (Ordre des Avocats)<sup>100</sup>. The drafting of the new constitution was rapidly finalised and it was adopted in January 2014. During the same period, the new government was formed and came to power with a mandate to oversee a crackdown on terrorist networks and to organise new parliamentary and presidential elections within a year.

## 1.2. A highly politicised media landscape

As briefly contextualised in the first chapter, the Tunisian media landscape underwent radical changes after the revolution. The freeing of public expression was accompanied by the establishment of new media outlets, by changes in the relationship between the state and media sector, and by a radical shift in journalistic practices. Equally, the aftermath of the revolution saw the emergence and proliferation of media content relating to political issues - previously a taboo subject (see Chapters 1 and 3).

Whereas the initial period after the 2011 revolution prompted a number of hopes about the transformation of the media sector, the subsequent years were marked by delays in the implementation of more profound structural reforms, by the persistence of close links between the media and political spheres, and by the emergence of new struggles over the boundaries of free and permissible forms of expression and communication. This context was fed by, and in turn contributed to, the socio-political polarisation in the country (El-Issawi, 2015). Delays in the establishment of the audio-visual regulatory body HAICA (see Chapter 1) partly contributed to some of these issues, but these delays were also the result of a complex context and legacy that resisted reform and a lack of political will to support it (Ben Chaabane, 2015; Farmanfarmaian, 2014, Laabidi, 2014). Indicative of these difficulties are, for example, the lengthy negotiations over the composition of HAICA's committee and its legitimacy (El-Issawi, 2015), as well as the difficult negotiations it faced with the government in asserting the terms of appointment of public broadcasting directors (Farmanfarmaian, 2014), and the challenges (including a legal challenge) the regulatory body was confronted with in trying to establish an apolitical framework for private media ownership. These latter changes were resisted by media owners as well as part of the journalistic profession (Ben Chaabane, 2015). In this context, more drastic attempts to enforce change were often represented to public opinion as attacks on freedom of expression and media pluralism.

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<sup>100</sup> As mentioned in Chapter 1, these four organisations were awarded with the Nobel Peace Prize in 2015, for their role in heading the national dialogue process at the end of 2013.

The deeper-level reform of the media landscape was difficult to achieve in a transitional context where part of the political culture continued to be entrenched in the instrumentalisation of media outlets for political purposes, and where relations between different sides were marked by a level of distrust. Similar difficulties arose in relation to other sectors (e.g. the judiciary) that equally struggled to undergo a more profound overhaul. Much of the private media landscape was in fact more or less directly in the hands of political actors. Additionally, the transitional period saw the launch of some media figures into the political arena, who thereby made use of their influence in the media sphere for political gains. Furthermore, the relationship between the media sector and the former dictatorial regime, was perhaps not sufficiently addressed to support a solid basis for trust and reform. Although Ben Ali's family and direct entourage no longer owned leading private media outlets, the politicisation of media and limited transparency over its financing further contributed to the socio-political polarisation in the country as government supporters distrusted the motives behind negative coverage by private media formerly linked to the old regime, and by the same token, government opponents distrusted more positive appraisals of government activities by new media outlets, considering them as indicative of the return of regime propaganda. This was the case, for example, for one of the leading Tunisian television channels *Nessma TV*, distrusted by Ennahdha supporters for its links to Ben Ali's regime as well as to new opposition party *Nidaa Tounes*, considered by many of these supporters as the voice of former networks of influence and corruption<sup>101</sup>.

For government supporters, it was equally difficult to create an alternative media space more suited to their viewpoints in this polarised context where any such attempt was considered, rightly or wrongly, as a new form of propaganda. A number of media outlets more aligned to pro-government or pro-Ennahdha perspectives emerged during the research period, but these also tended to be directly tied to the political sphere. For instance, *Zeitouna* television channel, launched in May 2012, was owned by the son of a leading Ennahdha figure who served as minister in the troika government (Farmanfarmaian, 2014). The level of distrust between different sides of the media and political sphere was also evidenced by the controversial move by the presidency of the Republic to publish, in December 2013, a 'black book' exposing media outlets and journalists implicated in Ben Ali regime's propaganda structures. The publication was hailed by some as a brave move for its revelations, but also rightly criticised by others because the research into the presidential archives was instigated

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<sup>101</sup> Many members of *Nidaa Tounes* are former RCD members (the party of Ben Ali) and its octogenarian leader Beji Caid Essebsi was formerly a minister under Bourguiba. Due to the relative failure of the transitional justice process, distinction between different levels of responsibility for perceived crimes of the former regime has been difficult.

by the president Mohamed Moncef Marzouki outside of any legal mandate, formal independent process, or consultation with other bodies dealing with transitional justice issues (Joyce, 2013; Tolbert, 2013).

The case of private television channel *Ettounsiya TV* (The Tunisian channel), one of the most popular channels in 2011 and 2012, is just one example to illustrate this polarised context, but it perhaps encapsulates most strikingly how the media sphere was serving as an important political battleground in 2013. The channel was launched in the spring of 2011, shortly after the revolution, by television presenter and producer Sami Fehri, who formerly controlled one of Tunisia's major production companies (Cactus Productions) together with Ben Ali's brother-in-law, Belhassen Trabelsi. Whereas an enquiry was launched in June 2011 into the unfair financial advantages offered by these ties to the old regime, the imprisonment of Fehri in August 2012 arose suspicion - due to its timing and irregular judicial procedures - about the underlying political motives and pressures that may have motivated it (IFEX, 2012; RSF, 2012). Indeed, Fehri claimed that the arrest was due to the airing on *Ettounsiya* of a political satire programme "Ellogique Essiyassi" (The Political Logic) that was critical of the transitional 'troika' government. The programme was suspended by the channel, a move that Fehri as well as the National Union of Tunisian Journalists (SNJT) justified as a result of pressure from the authorities (RSF, 2012)<sup>102</sup>. By December 2012, the case was not only the centre of a battle between a section of the political and media spheres, but had shifted to an unprecedented conflict within the judiciary that raised doubts over its political independence. Indeed, two judicial bodies, the Court of Cassation and the Accusation Chamber disagreed over the outcome of the case; the former issuing a warrant for Fehri's release and the latter demanding for him to be kept in prison (IFEX, 2012). Eventually, after a third warrant, the channel's owner was released from prison in September 2013, having spent a year in custody despite – according to Fehri - never being formally sentenced (Le Monde, 2013), and even though he still faced charges in relation to other embezzlement affairs.

Equally illustrative of the centrality of the media sphere to this polarised context are developments regarding the ownership of *Ettounsiya* during Fehri's detention. In March 2013, the channel's frequency was acquired by another businessman, Slim Riahi, leader of the political party UPL (and later candidate in the presidential elections of 2014). In July 2013, the broadcasting of *Ettounsiya* came to a sudden end and Riahi announced that he was to

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<sup>102</sup> Fehri announced that he received a phone call from a minister of the Ennahdha party directly requesting the suspension of the programme, a claim denied by the minister. The SNJT in turn said it was the result of "indirect" pressure from the regime.

create three new channels under the *Ettounsiya* brand. However, lawyers acting for the channel challenged his ownership of the brand and denounced the move as a renewed attempt to silence the channel's editorial line. Another channel, *El Hiwar* (The Dialogue), offered to host *Ettounsiya*'s popular programmes on its airwaves instead, alongside its own schedule. This channel was in turn owned by political opposition figure Tahar Ben Hassine, persecuted under Ben Ali's regime, and an active member of opposition party Nidaa Tounes after the revolution. Ben Hassine claimed that Ennahdha was pressuring advertisers into discontinuing their business with his channel, leading to financial difficulties (Girra and Rezgui, 2013). In September 2014, a year after Fehri's release, *El Hiwar* and *Ettounsiya* were to merge into a new company whose majority shareholder was Fehri's wife (Haddaoui, 2014).

The scope of this project does not allow for a more detailed assessment of the transformations of the media sphere in Tunisia. However, the overview provided above aimed to highlight the complexity and range of conflicts related to its reform in this unstable and highly polarised transitional context. I will now turn to an assessment of respondents' perspectives and orientations in relation to this media landscape and socio-political developments, particularly during the heightened period of crisis between the first and second rounds of interviews (October/November 2012 to October/November 2013).

## **2. Changes in media and news practices**

### **2.1. Ambiguous perspectives on news viewing practices**

Participants' media habits changed – and in some cases quite drastically - compared to the first round of interviews conducted a year earlier. Discussions of the time they spent with different media indicated a number of factors underpinning these differences. For some participants, changes in their personal circumstances had a significant impact on their use of different media forms. This was the case, for example, for Sonia who temporarily moved back to her parents' and had to adapt her media use (television and radio in particular) to theirs as a result. Other participants saw a change in their professional situation (Nabil, Hamza, Rim, Sarra and Zied) which affected the time they were spending with media. One respondent (Slim) had migrated to the Middle East in the meantime in pursuit of better employment opportunities, and was no longer able to participate in the study as a result. However, overall,

it was striking that much of the change in participants' media habits was related to the heightened political polarisation and politicisation of media referred to earlier in this chapter.

Perspectives on the importance of following the news were relatively unchanged. It still really mattered to most respondents to be up to date with rapid developments in the country and to understand them. However, they also expressed far more ambivalent feelings about their relationship to news in general than they had in 2012. Whilst this knowledge was important and considered as necessary, it was also painful, stressful, and increasingly challenging in psychological terms. Narjes' comments on this issue illustrate this point effectively:

Before one was very attentive and wanted to follow the news, but now there has been an overdose, you don't want to hear anything any longer.

[Since when?]

Since events have been succeeding each other without there being any visible solution...

[So if I understand this correctly, because of the events, you prefer not to follow the news any longer?]

Yes but it's only for a short time, because you tell yourself you must, you have to know. After all we live in this country so we better follow. We're forced to. You can't avoid it. We have to face this, at least to know what's going on.

In my translation of her words, I have tried to reflect her avoidance of using the first person (I). Her frequent shift between using the third person (one, you) to talk about her personal perspective and the collective "we" highlights some of the difficulty Narjes encounters in trying to negotiate her relationship, as individual and citizen, to a wider public world she feels the need to both connect to and seek shelter from. Connection to this realm through news comes across, in her framing, as an imposed duty, one that Narjes appears to be trying to convince herself is still important.

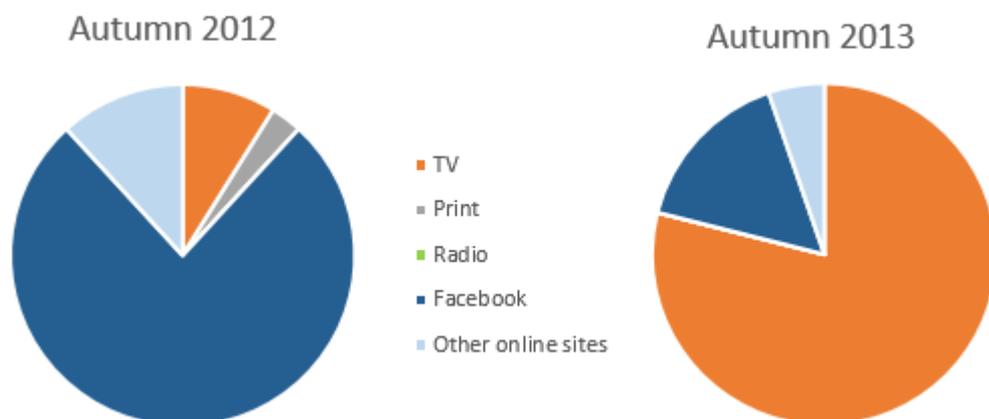
Although most interviewees continued to consider that following events in this socio-political context was still of value, many had reduced their exposure to news or sought more variety in media content in order to alleviate some of the distress it was causing them. Anis referred to the return of football as national preoccupation that was symptomatic of this news fatigue. Others, such as Rim and Zied, limited their exposure to news and sought more entertainment-led television content to avoid "feeling depressed" and "think about other

things”. Neila and Hanen, in turn, listened to more music online and on the radio than before for similar reasons.

The level of anxiety linked to following the news was often explained by the development of events in the country, the worrying escalation in violence, and the generalised context of antagonism and division. Additionally, approximately one third of respondents directly associated this stressful experience with the media’s reporting and representation of news and current affairs. Misinformation continued to play a part in this negative perception, but the majority of the interviewees identified the excessive politicisation and overt lack of objectivity of journalists as a crucial problem. Anis, for example, kept repeating that all he wanted was “just the information” and “the facts” rather than opinions. For some, the mediation of terrorist attacks by the media was also particularly shocking and inadequate. Images of the beheaded soldiers after the attack at Chaambi mountain at the end of July 2013 were broadcast uncensored on public television, leading to a public outcry. Similarly, disturbing images of an attack in a beach resort in Sousse in October 2013 were transmitted on a large scale and quoted by two interviewees as partly motivating a reduction in exposure to news content.

## 2.2. Overview of changes in media habits in 2013

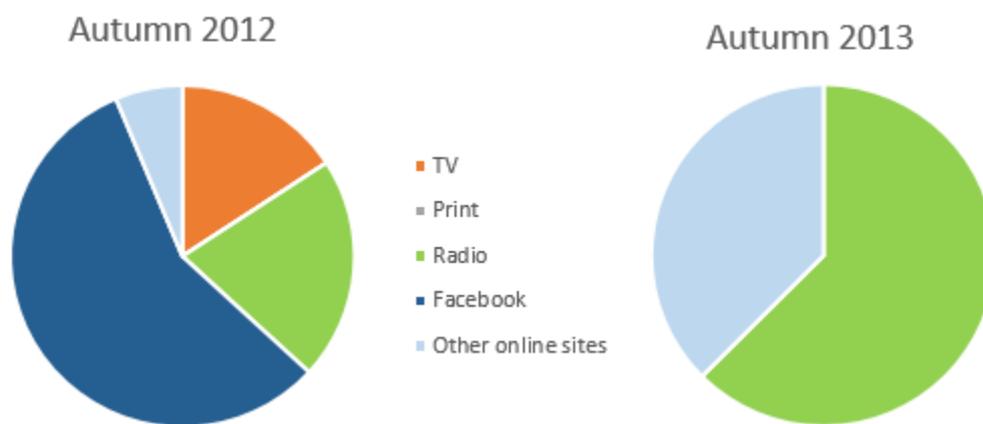
The time that research participants spent using different media reflected the changes in their relation to news and public matters, but equally the media form they turned to mattered in this respect. This was markedly apparent in the case of Rim, as illustrated in the graph below.



GRAPH 7: P3: Changes in average daily media time between Oct/Nov.2012 and Oct/Nov.2013

The proportion of time she spent using different media forms dramatically changed. Whereas, in the autumn of 2012, she described the time she spent on Facebook as dominating her media usage, most of her media time was dedicated, a year later, to watching television, in particular films broadcast on satellite television channels.

A similarly drastic change was evidenced in Meriem’s media habits in the autumn of 2013, who deactivated her social media account altogether, but equally avoided exposure to television content. As a result, her media time was exclusively shared between radio and online media spaces other than social networking sites, as illustrated in this representation:



GRAPH 7: P19: Changes in average daily media time between Oct/Nov.2012 and Oct/Nov.2013

There were many differences in the way that participants’ media habits changed in 2013, and not all of these were as drastic as in the two cases mentioned above, but certain tendencies can be discerned. The time spent using Facebook decreased by a third overall, and the time spent with radio, television and other online sites significantly increased (cumulatively by an average of eighty per cent).

Half of the participants in the sample said that there was no difference in their radio habits, whereas the other half spent more time listening to it. For several of them, this was related to changes in their circumstances that translated into more time spent at home or in a car. Seven respondents also expressed their preference for radio compared to watching Tunisian television that they considered a more stressful experience. For instance, Anis explained that his positive view of listening to political programmes on the radio, compared to television, was related to a difference in formats. He enjoyed the fact that, on the radio, politicians were being interviewed and expressed their opinions one by one, whereas on television, formats

tended to focus on debates between politicians that were difficult for the presenter to control and often degenerated into heated arguments. In this sense, the lack of visual cues and the necessity to make each speaker's voice audible on radio programmes favoured more controlled political exchange.

Although it was already relatively low in 2012, the time that interviewees said they spent reading print newspapers or magazines, had further declined by 2013. This trend can be considered to tie in with a continued migration of print readership to digital platforms, particularly observed among younger respondents. Many of these younger respondents expressed no interest in buying newspapers and several of those who previously did, said they no longer had the time to read them, as they spent much time already following the news on television or online. The only participant (Marwa) who still continued to buy and read a print newspaper on a more-or-less daily basis said she did so "out of solidarity" with the media owner because the paper belonged to an opposition figure. This alignment of media consumption to political opinion, and indeed the boycotting of specific media outlets in favour of others out of political motives, was most apparent in participants' television viewing practices.

### 2.3. Extreme contrast in television viewing habits

Opinions about Tunisian television channels in general were quite divided when I conducted interviews in 2013. One point of consensus among respondents was that news and political programming (televised debates in particular) were stressful to watch and that they reduced their exposure to this type of content accordingly, preferring to turn their attention to lighter and more entertaining content or subject matters instead. However, beyond this point of agreement, two quite clearly delineated groups could be distinguished in terms of opinions about Tunisian channels and viewing habits.

The first group mainly comprised supporters of the transitional government and/or one of the Troika parties. Participants in this group had pronounced negative opinions about Tunisian television and leading private broadcasters *Nessma* and *El Hiwar* in particular (including its broadcasting of *Ettounsiya* programmes). As a result, they either completely boycotted these channels or Tunisian television in general. Such was the case, for example, for Asma and Anis who said, respectively, they "no longer" and "never" watched Tunisian channels, accusing them of manipulating opinions with false information and propaganda.

Anis, however, later indicated that he had made an exception to this rule since the launch of a new channel, *El Moutawasset*, which he regarded more positively. Other participants in this group, such as Mehdi, Rim and Raouf, boycotted leading channels *Nessma* and *El Hiwar*, but watched other Tunisian channels including public broadcaster *Watanyia* as well as *El Moutawasset*, considering both to be more aligned to their viewpoints. Similar to interview outcomes in 2012, public broadcaster *Watanyia* was still the most widely watched channel across different opinion groups, although negative views about it were perhaps a little more pronounced than the previous year. The large majority of respondents also concurred that they only turned to the broadcaster for its news rather any other type of content. Other respondents in this group, such as Rim, who rarely followed the news in 2013, said that *Watanyia* was the only Tunisian channel she still watched occasionally for its news. She boycotted private Tunisian television channels explaining that she did not wish to be exposed to the viewpoints of the opposition that she considered unfair in its constant attacks on the government. For her, most Tunisian television was equated to opposition media. Participants in this group also referred to watching *Al Jazeera*, either via satellite television, for those who had access to it, or online. Meriem and Ahmed were two exceptions in that they also boycotted all Tunisian television, despite their opposition to the government, because they considered them, as well as most Tunisian media in general to be too subjective and polarising.

All other participants were in the second group, including supporters of the opposition as well as those who opposed the government but did not have a specific political orientation, and those who did not express any particular interest in political matters and current affairs overall. Opinions in this group were quite varied. A number of participants did not have any particular issues with Tunisian television channels or programming and did not further reflect on their viewing habits (e.g. Farah, Salma, Anouar). Others (e.g. Youssef, Marwa, Zied) had a positive opinion about the channels because they considered that they played an important role in raising awareness about alleged power abuses and turned people's opinions against the government, a change they considered positive. Zied, for instance, was a fan of the *Hiwar* channel and its owner who, for him, stood for the opposition under Ben Ali and continued to do so after the revolution. He considered that, following the temporary detention of the channel's owner by authorities in August 2013<sup>103</sup>, he was even more inclined to switch on the channel "not even to really watch it", but "mostly as an encouragement". At the extreme end

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<sup>103</sup> The channel's owner Tahar Ben Hassine was temporarily detained for incitement to civil disobedience during a broadcast on his channel *El Hiwar* in August 2013 (Smathi, 2013).

of this trend was Youssef, who felt particularly bitter about voting for Ennahdha in 2011, and thought that Tunisian television channels were in fact not sufficiently aligned with the opposition. He expressed the wish for them to be more “like in Egypt” to “mobilise people and fill the streets”. However, in this group, there were also many respondents who had a negative opinion about the role of Tunisian television, highlighting that it was too politicised and biased towards the opposition, but they watched it nevertheless, as they did not feel particularly positive about the government or leading parties (e.g. Sonia, Hanen, Narjes, Kamel). Paralleling the boycott of what participants in the first group viewed as opposition media, a number of respondents in this second group also mentioned that they “disliked”, “refused to watch” or even “hated” televised media outlets they considered to be biased towards the Ennahdha party and the government, with repeated references by interviewees in this regard to the new *Al Moutawasset* channel and to Qatari broadcaster *Al Jazeera*. Opinions about *Al Moutawasset* were particularly negative following the presentation by the channel, in a documentary transmitted shortly before I conducted the interviews, of alleged extremists that were captured by security forces after a prolonged armed exchange, as innocent people on a treasure hunt and erroneously mistaken for terrorists<sup>104</sup>. The absurdity of this representation of events was referred to by several respondents in the group as evidence of the channel’s intended manipulation of information and its political bias<sup>105</sup>.

#### 2.4. More controlled exposure to social media content

The use of social media and exposure to its content had equally changed in 2013. As noted earlier in this chapter, the time that study participants spent with social media compared to other media, decreased whereas time occupied by mass media use was higher in 2013 overall. This applied to Facebook as well as to Twitter. Participants, such as Anis, who preferred Twitter in 2012 because he regarded it as a more exclusive communicative space, explained that this was no longer the case a year later and that he was starting to encounter similar issues as on Facebook, relating to the spread of misinformation and the polarisation of opinions, resulting in a reduction of social media use overall.

Generally, social media’s role was framed as serving to access news, information and entertainment content. Despite the reduction in time, it was still important for the majority

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<sup>104</sup> It remains unclear whether this was due to the inexperience of the channel’s journalists or a deliberate attempt to misinform or minimise the incident.

<sup>105</sup> Here considered by respondents as biased towards Ennahdha because it was interpreted as an attempt to minimise the terrorist threat in the country.

of respondents to use social media, and this was tied to the need to access news through the platforms. Although following events in the country was stressful, and despite increased awareness of the unreliability of some of the information they came across online, the majority of respondents continued to turn to social media to find out about the latest developments. When I asked interviewees about their main reason for using Facebook or Twitter in 2013, most unequivocally associated this use to knowledge of news and current affairs. Much of this was still due to the rapidity of changes in the socio-political context in the country. By following numerous sources of information through their accounts, social media users were able to have instant access to updates where and when they wished to, and this offered a sense of control over a volatile context they had little influence over, but needed to form an understanding of.

However, social media was less central to participants' news practices in the autumn of 2013 than the previous year and this tendency can be tied to a wish to have more control over content exposure. Participants were less reliant on social media as their main source of information. Instead, references to mass media as well as other online news websites featured more extensively in their accounts. Beyond issues of reliability of information that numerous respondents continued to complain about, it could be argued that the decreased centrality of social media within their news mix, was related to the more widely observed tendency to manage stress levels and the associated wish to maintain a level of control over their exposure to news and other types of content. Unlike their use of mass media where respondents were able to choose to switch away from specific channels, watch movie channels, or listen to a radio station whose balance between news and music they enjoyed, scrolling through their social media newsfeeds meant more exposure to unsolicited content, including news and socio-political opinions, at times when they did not necessarily aim to do so. As a result, Imen for example, not only reduced her use of social media, but also adapted it towards more targeted news practices. Increasingly, she chose to visit specific Facebook pages that she wished to consult, instead of scrolling through her newsfeed as she previously did. Equally, Hanen, although still consulting her newsfeed, chose to 'unlike' a number of Facebook pages she was following in order to regain a level of control over the content she was exposed to, as she found the politicised content of some of these pages was causing her more anxiety. The fact that participants also spent more time, overall, accessing online sites other than social media in 2013, was also suggestive of their increased inclination towards more targeted and manageable media content exposure. Indeed, whereas a number of respondents had equated the Internet to Facebook in 2012, or referred to no content online

other than what they encountered on social media, their descriptions of their media habits in 2013 indicate that they spent nearly fifty per cent more time on other websites than in 2012, and they listed a variety of online news sites that they consulted directly rather than through their social media accounts.

Equally noteworthy is that there was no significant difference between supporters and opponents of governing parties in their change of social media habits between 2012 and 2013. It could have been hypothesised that respondents who felt particularly antagonised by Tunisian mass media's critique of government achievements, might have compensated by turning more often to social media platforms in order to connect to like-minded perspectives, but this trend was not observed. Instead, interviewees on both sides indicated an overall reduction in the time dedicated to social media in their everyday lives, induced by fatigue in processing news about the deterioration of the situation in the country and by higher levels of anxiety caused by this. There were three exceptions to this tendency (Raouf, Farah, Youssef), and of these, two were over the age of 35 and came relatively late to using Facebook, which may suggest that this increase may have been related to a lower level of familiarity with the platform than other respondents, and a less pronounced negativity about their experiences of using social media.

#### 2.5. A polarising social media sphere

Social media use was perceived as particularly stressful for two other reasons. Related to the exposure to unsolicited content discussed above was the lack of content filtering on social media. Six respondents complained in this regard about the circulation of distressing imagery or, at times, of aggressive discourse, by other users in their social media networks, and on a larger scale than what they had encountered on other media. Sonia, for instance, explained that she reduced her use of Facebook because of the photographs of terrorist attacks that she came across, comparing them to the similar images she had seen on television that were pixelated.

Furthermore, the polarisation of opinions was more apparent and less escapable on social media. Different opinions but also different representations of news and events were distributed in this space, and when such content was shared by users in their network of contacts, it transmitted a message not only about the media content per se, but about the perspective and alignment of the transmitter of this polarised information. This also signalled

to a social media user to what extent his/her interpretations were reflective of a more widely held perspective.

Whilst research participants were less inclined, in 2013, to engage in political interactions on social media, when they did, exchanges tended to be more confrontational. Due to their previously negative experiences and arguments with others in their social media networks, a number of participants explained that they were more selective with what they publicised and were more likely to express their views when they considered that an important point needed to be made and defended. In this sense, respondents were exposed to more pronounced or strongly-held opinions and there was less possibility for exchange in a middle-ground debate than the previous year. As Sonia formulated it, on social media “there [was] no objectivity at all any more, all I see is that each one is on his own side”.

Additionally, this space was more polarised in 2013 because participants were either less prepared to be exposed to antagonising perspectives, or less prepared to discuss their differences. The first motivation led to greater selectivity in their network of online contacts in order to filter out or block drastically opposing perspectives. In the case of Marwa, she explained that, on one hand, she did not witness too many arguments in her Facebook network any longer, and she interpreted this as a positive sign that pointed to a more consensual view between people in opposing the government and Ennahdha’s agenda. On the other hand, when I enquired about the selection of her social media contacts, she was keen to emphasise that she made more radical choices than before:

For me, in my list of friends, I don’t approve people I don’t know, I don’t accept simple acquaintances, but people I know and whom I know will accept me as I am, really, yes. I mean it happened to me to not accept people that I knew were very different politically, who have different perceptions of politics and all that, especially after the murder of Chokri Belaid. Hmmm... my choice of friends on Facebook has become very categorical.

Similarly, Zied suggested that he no longer came across opinions opposed to his on Facebook because his friends who supported Ennahdha were “either no longer friends or no longer for Ennahdha”.

In the second – and more prevalent – case, study participants opted to maintain a level of variety and preserve their social relations, but the silence this necessitated meant that more polarising political expressions tended to become more visible, further contributing to this

reinforcement. Farah, for instance, who was particularly careful about making potentially alienating comments online, explained that she was encountering more “opinions [she] disagree[d] with or [got] annoyed by than before”, a change she found at times difficult to avoid reacting to. Youssef, whose network of online contacts included very different political identifications was, as a result, exposed to opinions and news representations that were much contrasted. His reading of these differences was, however, very uncompromising: “Nidaa people” were, in his opinion “more sincere” whereas “the other people are all liars”, further clarifying that “even their news are lies”. By contrast, Rim, who supported Ennahdha, also chose to maintain her social relations and not exclude friends whose opinions she disagreed with. However, she felt extremely antagonised by the level of abusive language as well as by the perspectives she came across in her social media network, and she kept repeating how little understanding she had of their perspectives. Whereas in 2012, she held a relatively positive opinion about the opportunities provided by social media and a negative view of journalists who provided one-sided and manipulative accounts of events, by 2013, she viewed social media users in her network as similarly biased. The opening of the media field to the expression of opinion by ordinary citizens was, in this sense, becoming more problematic in that opinions of non-professional political commentators was even more subjective and alienating. Similarly, Yassine considered that:

In our current situation, in terms of Facebook and twitter mmm... I feel they got out of... for example in the revolution, they were the cause, they helped the revolution a lot, because we didn't have media that, I mean, were with the youth and with the people I mean. Now, it's no longer the case, quite the opposite, you see that Facebook and Twitter are making the situation more tense because everyone is talking, everyone is issuing news [...]. Now Facebook and Twitter is what is stressing people out.

To summarise, the socio-political polarisation and the highly politicised media landscape translated into – at times drastic– changes in participants’ news and media habits in 2013. Exposure to media content was more targeted and geared towards relieving some of the anxieties caused by this unstable context. Respondents’ need to stay informed about a rapidly evolving situation was in contrast with their wish to avoid exposure to news and an antagonistic political setting, leading to a level of ambiguity in respondents’ relation to knowledge about their shared public world. Overall, respondents sought more exposure to entertainment-led content and they turned to media forms that more readily provided this access. Whereas average time spent with broadcast media in their everyday lives increased, time spent using social media decreased. This was partly explained by the level of control

over content exposure that mass media provided. Findings also indicated that changes in media habits were influenced by the polarisation of the socio-political and media contexts, but that these further reinforced them. Research participants' orientation towards different mass media outlets were closely tied to political orientations, and equally, on social media, exposure to opposing viewpoints was more limited than in 2012, and where it occurred, difference in interpretations and representations were less tolerated. I will now explore in more detail forms of political communication, interactions and participation that participants engaged with in 2013. I start this exploration by revisiting the case of some participants who were active in formal political and civil society organisations in the autumn of 2012.

### **3. Political and mediated participation over time**

Social media' participative dimension is often explored in relation to – or positioned as potential solution to - a crisis of disengagement and alienation from institutional politics in established western democracies. Equally, in less democratic contexts, social media's participative opportunities raise hopes in terms of the possibilities they provide for alternative political movements to emerge, and for citizens' voice to become more pronounced. As discussed in chapter 5, the hypothesis is often advanced about the possibility of the emergence of a new form of politics online (Gibson and Cantijoch, 2013) that may provide an easier and more flexible frame for citizens' political expression, self-representation, and the organisation of new forms of collective action.

At the same time, the juxtaposition of these new opportunities with the realities of formal political processes raises new questions about the relation between forms of political involvement online and offline (Vitak et al. 2011), and the evolution of citizens' sense of political efficacy in relation to their online activities over time. The notion of efficacy highlights the underlying belief in the existence of a communicative tie between citizens and their governing institutions (Coleman et al., 2008), one that underpins their hope of producing a change and motivates their political involvement (Campbell et al., 1954). On the one hand, it may be argued that the sense of empowerment that social media provides users with, or the facilitation of political interactions and exchange, may support their politicisation and progressively mobilise them into further participation and involvement in formal politics (e.g. Valenzuela et al., 2012). On the other hand, politicised social media use could further alienate from party politics and widen the gap between citizens and their representatives.

Vice versa, it could be argued that political contexts affect the extent to which people tap into new media opportunities for political expression and action, or that social media are simply reflective of offline political contexts and levels of civic and political engagement offline. Far from a simple and linear causal relationship, in practice, these questions are more complex and contingent on individual settings.

Overall, research is currently relatively limited about what it means, in practice, for citizens to be involved politically through these new communicative opportunities when decision-making continues to be predominantly conducted through more traditional political processes and structures. In the British political context, Coleman et al. (2008) draw an ambiguous picture of citizens' Internet use and its relation to political efficacy. Their study highlights the continued importance of local settings as primary sites that the construction of a sense of efficacy relates to, and the continued relative centrality of television to political knowledge, despite the availability of alternative informational resources online. At the same time, they also highlight a number of ways in which citizens' experience of democracy is benefited by political involvement online. In particular, they highlight the importance of the symbolic repertoire and, at times, of 'mundane' cues in undermining levels of public confidence in politics. For instance, increased exposure to images of politicians can widen the gap with the political class when citizens perceive that they can't relate to them. By the same token, online interactions can support connection between like-minded citizens within, and beyond, their local context, as opportunities to tap into a symbolic repertoire to self-express and to communicate solidarity with others, are facilitated.

In chapter 5, I highlighted how, within a Tunisian context that was already highly politicised, social media further extended opportunities for communication and exchange about public and political matters, and how it equally provided a sense of proximity (albeit with low levels of interactions) between social media users in this sample and representatives of the institutional political sphere. In the following section, I explore how the change in political context in 2013 relates to these respondents' sense of political efficacy and their levels of involvement with political matters on- and offline.

### 3.1. Changes in participation in formal politics

It comes as no surprise that, in the uncertain context at the end of 2013, research participants' disillusion with the revolution's outcomes and with political pluralism were

more pronounced than a year earlier when I first met them. But the deterioration of the social, economic and political climate more generally had also taken its toll on their hope for change and belief in their ability to influence it.

The reality of involvement with organised politics was not a particularly easy experience for several of the young respondents who ventured into participation in formal political parties and civil society organisations. Out of the eight young interviewees new to this form of participation in 2012, five had discontinued their activities within these structures in 2013. For some, this was due to time constraints related to new work and family commitments. This was the case for Sarra, for instance, who had campaigned for an opposition party during the elections in 2011 and found no time, after having a baby in 2012, to further contribute in this way. Since interviewing her in 2012, Sarra had found full-time employment and was even less capable of committing to any other responsibilities. However, for most Respondents in this group, disengagement was primarily tied to a profound change in their perspective on the sphere of politics and their involvement with it. Sihem, for example, previously a staunch supporter of the left party grouping Jebha Cha'bia and a regular attendee of its meetings, had become disillusioned by the political decisions and discourse adopted by its leadership over time, in particular in the aftermath of the assassination of Belaid, whose criticism of Ennahdha she regarded as being among the sharpest and most articulate of that from the opposition ranks. Nearly a year after his death, she was still feeling "traumatised" by the death of "Chokri". In this sense, his killing also silenced a unique voice in the political sphere that Sihem identified with and felt she was on first name terms with. Whilst she still identified with the political left as a whole, she was less inspired to continue her political involvement within the party after his passing. Sihem expressed her disappointment with the party as motivating her disengagement, but found it difficult to provide more details and preferred to change subject. She continued to participate in occasional student union activities in 2013, but was very critical of the infighting she witnessed, and expressed a sense of exhaustion with the lack of consensus between different political factions in the union, that similarly undermined her involvement in this structure. Beyond her experience of politics through these activities, when I asked her what had changed since our discussion the previous year, she expressed a more profound sense of hopelessness with the political sphere in general as motivating her political disaffection:

There is something that changed. The only thing that really changed is that... I am not at all... with the same... I mean, since last year I'm no longer... the energy of last year is no longer there. Because with so many things before, with the revolution, with politics... I used to have hope. Now it's not... I distanced myself from many things.

It was striking that respondents' disillusion with political participation was paralleled at both ends of the political continuum. Anis and Rim, both formerly active members of Ennahdha, also indicated that they were no longer participating in the party. Rim, who had overcome a number of obstacles to act on her wish to support Ennahdha (as discussed in the previous chapter) explained that her withdrawal was due to personal reasons as well as to time constraints. Indeed, after failing to secure the renewal of a temporary position she had found in 2012, she felt under tremendous pressure to dedicate her time to finding new employment. Her situation had caused her much distress, but she also reflected on her non-involvement as being related to a feeling of disillusionment with what she felt she was capable of achieving politically:

I'm still interested and I'm very scared about the future and I wish I was active and did something about it, but I feel like my hands are tied... that even if I made the time I wouldn't manage to change these people's minds??

[What people are you referring to?]

Mmm... the people who don't have principles [...]. I get the impression, and maybe I'm wrong, but I have the impression that people like that you can't convince them.

The excerpt denotes how closely Rim connected her participation to a wish to influence others, and how her political ideals were tied to moral norms according to which she perceived the political game ought to be conducted. Even respondents such as Narjes, a teacher who did not identify with any political party, but experimented with participation in a union, also expressed a similar sense of disillusionment with the realities of action through such structures:

I have been disappointed by my experience of anything to do with collectiveness. I wanted to have that experience, and... [ironic tone] I certainly got a real insight into it and saw how things work hah!

She described her initial motivation to participate as being bound up with a sense of patriotism and wanting to contribute to serving the country during the transitional period. However, the realities of political involvement eroded this initially optimistic position, and her experience of internal dissension during the election of new union representatives eventually led her to leave. She drew the following conclusion about this experience:

From that point onwards, I decided that if there was anything, if there is the slightest hint of power games, then no, I'm not getting involved, and I will pursue my other [teaching] work with the kids, for the kids from now on, and that's all... It was a complete mess.

The juxtaposition of her political experiences with her teaching is perhaps illustrative of how the sense of idealism, which originally underpinned her involvement, was subsequently shattered, which led her to retreat to the more familiar world of her work with children.

### 3.2. Distancing from the political sphere

Disillusion with the political sphere was more generalised and not limited to respondents with experience of active participation in organisations and political structures. Overall, opinions about the political sphere were more negative than in 2012, and at times a hatred or repulsion for political representatives and structures transpired through interviews. Being “fed up with politics” was a recurrent comment in over half of the interviewees’ accounts. Many even referred to the painful physicality of witnessing and experiencing politics the way they had over the previous year. Violence, in the form of assassinations of politicians, as well as in the level of aggression and verbal abuse in political discourse, was taking its toll on their bodies, triggering depression or heightened states of anxiety, making them lose appetite or gain weight and inducing headaches (P1, P3, P9, P10, P12, P13, P14, P19, P20, P30). Whilst for some, like Kamal, disillusion with politics was the result of a more gradual disappointment with particular politicians whose points of view he could no longer assimilate to his personal perspective, for respondents such as Neila and Anis, politics more generally had become equated with endless noisy arguments between politicians during televised debates. Neila, for instance, expressed how this spectacle of politics had become indicative of a wider breakdown of communication in society, concluding that “[politics] has split us”. Anis, whilst equally associating a general political fatigue experienced by him and his friends with the failure of the political class to engage in more constructive dialogue, observed that many people in his entourage now resorted to avoiding involvement in political issues, instead

turning more of their attention back to football talk as in the pre-revolution days. More pronouncedly critical, Youssef, who expressed a distrust of the political class after regretting his vote for Ennahdha in 2011, now considered that parties, irrespective of orientation, were “all liars, they’re all thieves”, later explaining that, as a Tunisian citizen, he felt he’d “been robbed” and his mood had “fallen flat”. Youssef’s analogy could be seen to mean that the political sphere, in his opinion, had denied citizens the result of the democratic opportunities they had struggled to gain during the revolution, and with this, they had also been deprived of the hope they invested in the possibility of change in political culture and future prospects. Perhaps most bleakly expressing the utter failure of democratic pluralism was Meriem who, as seen in the previous chapter, had invested much energy and meaning in participating, on social media, in the expression of her position and identity in relation to the political landscape in the country. For her, dialogue and consensus had become a waste of time and pragmatism now needed to prevail:

The thing that you always find in politics is that the multitude of ideas is always blocking the advancement of the country. Each one sees that his idea is the right one. But then you don’t know who’s right, it could be that I, you or someone else, we’re all right. But in the end, whose way is the fastest one? We can’t all be there at the same time, only one of us has to stay.

For the majority of these respondents then, the vibrant political culture that emerged in the aftermath of the revolution was progressively dissipating in favour of a more distant and disengaged relation to the political sphere and, at times, a cynical perspective on the value of pluralism. Paralleling this, communication and exchange about political issues on social media equally changed.

### 3.3. Profile images over time

As illustrated in chapter 5, the use of profile images was one way in which interviewees expressed their identification with particular representations, and their solidarity as Tunisian citizens during the period of the revolution in January 2011. As the socio-political landscape in Tunisia became increasingly polarised, so did the use of profile avatars. Imagery drawing on the Tunisian flag and symbols of unity changed over time, either to personal photos or to other profile images that reflected divergent socio-political identifications. To illustrate this, I

have included a chronology of profile pictures used by three participants at different points of the research period<sup>106</sup>.



FIG.4: Changes in participants' use of profile images between 2011 and 2013

As illustrated by the screenshots of profile imagery below, all three participants used exactly the same image of the 'solidarity flag' (discussed in chapter 5) during the revolution period in January 2011. By February 2013, Participant 3<sup>107</sup> (right hand column), switched profile picture to a photo of Chokri Belaid, when the politician was assassinated. The second assassination in July 2013 prompted the adoption by this participant of a black screen as profile image. During the ensuing sit-in and protests at the end of July, a third image was used, depicting two hands

<sup>106</sup> I have only used a selection of profile images here, and not included any personal photos used at times by participants for their account profiles.

<sup>107</sup> I refer to participants by numbers here to avoid making them identifiable and linking their quotes to their profile images.

holding a black sign that read: “the people want the fall of the regime” (bottom right hand corner). In this sense, through these evolving self-representations, this participant progressively expressed an alignment that shifted from unity with other citizens against the dictatorship at the beginning of 2011, to an opposition by the end of July 2013 - articulated as collective opposition in the name of the Tunisian people - to the transitional government.

Participant 1 (left hand column) also used the ‘solidarity flag’ image in early 2011. However, over time, the use of imagery to represent the user’s profile became increasingly articulated along religious lines, with a change – as illustrated above – to the photo of an Islamic preacher, then a picture related to an online campaign in support of Palestinian prisoners but later a return to the religious theme with the adoption of an image of Qur’anic text as avatar (bottom left hand corner).

Participant 2, in the middle, continued with the flag theme for some time, using an image of the Tunisian flag as the background to the photo of a newborn baby and text reading “my name is freedom”. Later, this participant switched image to a mixed Tunisian and Syrian flag with the text “one people against tyrants”. Finally, a photo of Ali Laarayedh - the Islamist prime minister who assumed his role after the death of Belaid - was uploaded, an image that was part of a campaign in his support in March 2013 following the resignation of former prime minister Hamadi Jebali. Thus, through this use of profile imagery participant 2 portrayed an alignment in support of the Islamist party leadership at a time when its future was in question. It is also worth noting, that the political assassinations in February and July 2013 did not trigger a change in the use of images to represent their profiles on Facebook for participants 1 and 2, unlike the case for participant 3.

Similarly, an assessment of participants’ social media accounts during these important turning points, indicates that the type of content shared by participants who supported the transitional government and those who opposed it, was notably contrasted. For example, following the political assassination in February 2013, a number of opponents shared images, drawings, photographs and video footage of Belaid, as well as images of the wife and children he left behind. A similar pattern, though on a smaller scale could be observed in July 2013 with the death of politician Mohammed Brahmi. By contrast, on profiles of government or Ennahdha supporters, references to these events were less prevalent. Occasionally, content that more generally condemned violence was shared, but no similar sharing patterns were observed in relation to images or representations of the victims or their families. It could be

argued that this trend was indicative of their choice not to opt in to the collective gathering by other citizens around these representations. In the case of some participants who supported the government, similar image sharing patterns could be observed but these related instead to alternative images and representations of what they considered as important. For example, in the case of two participants, imagery was shared in February 2013 that related to the death of a policeman in the violent clashes that erupted after the assassination of Belaid. By choosing to transmit photos of this policeman or of his orphaned son instead of the wider pattern of association with Belaid's death, these participants could be seen to advance a different narrative of whom sacrifice in the name of the wider collective was assimilated to.

#### 3.4. Nodes of silence

Whilst some respondents discontinued their participation in formal political structures and organisations, others, who were not active in such structures (but the majority of whom were involved in talking about public and political matters on social media) expressed a similar disaffection with politics and, paralleling this, a relative reduction in communication about political issues. In this context of rising tensions, whilst some felt no longer able or willing to listen to diverging political opinions, many also chose to no longer participate in their expression on social media.

Noelle-Neuman's theory of the spiral of silence (1974) asserts that individuals are inclined to abstain from expressing their opinions if they perceive them to be at odds with dominant public opinion, because they fear being socially isolated or sanctioned. Studies exploring the translation of this theory to online environments have led to different and, at times, contradictory findings. Opportunities to communicate anonymously, and to find like-minded individuals in online settings, may partially counter-act the limitations to political opinion expression offline (e.g. Hwang et al., 2006; Ho and McLeod, 2008). However, recent research into the applicability of the theory to online social networking sites has quite starkly highlighted that features of this theory can be observed in such communicative environments (Lee and Kim, 2014; Neubaum and Krämer, 2016), and that the spiral of silence may even be reinforced on social media (Hampton et al., 2014).

Indeed, it could be argued that the mediation of opinions through social media's networked architecture, may alter users' perspectives on what the dominant opinion is, and shape their

understanding of how reflective their personal views are of a general public mood. As a result, users may be more inclined to converge towards concurring opinions, and they may feel more supported in their views and express these more forcefully. This may in turn undermine the willingness of others to express difference, and it can contribute to the reinforcement of opposing opinion networks.

At the same time, while existing empirical research on the spiral of silence on social media (*ibid*) has established that users are more likely to refrain from openly expressing their opinions on social media than in a face-to-face context, it provides relatively limited insights into the underlying motivations and dynamics underpinning these choices. For instance, it remains unclear to which extent 'silence' on social media specifically relates to minority opinions, or to political matters more generally. It may be the case that the opinions expressed on social media are not reflective of a dominant public opinion, but rather of an opinionated minority. Furthermore, from a different perspective, it could also be argued that, rather than fear of isolation - which implies a level of involuntary submission - individuals may be actively developing strategies to manage their online identities and reputations.

Eliasoph (1997, 1998) highlights, in the American context, that the avoidance of political talk needs to be understood as part of a culture that delineates the terms under which people ought to participate in opinion expression. Under this perspective, the avoidance of politics is not a spontaneous occurrence, but in fact it requires active work and the investment of a conscious effort by citizens to manage the conditions for political opinion exchange. Crucially, Eliasoph points to the difference between political talk in public and private. In her ethnographic research, concerned with offline political talk by political activists, she highlights how people actively avoid talking about politics in public, but increasingly engage in such talk the more private the context for conversation is. In doing so, Eliasoph contends that citizens actively reproduce a specific political culture and citizens' place within it.

In the context of this study, the majority of participants who previously used social media platforms to communicate about public and political matters indicated that their activities had significantly decreased, and data drawn from their online accounts confirmed this trend. This was the case for users of Facebook, as well as for respondents such as Anis, who had progressively migrated to Twitter, because he deemed its users more inclined to engage in constructive debate. He indicated in 2013 that similar issues were now arising on both social networking sites. Approximately half of the participants whose use of social media had

changed since 2012 explained that they had reduced their activity overall and their sharing of content on their social media profiles. The others indicated that, although they had not reduced their social media use, the type of content they exchanged was less related to political matters than before, focusing on less contentious content instead such as music videos, personal photographs, football results, celebrity quotes, poems, funny animal videos or jokes.

Overall, political exchange on the platform was more limited than in 2012 and two reasons were referred to as motivating this change. Notably, their sense of political inefficacy was one important factor. The increased distance from the political sphere that respondents perceived, and their inability to influence political opinions and outcomes, contributed to dissociating their expression and sharing practices on the platform from the goals some had previously said had propelled them into action online (as seen in the previous chapter). Zied, for instance, previously enthusiastic about contributing with his opinions and mocking politicians, despite some of the hurtful reactions he felt subjected to, now considered this type of social media activity as pointless because “if I participate or don’t participate, it’s not going to change anything”. Narjes, in turn, who had associated a sense of patriotism with her political contributions and the need to raise public awareness about specific issues, now emphasized the helplessness she felt in confronting developments in the country: “when you see things happening and you can do nothing about it, you are like... with no arms, disarmed”, concluding that the way she used Facebook was now limited to maintaining contact with people in her network. Concisely encapsulating the change in her attitude to using Facebook, is the following stark contrast between what she said about her sharing habits in 2012:

It’s mainly to give an opinion, why things aren’t working, why things are blocked [...]. Sometimes you want to motivate people, to try to find a solution together, what have we got to lose? If everyone sees what’s wrong and stays silent, no. At some point you think it’s necessary that everyone moves on all sides so that there’s a collective solution.

... and in 2013:

I don’t expect anything to come from it. This story of a Facebook revolution, it’s an empty story [h’keya fergha]<sup>108</sup>.”

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<sup>108</sup> “Empty story” is the literal translation of a Tunisian expression that means ‘meaningless’ or ‘insignificant’.

It needs to be noted that, overall, the decrease in politically-related social media activity was gradual but not linear for most research participants. Moments of heightened crisis continued to trigger a surge in activity for many of them, as had already been noted about trends over the previous year. However, with each renewed crisis, the threshold of what was considered as news- and discussion-worthy was redefined, and a gradual surrender to the language of crises and violence as normal reframed this communicative space. Sonia captures this quite effectively:

I'm still using Facebook, now less... From reaching such a level of disappointment... You know, with there being more... the political assassinations, then I was using it a lot, a lot, a lot. And after you know, you have the first assassination, then the second, then the army and so on and so on, and then you're fed up and your mood gets low so in my case I reduced it, I reduced.

A second factor is also crucial to understanding the change in use of social media in this context. Communicating about public and political matters had, as already highlighted in the previous chapter, undermined participants' ability to socialise and led, when opinions differed, to numerous arguments and disagreements that were difficult to manage. This trend was further exacerbated by the heightened socio-political context in 2013. Respondents not only perceived no positive influence or outcome of their activities, but encountered many negative consequences as a result, and this gradually reinforced a preference for the avoidance of political talk and communication on social media.

In the context of this study, interviewees commented on the reinforcement of political opinions in their entourage, with those whose views sided with the governing parties, as well as their opponents, becoming increasingly entrenched in their positions, leading to more strident confrontations and arguments online. Tolerance of different opinions was now lower, and there was a stronger sense that social media was reinforcing divisions because it opened debate to users with all levels of political knowledge and perspectives.

The interview outcomes in 2013 thus crucially highlight how most of the respondents who reduced communication about political issues on social media, still participated in political opinion exchange offline and relatively more private contexts. The ambiguous private-public nature of the social media environment, and the lack of control over the mediation of political expression within it, translated into a more strategic approach by these respondents to political communication and interaction on social media. Yassine, for example, continued

to engage in conversations about politics with some of his friends in cafés, but not on social media. He thought that “Facebook and Twitter [were] making the situation more stressful because everyone [was] talking” and “there [were] people who [didn’t] use their brains”. Similarly, Rim also adapted her use of social media after losing her temper on a few occasions on social media. She opted to “avoid discussions” with people opposing Ennahdha as she had lost numerous contacts from her Facebook network already. She was eager, however, to clarify that she still considered a face-to-face context suitable for such conversations. Sihem, who was previously very vocal in her political expression and her criticism of Ennahdha, had also paid a price for this, losing contact with numerous friends and, on a few occasions, deeply regretting it. In a reversal of the logic that accompanied the start of her participation in political communication (see previous chapter), it was now silence and withholding from this type of expression online that required careful consideration for Sihem:

I started to think a lot about what I share and don’t share, a lot I mean! Like recently, I was close to sharing a status update that could have led me to ruin! But you see, I thought about it a lot, and I asked the opinion of my friend who was next to me about whether to share it or not to share it, and I didn’t.

The negative outcome of interactions between social media users of opposing socio-political opinions led to more limited communication between them over time. The language of violence and abuse that had marked the public and political spheres over the previous year partly contributed to Narjes’ changed perspective about the benefits of Facebook as a tool for the expression of public opinion and convergence of a collective will. Changes in the use of Facebook to communicate about political and public matters was even starker in the case of Meriem who preferred to de-activate her social media account in 2013 rather than continue to be involved in further arguments online. She explained that this was because she felt too angry when she read some of the opinions of her network contacts online and preferred to keep them as friends offline where political topics could be more easily avoided. Coincidentally, it was just as I was conducting the interview with Meriem that one of her friends called on her mobile phone, thinking that Meriem had ‘unfriended’ her, because she could no longer find her profile among her contacts on Facebook. As a result, Meriem had to reassure her friend that this was not the case and to explain her absence from social media. This was starkly illustrative of the politics of connectivity (Van Dijck, 2012), and of some of the difficulties that these participants encountered in negotiating a coherent social and political identity on- and offline.

## **Conclusion**

Interviews in 2013 highlighted media's reinforcement of the intensifying socio-political polarisation in Tunisia in 2013. Exposure to media content paralleled respondents' identification with different sides of the political sphere that were further reflected in a highly politicised media landscape. In this context, the chapter drew on the distinction – used throughout the structure of the thesis - between the use of social media for exposure to news and media content on one hand, and for communicative participation in a public sphere on the other hand, in order to highlight differences in the positions adopted by research participants in their social media use over time. In doing so, I have sought to emphasise, in particular, how respondents' acting on the participative opportunities provided by social media is tied to both their perception of their political weight as citizens, as well as to their need to socialise in a context where communicating politically was becoming more divisive and arguments more difficult to avoid. Over time, these factors engendered a significant intentional reduction in respondents' participation in communication and interaction in this politicised social media sphere, a change that saw them increasingly adopt the position of a social media audience rather than that of a networked public.

## CONCLUSION

This thesis aimed to explore the political dimensions of everyday social media practices by ordinary users. A core focus was the ways in which social media may mediate a relationship between users and their wider public and political world. This mediation was explored with regard to users' knowledge and conception of these public and political spheres, as well as their engagement with and participation in them. To achieve this, the research focused on a context in which social media was claimed to have played an important role in supporting revolutionary movements, and in which much was open to civic, social and political renegotiation after the revolution. Thus, this was a context in which social media was potentially to continue playing an important public role.

Social media has been linked to numerous social movements and considered as radically transformative and disruptive of political processes over recent years in a number of national and transnational settings. The growth of social media has challenged the theorisation of established frameworks on media power. However, academic research is still at an early stage, and more empirical evidence is required to better understand how social media may shape existing power structures and in turn be appropriated in different ways, and in varying settings, by users to challenge or reinforce existing notions of how power is distributed across society and the place of citizens within a given socio-political order.

More in-depth and contextualised exploration of these questions particularly matters because traditional politics is considered to be in crisis in established democratic settings, where engagement levels and involvement in political processes are low. Against this backdrop, social media seem to offer new possibilities for participation that are politically transformative, and to be ushering in a new era of politicisation and activism, especially among younger generations that previously appeared to be particularly distant from such matters. Equally, many questions and much uncertainty continue to revolve around social media's role and political potential in parts of the Arab world, where, on the one hand, social networking sites appeared to be prominent contributors to social movements in 2011, and yet, on the other hand, new media's place in social and political developments since have been more difficult to grasp.

The research in this thesis provided a detailed empirical exploration of these issues in the Tunisian context in which the Arab uprisings started, yet that has been under-explored since. It sought in particular to contribute towards addressing some of these uncertainties by assessing the practices, motivations and experiences of ordinary social media users in their everyday lives over a time period stretching from pre- to post-revolution, in order to try to capture politicisation and de-politicisation processes in detail by utilising people's own reflections on their relationship to new and old media within these processes. Furthermore, this study sought to provide a holistic and contextualised exploration of these questions by assessing online actions in relation to their offline setting; new media practices in relation to traditional media; different facets of activities on social media in relation to each other; and by looking at the development of these relations over time.

The remainder of this concluding reflection provides a summary of empirical findings, and a discussion of key emergent themes for further exploration and debate.

### **Summary of findings**

Chapter 3 traced the change in media habits and practices induced by the revolution. In particular, it focused on media's role in supporting a shared knowledge and understanding of socio-political reality. Findings indicated that, in the highly censored informational context before the revolution, study participants shared a common knowledge of the undemocratic nature of the political regime they were living under, of its pervasive surveillance, and of the norms of silence related to political expression and engagement in public as well as, to a lesser extent, in private spaces. National media played an integral part in sustaining this knowledge by projecting a representation of the social and political world that was unchanging and removed from interviewees' daily experiences. In doing so, it reiterated the maintenance of the political status quo and enforced citizens' disconnection and disengagement from political matters. Similarly to other authoritarian contexts, interviewees developed relatively complex audience positions and strategies in relation to this media landscape. The exploration of their perspectives on their media practices before the revolution highlighted that many of them were quite ambivalent towards domestic media and news consumption as it was nevertheless tied to important social dimensions, linking them to shared habits and routines, as well as informing them, in a sense, about the lack of change. Although new and social media offered opportunities to bypass this national

informational vacuum, their use by the study participants, prior to the revolution, mainly reflected these norms of disengagement. The regime was relatively effective in controlling online content access within the country and limiting the proliferation of dissenting content. Access to alternative sources was relatively difficult, and many people lacked the motivation and skills to overcome the level of risk and effort involved in adopting a more politicised use of new media overall.

This situation drastically changed during the revolution period as social media became an important source of alternative information and user-generated content in the context of a crisis in which national mass media failed to address citizens' heightened informational needs and continued to serve instead as a mouthpiece for the regime. The research findings underlined how the change in participants' media practices –and in particular the turn to more politicised social media use – was tied to a more gradual shift in their perspective about the possibility of change, and to an understanding that the political status quo, and their enforced disengagement, were no longer sustainable. This change in perspective was not simply the result of mediated knowledge about the protests and their repression. Direct experience and witnessing of the changing environment in people's daily lives often marked important turning points in this process, augmented by a sense of disconnection from a public world in turmoil. In this context, social media platform Facebook became important both as a source of information as well as a form of re-connection between citizens. It was closely associated, in interviewees' accounts, to a narrative of civic empowerment, to which national mass media, associated with the regime, were opposed.

Chapter 4 followed on from the previous findings to assess how participants navigated across the changed informational landscape that emerged after the revolution, and examined social media's place within their everyday media practices towards the end of 2012.

The findings highlighted how much importance research participants placed on being knowledgeable and informed about the new socio-political context they lived in. This was associated with a new conception of civic duty and to the adoption of new civic identities that marked a radical break with the past. Equally, being informed was motivated by a renewed sense of hope, and by respondents' awareness of their own political weight, which was prompted by the revolution. Furthermore, closely following the news allowed users to keep up with relatively complex and rapidly-evolving political developments, and become acquainted with new public and political figures after the revolution. Most significantly, the

findings highlighted how being political and expressing political opinions was part of a new political culture that emerged after the revolution. Thus, knowledge about public and political matters was important in order to take part in this culture and served as an important resource for conversation and everyday socialisation.

The research established that participants' media practices were consequently primarily aimed at fulfilling these heightened informational needs. Social media featured prominently within these practices and occupied a central role in participants' daily media habits. This was in particular due to the rapidity with which users were able to access information, which was not reflected in the traditional mass media. The instantaneity of information access, the quasi-live quality they associated with social media's representation of socio-political reality, lent it a sense of proximity and connection to other citizens and to issues that mattered to them collectively, and which they could participate in shaping.

At the same time, the findings in this chapter highlighted that participants in this study also experienced a level of difficulty in orienting themselves among the variety of information and sources available to them after the revolution online and offline. Whilst respondents expressed high expectations of media objectivity and journalistic neutrality, they considered that these expectations remained largely unfulfilled. However, within a highly politicised transitional context that was gradually becoming more polarised, these expectations contrasted with their own orientations towards (traditional and new) media outlets and sources that reflected their own opinions, and their avoidance – at times even boycott of – sources of different views and opposing perspectives. The findings outlined the role played by diverging conceptions of trust in shaping this media exposure. This trend was particularly pronounced online, in particular as the social media space became increasingly compromised by the proliferation of rumours, misinformation and highly biased and contrasting representations of events. There was a marked lack of diversity of opinions in the content that participants seemed to gain access to through their social media accounts. Trust, personal judgement and political opinion were found to play an important role in the level of credibility that participants associated with mediated information and news content they came across online as well as offline. Journalistic authority was regarded as secondary, in many respondents' perspectives, to these factors. The resultant uncertainty that emanated from these issues, was particularly apparent in relation to social media content, and it led to the development of a number of verification strategies by users, in which the source of

distribution, rather than source of information, appeared to be more significant in shaping their judgement.

Chapter 5 explored the relation between the level of politicisation and interest in public matters depicted in previous chapters, and their translation into forms of participation in political and public life.

To contextualise social media's role within this, the chapter started with an assessment of interviewees' political participation overall, including their involvement with formal political organisations and structures offline. Findings highlighted that the highly politicised transitional context only partially translated into experimentation by some interviewees with participation in party politics and civil society associations, and very occasional involvement in protest actions. The majority of the interviewees did not participate in formal political structures. This was due to a number of obstacles that people perceived in accessing them, as well as to their distrust of the political class, a perception that was partly anchored in the country's recent authoritarian past - a negative view that continued to prevail.

By contrast, the findings illustrated that the social media environment extended opportunities for connection and perceived proximity to the political sphere. Mainly, this took the form of relatively disengaged political fandom, whereby social media users followed (but rarely interacted with) political figures (rather than parties) whose views they could identify with and whose opinions they were interested in. Beyond this role, social media was found to be an important space for participation in political talk, opinion exchange, expression of civic and political identity, and other forms of communicative interactions between citizens in relation to matters of public concern.

The study outlined the ways in which social media extended opportunities for civic and political communication between citizens, and how social networking platform Facebook became a highly politicised and vivid communicative space after the revolution. This suggested that something close to an online public sphere was developing. However, results also highlighted how the new communicative affordances of the platform favoured the expression of collective political positions and identifications, and were less supportive of more in-depth political debate or considered exchange.

Indeed, the extension of public communication to a broader citizen base caused some issues due to the range in levels of political knowledge and familiarity with discussing political issues, leading at times to difficult social negotiations between users and contacts in their online networks. Equally, unlike political exchange in an offline environment, the social media context led to more frequent and less manageable exposure to unsolicited politically-related content and opinions. The lack of moderation and rising levels of aggression and abuse led to relatively mixed opinions among the research respondents about social media as a space for mediated participation and political exchange (contrary to their views about its role as informational space, which were more positive overall).

Finally, the empirical findings of this chapter highlighted how the publicly-oriented use of Facebook in this specific context supported new forms of collective expression, and partly reinforced divisions. The architecture of the platform shaped the ways in which consent and dissent on political issues were communicated. Often, political expression consisted of the act of making visible to others (for example by 'sharing' content or 'liking' it) support for political positions and causes that users identified with, leading to the exchange of (opposing) clickable stances but limited opportunities for more detailed dialogue of the issues at play or more in-depth communication of supporting and contrasting arguments. Equally, the results pointed to some instances where the intended use of the platform's architecture, for example to write individual comments, was appropriated by users for a quasi-ritualised repetition of comments that set specific content apart and served to express collective voice and group solidarity quite powerfully, leaving limited scope for others to dissent or express individual difference.

Overall, respondents sought to participate in this vibrant space of public communication on social media. The findings highlighted that this form of participation mattered to them as many perceived that their voice had an impact and could influence the opinions of others in their networks within a transitional context in which many social and political issues were open to renegotiation. However, the experience of this 'publicised' communicative participation was ambivalent, at times increasing socio-political polarisation and leading to new divisions. The research suggests that, at the end of 2012, a number of respondents started to develop strategies to manage the visibility of their opinion expression and their public identities on social media, with some expressing a preference for offline and more private contexts where contextualising information facilitated the adaptation of political talk, and disagreement, to everyday socialisation.

Chapter 6 explored the evolution of the transitional context during the subsequent year, and revisited previous questions through an assessment of online data and a second set of interviews with the same study participants at the end of 2013.

The chapter started by highlighting the deterioration of the economic, social and political situation in the country in 2013. Whilst economic recovery stalled and employment opportunities demanded by protestors during the revolution failed to materialise, the polarisation of the socio-political context continued to escalate. The year was particularly marked by the escalation in ideologically-motivated violence that included two political assassinations and several attacks by jihadi extremists against security and military personnel. By the end of the summer, the country witnessed its deepest political crisis and largest-scale protests since the 2011 revolution. The media landscape equally witnessed delays in the implementation of more profound structural reforms to empower a more financially sustainable and politically independent media industry and journalistic profession. The media context continued to be marked by the persistence of relatively close links with the political sphere, which partly contributed to the socio-political polarisation in the country.

Against this backdrop, the research established that interviewees' media habits had undergone relatively stark changes since 2012 when interviews were first conducted. This was partly tied to a change in the study participants' relationship with news. Whilst perspectives on the importance of being informed remained relatively unchanged, respondents had more ambivalent feelings about the experience of following news and political programming. The negative developments the country had witnessed in 2013, as well as the excessive politicisation of journalistic reporting and the level of antagonism on televised political debates, meant that maintaining a level of knowledge and understanding of public and political issues was a stressful and, at times, distressing, experience. As a result, respondents increasingly sought more variety, and more entertainment-led content, in the type of programming they were exposed to in their everyday lives. In this assessment, it was also noted that media consumption was more polarised along political and ideological lines, as a number of government supporters and opponents in the research sample chose to boycott specific mass media outlets based on their political stance.

Whilst mass media enabled this desired adjustment in media practices towards less politicised content, as well as towards political and news programming that was in line with

individual opinion in relation to this polarised context, interviewees' accounts highlighted that managing this exposure on social media was more problematic. Consequently, the proportion of time that they dedicated to social media, in comparison to mass media, decreased by a third overall, compared to the previous year. Social media continued to be an important source of information for the majority of respondents. However, it was less central to their news habits. Exposure to unsolicited information, antagonising opinions, and distressing imagery encountered on social media made the experience more stressful to manage than targeted news access on other online websites and professional programming on mass media. Equally, paralleling trends observed with mass media, exposure to opposing viewpoints was more limited as respondents became more selective in their choices of sources they followed and contacts they stayed connected to through their social media accounts.

Furthermore, the 2013 research findings highlighted that levels of political participation had significantly decreased as many of the respondents who had previously experimented with involvement in party politics and civil society associations had discontinued their activities, either due to time restrictions or out of disillusionment. Opinions about the political sphere overall, as well as the democratic process and political pluralism, had become more negative and, at times, cynical. Similarly, participation in civic communication and politically-related exchange on social media had decreased. The study findings indicated two key reasons for this change. The sense of civic and political inefficacy was one important factor as respondents no longer associated their communicative involvement online with any positive outcome or influence. Secondly, communicating politically on social media had undermined participants' ability to socialise and had led to numerous arguments with friends and relatives. The social media environment reinforced differences and divisions, leading to less participation in this type of communication online and a more pronounced migration, than in 2012, of political talk and exchange to a more manageable and private offline environment.

### **Emerging themes and implications**

A number of important points arise from these findings, which contribute to how social media and their adoption in different contexts can be understood, and which are worthy of further research and exploration. Although this study focused on a very specific social, political and civic context, and the findings cannot be considered as statistically

representative of a wider local population, they provide important insights and, at times, counter-arguments to overly linear discourses on social media and change. For instance, the research has provided evidence of the continued relevance of traditional mass media to public opinion and discourse (Redden, 2011; Coleman et al., 2008), even within a context in which social media occupied a particularly central role. It has further highlighted the significance of exploring in detail individual social settings in relation to media practices, and to incorporate a more culturalist perspective on politics (Buckingham, 1999) in different contexts. This is particularly crucial in non-Western settings where assumptions about the impact of new communicative technologies and their adoption can easily be misguided. Equally, it has pointed to the benefits of not just taking internet time seriously, but also of taking the time to explore fleeting communicative processes in their complexity. The following discussion develops in more detail important questions and implications that emerge from this dissertation.

This research has pointed out several ways in which social media can be supportive of new forms of civic and political communication, as well as facilitate and extend opportunities for engagement and participation for ordinary social media users in everyday life. It has, for instance, pointed to the particularly powerful (and disruptive) role of social networking sites such as Facebook in facilitating information (and misinformation) access and distribution, and supporting opinion formation. Equally social media have facilitated new forms of collective participation, in particular through individual and collective socio-political identity and solidarity expressions that are symbolically powerful. Social media perhaps blur, or at least make less distinct than is the case with mass media, the media's role in supporting a socio-temporal and a socio-political connection between citizens (Mihelj and Huxtable, 2016) by providing a seemingly unmediated access to an unfolding socio-political reality that users/citizens can directly participate in shaping. While social media platforms appeared to contribute to a sense of civic connection in this context, they also partly extended opportunities for direct communication between citizens and the formal political and institutional sphere, albeit that these connections were marked by a relative lack of interaction.

On the other hand, the findings also highlighted that communication between citizens within this specific social media sphere were not supportive of deeper discussion or deliberation on issues of common concern. The architecture of the platform shaped communicative paths and opportunities for public expression and the enactment of different subject positions (Isin,

2008) in very specific ways that were not supportive of deeper engagement with the issues at stake. The extension of these communicative opportunities to citizens with varying levels of political knowledge and expertise was also problematic. Perhaps what emerges most strikingly from the research is the discrepancy between the type of communicative involvement the citizens in this sample were engaging with and the political realities on the ground. As the findings highlight (Chapter 6), users' participation in public and political communication on social media was undermined, over time, by the lack of improvement in the social, economic and political situation in the country. There was a marked difference between their politicised usage of social media in 2012, which was motivated by the hope of influencing their wider public world, and the more disengaged social media usage of 2013, which was partly tied to a lack of belief in the possibility of change. The research illustrated that this realisation was anchored in a distancing from the political sphere, whose legitimacy and representativeness, in the view of numerous participants in this study, was undermined by repeated crises and lack of effectiveness. Furthermore, it could be argued that, paralleling this process, users distanced themselves, to some extent, from the conception of the social media sphere as reflective of a wider public world they have in common with other Tunisian citizens<sup>109</sup> - a notion they had contributed in constructing in the first two years after the revolution, but were relatively less willing to engage with in 2013.

Nevertheless, looking specifically at the dynamics inherent to public communication on Facebook in this setting, the findings highlighted that communicative involvement in political expression, and information and opinion sharing was considered by most of these users, during the initial post-revolution context, as a civically and politically participative act, thus one that needs to be taken seriously regardless of impact, representativeness or outcome. Much of this participation can be understood, as Theocharis (2015) contends, as relating to shifts in the boundaries of the public realm, as a form of action based on the display of personal mobilisation and position in relation to a given cause. It challenges, and at times undermines, the power of media and political institutions in shaping a public agenda, and equally allows users to make their political positions visible to other citizens and political actors. The extension of mediated visibility to a broader citizen base at the same time empowers them and subjects them to new pressures to manage and account for their political image and identity, paralleling issues that Thompson (2005) identified in relation to the rise in mediated visibility and politics in the television age. As the last part of the study

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<sup>109</sup> In fact, Internet and Facebook penetration rates in Tunisia (which are quite similar in the country) were still under fifty per cent of the population by 2015 (Internet World Stats, 2015).

highlighted, these pressures have led to the development of more cautious and strategic use of social media to better manage social interactions and personal reputation. They have also imposed limits on political talk and communication in social media settings, as well as, for a number of users, led to a more disengaged receptive mode of social media use, in place of their previous involvement as a networked public. The distinction and juxtaposition, in the research design, between different types of activities on social media, in particular between content access and participation in its production or distribution, have brought these dynamics to the fore. The move away from overtly politicised communication to more entertainment-led content on social media also signals user/citizens' active role in choosing different positions in relation to media content. Perspectives that consider mass media's entertainment value as an important cause for the erosion of civic values (Habermas, 1989 [1962]; Putnam, 1995), whilst perfectly valid, perhaps unnecessarily overstress audience passivity in these processes.

Some academics have called for the increasing need to take into account forms of non-participation in relation to new media use (Casemajor et al., 2015) as these, it is argued, constitute politically significant action, particularly when they are actively intended and considered. For these authors, active non-participation online includes, for example, exodus from specific online platforms or their "principled non-adoption" (p.863). For a few of the participants in this research, such movement or gradual migration away from Facebook and Twitter could be observed. However, its underlying motivation was not related to a principled rejection of a specific platform per se but, rather, a choice to exit a specific context of public communication. Nevertheless, the question arises of whether the rejection of participation in this sphere can be considered as active non-participation, because it is a considered choice, as some of the findings highlighted. On a wider scale, the decrease in expression of public opinion and the more cautious approach towards opinion exchange over time on the platform can equally be challenging in terms of how we may conceive of such purposive non-involvement and silence. This is reminiscent of Eliasoph's findings (1997, 1998) about political culture and avoidance of public political talk in the American context (discussed in Chapter 6).

In linguistic theory, and with reference to a traditional offline verbal communicative setup, the notion that silence can be equated with passiveness and absence of intent, has been gradually challenged, and it has been argued that the concept of "eloquent silence" can be considered as much of a speech act as forms of speech (Saville-Troike, 1985; Ephratt, 2008). However, in a social media environment, silence and non-participation in public

communication need to be made visible in order to be meaningful and for their intent to be communicated clearly and effectively. Non-participation online requires mediation, but the architecture of commercial social media platforms such as Facebook, which were predicated on a principle of “automated connectivity” (van Dijck, 2015), do not support the translation of choices such as those of silence, non-participation or non-connection. In the case of one of the participants highlighted, whose refusal to further participate in public communication on social media translated into her deactivation of her account, this withdrawal act was even misunderstood by other users in her network and necessitated justification. The variety of communicative forms that such platforms enable, in relation to public and politically-related communication, call for a deeper reflection on what non-participation as a form of dissent may entail and imply. In the context explored, for instance, when users gradually become less inclined to share content to represent their opinions to others in their network, exposure to diverging opinions may become more restricted, and the power to produce and distribute content and information across this communicative sphere may become more centralised and hierarchical.

The latter point is particularly important considering that content that users in this sample shared was already predominantly non-user generated and distributed from other sources, some of which appeared to be part of orchestrated media campaigns by different political factions. Furthermore, as noted in the thesis, some of the contextualising interviews conducted suggested that the sale and acquisition of Facebook pages that had a significant following, and the creation of pages and payment of administrators to propagate content in support of the agendas of different political groups (but with no apparent link to them), was a common practice during the research period. A detailed exploration of these issues was not undertaken in this thesis as this was not its focus, but these trends starkly serve as a reminder to take seriously, as Fuchs (2014a, 2014b) contends, the assessment of the political economy of emergent social networking sites and of content production and distribution within such communicative spaces in different settings. This is particularly important as research findings highlighted the relative lack of attention by ordinary users, in the context of this study, to the sources of content on social media, and their relative reliance on the distributor of such content, within their network of contacts, as the basis for their judgement of the credibility of information they came across. Source transparency becomes particularly problematic with social media (Sveningsson, 2015). Indeed, as Sunday and Nass (2001) pointed out, the very notion of ‘source’, in the traditional journalistic sense, is challenged in the new media environment. The relative lack of accountability and of monitoring of social media companies

such as Facebook in relation to the content disseminated on their platform, and of its producers, only makes these questions more pressing.

Two other important implications emerge from this research. On the one hand, relatively consistent evidence in this study indicated that the use of social media supported the reinforcement of opinions and socio-political polarisation in this context. For instance, whilst participants' media practices evolved within relatively separate and contrasting media spheres both online and offline, privileging content that supported their opinions and increasingly boycotting opposing perspectives, this trend was more pronounced on social media where users were more exposed to unsolicited content, and tools to customise and adjust this exposure were available, and increasingly tapped into as a result. Furthermore, findings highlighted how the polarised context in the country was not only reflected on social media, but also reinforced as differences in perspectives were intentionally or unintentionally publicised to a wider public and made more visible, translating into more confrontational exchanges than an offline and face-to-face context may have triggered.

On the other hand, the temporal dimension of the research brought to light that any conclusions reached in relation to social media's role in a given context always needs to take into account the fact that such trends are non-linear because media practices are adaptive. The findings outlined how drastically respondents' traditional and new media practices changed within the short span of one year, evolving from a highly politicised social media usage, and vivid engagement with public matters, to a more disengaged media consumption, and a relative avoidance of, or more strategic approach to, political expression on social media – strategies that parallel findings in other contexts (e.g. Mor et al., 2015).

These are not only context-specific changes, but they are also related to users' learning processes about the advantages, shortcomings and implications of their social media use and habits, to which they are reactive and adaptive. Thus, where social media use was perceived as reinforcing of divisions, a less confrontational communicative space was privileged. The trends observed in this study should thus not be considered as permanent nor as linear. Rather, they elucidate the complex dynamics and processes that ordinary users negotiate in their everyday experiences on social media, which may translate into increased participation in public and political communication at other times, but will be, for some users, increasingly skilful and informed by previous experience (Hargittai and Litt, 2012; Marwick and boyd, 2012).

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## APPENDIX (A): KEY POLITICAL TURNING POINTS

Mar. 1956	Tunisian independence
1957 - 1987	1 <sup>st</sup> president of the Tunisian republic: Habib Bourguiba
1987 - 2011	2 <sup>nd</sup> president of the Tunisian republic: Zine El Abidine Ben Ali
Dec. 2010 - Jan. 2011	Revolution period, ends in departure of Ben Ali into exile
Jan. - Feb. 2011	'National union government' led by Mohamed Ghannouchi (former PM under Ben Ali)
Feb. 2011	'El Kasbah' sit-ins lead to resignation of M. Ghannouchi
Mar. - Oct. 2011	New transitional government led by Beji Caid Essebsi (former minister under Bourguiba)
23 Oct. 2011	1 <sup>st</sup> democratic elections after the revolution Election of ANC deputies with 1-year mandate
Dec. 2011 - Feb. 2013	1 <sup>st</sup> 'Troika' government (Ennahdha, CPR, Ettakatol) Prime Minister: Mohammed Jebali (Ennahdha) President: Mohamed Moncef Marzouki (CPR)
Feb. 2013	Assassination of politician Chokri Belaid (opposition) Prime minister Jebali resigns
Feb. 2013 - Aug. 2013	2 <sup>nd</sup> 'Troika government Prime Minister: Ali Larayedth (Ennahdha)
Jul. 2013	Assassination of politician Mohamed Brahmi (opposition) Eight soldiers killed in an ambush in Mount Chaambi 'Rahil' sit in and mass protests in front of the ANC
Aug. 2013	ANC activities suspended Talks towards formation of 'national dialogue' initiative start
Oct. - Nov. 2013	Escalation in violent attacks by jihadi groups
Dec. 2013	New 'technocratic' government chosen (PM: Mehdi Jomaa), with aim to lead transition to new elections
Jan. 2014	New Tunisian constitution adopted
Oct. 2014	2 <sup>nd</sup> democratic elections after the revolution.

### APPENDIX (B): STUDY PARTICIPANTS

Participant reference	Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Political orientation
P1	Sonia	F	36	None of existing parties
P2	Sarra	F	29	Other opposition party
P3	Rim	F	25	Party in government
P4	Hanen	F	21	None of existing parties
P5	Sihem	F	22	Jebha Cha'bia (left)
P6	Slim	M	45	None of existing parties
P7	Habib	M	55	Nidaa Tounes
P8	Imen	F	26	Party in government
P9	Marwa	F	34	Other opposition party
P10	Yassine	M	23	Party in government
P11	Anouar	M	21	None of existing parties
P12	Neila	F	20	None of existing parties
P13	Farah	F	52	None of existing parties
P14	Khouloud	F	31	None of existing parties
P15	Ahmed	M	27	None of existing parties
P16	Anis	M	28	Party in government
P17	Mounir	M	49	None of existing parties
P18	Salma	F	19	None of existing parties
P19	Meriem	F	24	Nidaa Tounes
P20	Narjes	F	33	None of existing parties
P21	Zied	M	30	None of existing parties
P22	Youssef	M	29	None of existing parties
P23	Rafik	M	25	None of existing parties
P24	Lobna	F	21	Jebha Cha'bia (left)
P25	Raouf	M	43	Party in government
P26	Asma	F	46	Party in government
P27	Kamal	M	23	None of existing parties
P28	Ghada	F	57	Other opposition party
P29	Mehdi	M	37	Party in government
P30	Nabil	M	27	Nidaa Tounes

## APPENDIX (C): INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

### INTRODUCTION

Personal introduction

Present the overall interview scope, aim, length and structure

Explain confidentiality and anonymity parameters

Request agreement to proceed and to record the interview

### PART 1

#### Background / general

- Can I start by asking you to briefly introduce yourself?
  - o Occupation
  - o Age
  - o Background (family/region/religion – if suitable)
  - o What languages(s) you use in everyday life (e.g. classical Arabic, Tunisian dialect, French)?

#### Media use / general

- Could you tell me about the media you tend to use?
  - o What do you have access to?
  - o What do you use the most?
  - o How often or for how long?
  - o Has this changed over the last two years?

#### Account of the revolution period

- Did you witness the events around the January revolution? If so, could you describe to me what happened in the days just before and after the 14<sup>th</sup>?
  - o How did you first find out about what was going on?
  - o At what point did you realize the importance of events?
  - o Did you participate in the protests?
- Can you tell me a little more about what type of media you used or followed during that period?

#### Political engagement

- You mentioned that ... [depending on previous answer] during the revolution period. How would you describe your general interest in politics before, during and after the revolution?
  - o Do/did you attend political party meetings or protests?
  - o Do/did you attend any other forms of large group gatherings (e.g. local meetings, mosques, seminars)?
  - o Do/did you tend to discuss political issues with family, friends or work colleagues? If so, usually where/when?

- Do/did you follow political and social issues in the media?

Media use / detailed

- Can you tell me a little more about the type of media content you tend to follow most regularly?
  - What interests you the most in them?
  - Do you think this is quite similar to - or different from – what other people around you follow?
  - How much of what you follow in the media do you think is related to the current social and political situation in the country?
  - What is your opinion about the changes in Tunisian media since the revolution?
  - What about the Internet?
  - How much time do you spend online on an average weekday and on a weekend?
  - What do you typically do online?
  - Has this changed over time?
  - Do you follow any TV channels, newspapers or radios through their online websites, streaming sites or their Facebook pages?
  - Would you say this is quite similar to or different from how other people around you use the Internet?

PART 2

Facebook use / general

- Can you tell more about how you use Facebook?
  - How long have you been using it?
  - How much time do you spend on it on average?
  - Do you use your own name and show your photo on your profile?
  - Do you use one profile or more than one?
- Generally, what do you think about Facebook and how it is used in Tunisia? Has your opinion about it changed over time? If so, in what way and why?

Facebook networks

- What about other people around you like friends, family or colleagues for example?
  - Do they use it as well?
  - How many of them would you say are also your friends on Facebook?
  - Are there any that you're not connected to on FB?
  - Have you ever removed people you know from your FB friends?
  - Similarly, are there any you only know online but never met?
  - Do you use the privacy setting adjustments available on FB?
- Other than FB 'friends', who or what else are you connected to?
  - Are there pages or people you are subscribed to or follow?
  - Are you part of any groups on Facebook, such as political parties, religious groups or any social causes for example?

- If so, do you remember how you found out about them on FB?
- Do you follow any groups or people that are very different from your normal circle of friends or show different opinions from the ones you're usually exposed to in your everyday life? Why/why not?

#### Political use

- Can you talk me through what you typically do when you're on Facebook?
  - Do you tend to go on individual pages or check your news feed?
  - Do you find FB useful to find out about news in the country?
  - Do you follow any social and political issues on the network – if so, how?
  - Do you tend to post content related to such issues, create your own, comment on others, 'like', or 'share' content from others?
  - What does it depend on? Can you give me an example?
  - Has this changed over time?
- Have you ever used FB to find out about, create or join a protest or any other form of social or political activism outside of the Internet?
- Have you looked at or followed any public political figures or institutions?
  - If so, what did you think of their pages or posts?
  - Have you ever interacted with them? If so, can you tell me more about it?

#### Visibility

- Would you say that you are more active than other people around you on Facebook, or less so?
  - What about when it comes to political and social issues?
- If you have shared or commented on content to do with politics, do you usually get a reaction to your activity?
  - If so, can you give examples?
  - What type of activity do you think gets more noticed and why?
- Does it matter to you that people you know see what you do or say about social and political issues on FB?
  - If so in what way and why?
  - Have you ever had comments about your Facebook activity from people you know in 'real life', whether positive or negative?
  - If so, what happened and has it changed the way you use FB?

#### Trust

- What do you think about the trustworthiness of the social and political issues you find out about in the media?
  - For example what you hear on the radio or see on TV?
  - What about online media and Facebook?
  - Does it matter to you, and why?
- Do you think it's easier or harder to believe news you find out about on Facebook?
  - What about when it's news shared by friends of yours on Facebook?

- Have you come across content on the network that you felt was inaccurate or distorting reality?
- Have you ever shared or reacted to content that turned out to be a false rumor afterwards?
  
- How do you assess the believability of what you come across on the network? Do any of the following factors make a difference?
  - Who posts the content
  - How many have shared it
  - If your friends on FB have shared it
  - If it's an image or text or video?
  - If so, can you explain a little more why you think that is?