An Accelerated Story of the Emergence and Transformation of the Networked Public Sphere

The Case of Tunisia

Escander Nagazi, Jazem Halioui, Fares Mabrouk

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In this study, we aim to improve understanding of the impact of the Tunisian networked public sphere in facilitating and promoting civic engagement and collective action in Tunisia. We set out to tackle this important question by mapping the structure of the Tunisian networked public sphere. We identify players and actors and assess the way they interact with each other, the nature of data and information that are exchanged, and how this information is mediated. The analysis is based on digital media data collected using the social media analytic tool WebRadar, quantitative data collected from a national survey, and qualitative data collected from in-depth interviews using focus groups. The study describes the shift that happened in Tunisia from an authoritarian regime that controls media and information to the emergence of a flatter, less hierarchical, and multi-directional information system that allows individuals to contribute to the public sphere.

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INTRODUCTION

The democratization of the Internet has revolutionized the way citizens consume, produce, exchange, and share information in Tunisia. Traditional media tools such as television and radio are losing ground to the exponential rise of the new technologies of communication, particularly social networks. The Internet penetration rate in Tunisia has risen from less than 10 percent in 2005 to nearly 50 percent in 2014.[1] Citizens are no longer simply readers, listeners, and viewers, and they no longer depend on the one-way hierarchical stream of information from traditional media. By interacting with emails, blog posts, tweets, Facebook posts, comments, videos, and other digital content, they contribute to enriching a networked information environment.[2]

This new way of dealing with information also gives citizens new opportunities to become actively involved in the public debate. With the rise of new digital media, "the networked public sphere has emerged…as an important venue for discussion and debate over matters of public interest."[3] Internet-based communications have considerably changed the old paradigm of traditional media by providing citizens new channels to express opinions and help to organize social mobilization.[4] Benkler describes the networked public sphere as an alternative arena for public expression and political debate, which is less dominated and controlled by traditional media entities and governments, and more open to wider participation such as minority viewpoints.[5]

In recent years, social network analysis has been incorporated into webometrics to explore online phenomena. The data and information that emerge from social networks represent a wide basis for analysis of associative relationships between web content producers.[6] Several studies are now analyzing social media to better understand these phenomena. For instance, Tkach-Kawasaki and Park (2007) provided a comprehensive review of the political landscape of South Korea; Soon and Kluver examined the websites of political parties in Singapore;[7] and Rogers and Ben-David studied the Facebook pages and groups of non-governmental organizations in Palestine.[8]

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[1] "Internet users (per 100 people)," World Bank, http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IT.NET.USER.P2.
[2] Yochai Benkler, The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).
[3] Yochai Benkler, Hal Roberts, Robert Faris, Alicia Solow-Niederman, and Bruce Etling, "Social Mobilization and the Networked Public Sphere: Mapping the SOPA-PIPA Debate," Berkman Center for Internet Society, July 19, 2013, http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2295953.
[4] Bruce Etling, John Kelly, Robert Faris, and John Palfrey, "Mapping the Arabic Blogosphere: Politics, Culture, and Dissent," Berkman Center for Internet & Society, June, 2009, http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/sites/cyber.law.harvard.edu/files/Mapping_the_Arabic_Blogosphere_0.pdf.
[5] Benkler, The Wealth of Networks.
[6] Kirsten Foot, Steven M. Schneider, Meghan Dougherty, Michael Xenos, and Elena Larsen, "Analyzing linking practices: Candidate sites in the 2002 US electoral Web sphere," Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication 8, no. 4 (2003), http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1083-6101.2003.tb00220.x/abstract.
[7] Carol Soon and Randolph Kluver, "The Internet and Online Political Communities in Singapore," Asian Journal of Communication 17, no. 3 (2007): 246-265, http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/01292980701458331?journalCode=rajc20.
[8] Richard Rogers and Anat Ben-David, "The Palestinian—Israeli peace process and transnational issue networks: the complicated place of the Israeli NGO," New Media & Society 10, no. 3 (2008): 497-528, http://nms.sagepub.com/content/10/3/497.abstract.

This research contributes to recently published studies that aim to improve the understanding of the role of the networked public sphere in facilitating and promoting civic engagement and collective action in Tunisia. This paper tells the story of an accelerated emergence and transformation of the networked public sphere in the context of the Tunisian democratic transition.

We set out to tackle this important question by mapping the structure of the Tunisian networked public sphere. We identify players and actors and assess the way they interact with each other, the nature of data and information that are exchanged, and the manner in which this information is mediated.

The first section of this paper introduces the methodology used to collect data, including digital media data collected using social media analytic tool WebRadar, quantitative data collected from a national survey, and qualitative data collected from in-depth interviews using focus groups.

The second section of this study describes the shift that happened in Tunisia from an authoritarian regime that controls media and information to the emergence of a flatter, less hierarchical, and multi-directional information system that allows individuals "to become a speaker" and contribute to the public sphere.[9] The main obejctive of this section is to assess the role of information and communication technologies (ICT) before, during, and after the Tunisian uprising in terms of building communities, exchanging information, and organizing collective action.

The third section of the paper aims to understand better the structure of the networked public sphere in Tunisia by identifying different actors and documenting how they interact with each other, what kinds of data are exchanged, and how information is mediated. We see through two case studies, which clearly show the new polarization of the Tunisian NPS, that the new political and social context in Tunisia has led to a structural change of the Tunisian networked public sphere.

SECTION 1: METHODOLOGY

The analyses in this paper are based on several sources of data, and use a range of analytical approaches, including a literature review, social media analysis, a national survey, and focus groups. Data were collected through blog posts, tweets, and Facebook posts, as well as a quantitative survey and qualitative in-depth interviews.

SOCIAL MEDIA ANALYSIS

We analyzed the data using WebRadar, a digital media monitoring and analytics tool, currently monitoring the Tunisian and Egyptian public web spaces. WebRadar captures data in Arabic, French, and English. The tool monitors articles, tweets, and Facebook posts in close to real-time speeds, focusing on the top ten thousand websites in a country. The tool collects and

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[9] Benkler, The Wealth of Networks.

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permanently stores more than 90 percent of total web content in the country. The system then proceeds to remove noise by removing extraneous text. Useful article content—for example, the title, body, and accompanying pictures of a news article—is kept. The system also extracts named entities and classifies content. The tool allows for measurement of audience and social engagement by, for example, collecting the comments of Facebook users on a page.

We identified the websites with the most traffic in Tunisia using Alexa, which publishes a list of the most frequently visited 500 websites per country. Given that the focus of this study is on local and regional news and information-oriented websites, we excluded foreign news websites and other non-relevant content, such as gaming, music, and pornographic websites. For Facebook and Twitter, the two most popular social media platforms used in Tunisia, we built lists of popular local Facebook pages and the most active Twitter users. The initial lists are hand-curated and are restricted to pages and accounts that are easily recognized as part of the target country. The lists are based in part on expert knowledge and in part on web searches for relevant accounts. Each list includes pages and accounts representative of the political, social, and cultural issues in the country. We then used proprietary web crawling software and social media public Application Program Interfaces (APIs) to fetch HTML pages and social media content multiple times a day. We extracted the links from this data in order to identify new relevant websites and Facebook pages. A majority of the additional content gathered in this way in both countries consisted of Facebook pages.

We then automatically determined the language of every piece of content using natural language-processing algorithms based on the statistical likeliness of two letters occurring together. We also applied text mining techniques to extract the named entities (such as people's names, locations, organizations, brands, products and concepts). For each article, post or tweet, we computed the general tone of the text to determine if it was positive, negative, or neutral. We based this classification on the number of occurrences of positive and negative concepts from a predefined list. The former list was built by manually annotating the top 10,000 most frequent words in the corpus for each language. The list was then improved manually by adding other words from publicly available sentiment analysis resources. Using naive Bayesian and "bag of words" techniques on the extracted named entities, we automatically categorized each content item into one of the following five categories: politics, business and economy, sports, arts and culture, and science and technology.

We then collected audience and social engagement metrics, using the Facebook and Twitter APIs to collect the number of likes, comments, shares, and retweets for each page or post.

The final step was to estimate the number of page views for each content item. We employed three mathematical models to calculate the page views: one for Facebook posts, another for tweets, and a third for other websites (news, forums, corporate websites, etc.). Each of these models incorporated several parameters: website average monthly traffic (as well as the number of Facebook page fans and number of Twitter followers), the number of articles or posts published during a given day, and the relative popularity of content compared to other content produced by the same source during the same day. In order to fine-tune our models, we also incorporated external insight from research publications of Facebook and Twitter about the

number of Internet users in each country and the online behavior of social media users, such as linking, liking, sharing, retweeting, and following.

For this study, WebRadar collected data from January 1, 2012 to Decemeber 31, 2014 in Tunisia. All data were organized by week to provide the following metrics:

- The number of sources (Facebook pages, tweets, blog posts)
- The number of collected posts published in the week
- The number of collected likes in the week
- The number of collected comments in the week
- The number of collected shares in the week
- The total reach (page views) of each article, post, or tweet collected in the week

During this three-year period, we collected in Tunisia:

- 1,056,192 news articles
- 2,929,848 tweets
- 6,580,468 Facebook posts
- 15,396,550 Facebook comments

QUANTITATIVE SURVEY

An additional source of quantitative data was a national survey developed for this study and conducted by Sigma Conseil, a market research and opinion polling firm based in Tunis. We opted for a quota sampling method, which aimed to select a sample with the same proportions of certain characteristics or traits as the population as a whole. In this method, the quality of the sample depended on the choice of control variables and on efforts to match the empirical quotas to the population.

We selected individuals according to their age, gender, region, and socio-professional category, according to data provided by the Tunisian National Statistics Institute. The sample consisted of 1,050 individuals.

Data collection took place in December 2014. We opted for a computer-assisted telephone interviewing collection method. The interviewees were contacted by phone by a professional investigator from Sigma Conseil. The survey contained a total of 29 questions and took approximately 20 minutes to complete.

Demographic Breakdown	Percentage
Gender	
Men	49.9
Women	50.1
Age	
18-19	5.90
20-24	21.43
25-29	18.00
30-34	13.90
35-39	10.86
40-44	8.48
45-49	10.19
Socio professional categories	
AB (upper class)	30.10
C+ (middle class)	21.5
C- (middle class)	26.5
D/E (popular class)	20.5
Region	
Grand Tunis	25.77
North East	14.42
North West	9.13
Center	24.52
Western Center	12.50
South	13.65

Table 1: Demographic breakdown of survey sample

FOCUS GROUPS

Based on the findings of the survey, we conducted a qualitative study using focus groups. The main objective of the focus groups was to explore participants' behaviors both online and offline to assess the impact of social media on their participation in events in Tunisia.

The target group of this study was Tunisian urbanites holding an active Facebook account, interested in the political and social context of Tunisia, and at least 18 years of age. Three focus groups consisting of eight to ten persons each were organized:

- A group of people active on Facebook who never participated in events on the ground.
- A group of people active on Facebook and moderately active on the ground through participation in some events.
- A group of activists who frequently participated in events on the ground.

The Emergence of the Networked Public Sphere in a Closed Society

A State-Controlled Mass Media Model

Before the 2011 uprising, Tunisia's political system was dominated by one political party: the Democratic Constitutional Party. Some opposition parties were allowed, but they were not able to participate in the public debate. The opposition parties included the Socialist Democrats Movement, the Party of People's Unity, the Social Liberal Party, the Democratic Unionist Union Ettkatoul, and the Green Party for Progress.[10]

During that time, Tunisia had nearly 9,700 associations, mostly dedicated to culture (about 6,000), sports (1,300), and science (500).[11] Despite the repressive and coercive legal framework, a small number of these associations, mainly in the field of human rights, managed to remain relatively autonomous.[12] Nevertheless, opponents of the regime were directly threatened and their work severely hampered through the confiscation of documents, data theft, the difficulty of raising funds or receiving grants, and lawsuits, among other challenges.

The Tunisian media landscape before 2011 was dominated by pro-government publications such as newspapers owned by the Tunisian state, including *La Presse* and *Essahafa*, and newspapers owned by the leading party, such as *Le Renouveau* and *El Horria*.[13] These newspapers have benefited from advertising revenues from the Tunisian state and have significant advantages in terms of distribution. Opposition newspapers, such as *Al Maoukif* and *Mouwatinoun* were marginalized.[14]

Public radio and television were the voice of the old regime, which controlled two television channels (TV7 and Tunisie 21), four national radio stations (National Radio, Radio Tunis International Channel, Radio Young, and Radio and Culture), and five regional radio stations (Monastir, Sfax, Kef, Gafsa, and Tataouine). Two private satellite television channels were allowed (Hannibal and Nesma), as well as five private radio stations (Radio Mosaique, Radio Jawhara, Shems FM, Radio Express, and FM Zitouna). All these media entities were close to the government and had no editorial independence.[15]

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[10] Sam Bollier, "Who are Tunisia's political parties?" *Al Jazeera*, October 27, 2011,
http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2011/10/201110614579390256.html.
[11] "Sustaining Human Progress: Reducing Vulnerabilities and Building Resilience," United Nations Development Programme Human Development Report 2014, http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/hdr14-report-en-1.pdf.
[12] UNDP, "Sustaining Human Progress."
[13] UNESCO (Steve Buckley, Sawsen Chaabi, Bechir Ouarda), "Etude sur le développement des médias en Tunisie: Basée sur les Indicateurs de développement des médias de l'UNESCO," 2012,
http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0021/002192/219222F.pdf.
[14] Reporters Without Borders, "Tunisia: The courage to inform the public," February 2009,
http://www.rsf.org/IMG/pdf/Rapport_Mission_Nov_08_GB_PDF_.pdf.
[15] UNESCO, "Etude sur le développement des médias en Tunisie."

A STRONG AND DYNAMIC ICT SECTOR

Tunisia has made information and communications technology (ICT) one of the main pillars of its development strategy. During the last 10 years, Tunisia has confirmed and strengthened its leadership role in the region and has become a major regional destination for companies and investors in the ICT sector.[16] In 2005, Tunisia hosted the UN World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS). Fifty heads of government and vice presidents and 197 ministers, vice ministers, and deputy ministers from more than 170 countries, as well as high-level representatives from international organizations, the private sector, and civil society, attended the Summit and related events. In total, there were more than 19,000 participants.

The ICT sector contributed 7.6% of Tunisia's GDP in 2012, compared to 2.5% in 2002. It is among the most dynamic sectors in the country, with a growth of 14% in 2012.[17]

Tunisia has deployed significant efforts toward the development of ICT equipment and infrastructure, and this is reflected in the level of infrastructure indicators. The World Economic Forum ranked Tunisia 35 out of 138 countries in networked readiness in 2011, the first in the Maghreb region. In 2012, Tunisia had more than 1.1 million fixed telephone subscribers, or approximately one for every ten people. The same year, the number of subscriptions to mobile networks was around 13 million active users, or approximately 1.2 subscriptions per person. The fixed and mobile telephone penetration rate reached more than 128%, indicating a maturity of the sector.[18] These numbers are on par with Morocco, and considerably higher than neighboring Algeria.

THE EMERGENCE OF A TUNISIAN BLOGOSPHERE

Censorship and state control diminished public interest in traditional national media, who instead turned to international media and showed growing interest in the Internet as an alternative source of information. Meanwhile, Internet access grew substantially; according to the World Bank, less than 10 percent of Tunisia's population had access to the Internet in 2005, while 46 percent had access in 2014.[19]

As early as 2007, the Tunisian state feared social media was "strengthening the bonds of communication between citizens in ways not easily monitored and managed by the state."[20] While the distributed networked structure of the Internet is harder and much more costly to control than mass media,[21] it is technically possible to limit access to the Internet and to substantially control the flow of information into and out of a country.

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[16] Rachid Jankari, IPEMED, "Les technologies de l'information au Maroc, en Algérie et en Tunisie: Vers une filière euromaghrébine des TIC?," October 19, 2014, http://www.ipemed.coop/fr/publications-r17/etudes-analyses-c108/les-technologies-de-l%E2%80%99information-au-maroc-en-algerie-et-en-tunisie-vers-une-filiere-euromaghrebine-des-tic--a2388.html.

[17] Jankari, "Les technologies de l'information au Maroc, en Algérie et en Tunisie."

[18] Jankari, "Les technologies de l'information au Maroc, en Algérie et en Tunisie."

[19] World Bank, "Internet users (per 100 people)."

[20] Philip N. Howard, Aiden Duffy, Dean Freelon, Muzammil M. Hussain, Will Mari, and Marwa Maziad, "Opening Closed Regimes: What Was the Role of Social Media During the Arab Spring?" (2011). Available at SSRN: http://ssrn.com/abstract=2595096 or http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2595096.

[21] Benkler, *The Wealth of Networks*.

The Internet in Tunisia was strongly censored by the state, which established complex mechanisms to block content and control Internet access.[22] In 2010, Tunisia was ranked among the fifteen most closed countries in terms of freedom of expression.[23] Websites such as YouTube, Daily Motion, and Twitter were censored.

The state's attempt to control and muzzle the Internet did not prevent the emergence of a Tunisian blogosphere. In 2002, when less than six percent of the population had Internet access, Zouhair Yahyaoui, a Tunisian cyber activist known under the pseudonym Ettounsi ("The Tunisian" in Arabic), denounced censorship and human rights abuses by the regime of deposed president Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali in his online newspaper, *Tunezine*.[24] Yahyaoui was arrested on June 4, 2002 and was sentenced to two years in prison for "spreading false news in order to carry out an attack against persons and against property." He was released from prison on November 18, 2003 after being tortured and staging multiple hunger strikes.[25] He died on March 13, 2005 at the age of 37 of a heart attack at the Habib Thamer Hospital of Tunis. He became one of the first symbols of cyber activism in Tunisia.

In August 2007, a video of the president's plane chauffeuring his wife as a single passenger to Europe's most famous shopping locations was posted to YouTube by *Nawaat*, a blog co-founded by Sami Ben Gharbia and Riadh Guerfali. The publishing of the video led to the censorship of YouTube, Daily Motion, and temporarily Facebook.[26]

As Internet penetration increased, so did attempts to provoke the regime by denouncing its abuse. In 2008, as Tunisia's Internet penetration rate reached almost 30 percent, demonstrations against corruption took place in the Gafsa mining basin. Located 360 kilometers southwest of Tunis, the city of Gafsa is characterized by isolation, social and economic problems, and a high youth unemployment rate.[27] The protests were directed against allegedly corrupt hiring practices and unsafe working conditions at phosphate mining companies in the area.

The demonstrations were violently repressed by the police, an event that was totally ignored by the Tunisian traditional media. However, the event was promoted through videos filmed with mobile phones and posted on YouTube and Daily Motion, among other sites. Tunisians used proxies to access censored websites and pass on information to other non-censored platforms. The protests were also covered by Fahem Boukadous, a Tunisian journalist and human right activist who was the only journalist on the ground to cover the "Gafsa event" for the private TV channel Al Hiwar Attounsi. Boukadous was forced into hiding, fearing for his safety. In 2010, Boukadous was sentenced to four years in prison for allegedly participating in the protests.

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[22] UNESCO, "Etude sur le développement des médias en Tunisie."

[23] Reporters Without Borders, "Press Freedom Index 2010," http://en.rsf.org/press-freedom-index-2010,1034.html.

[24] Anita Breuer, "The Role of Social Media in Mobilizing Political Protest: Evidence from the Tunisian Revolution" (October 10, 2012). German Development Institute Discussion Paper No. 10/2012, Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE), ISSN 1860-0441. Available at SSRN: http://ssrn.com/abstract=2179030 orhttp://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2179030

[25] Reporters Without Borders, "Zouhair Yahyaoui Ends Hunger-Strike," April 29, 2003, http://en.rsf.org/tunisia-zouhair-yahyaoui-ends-hunger-29-04-2003,06271.html.

[26] Howard et al., "Opening Closed Regimes."

[27] African Development Bank, "Tunisia: Economic and Social Challenges Beyond the Revolution," 2012, http://www.afdb.org/fileadmin/uploads/afdb/Documents/Publications/Tunisia%20Economic%20and%20Social%20Challenges.pdf.

One of the symbols of opposition to censorship and authoritarian rule in Tunisia was "Ammar 404." An imaginary figure created to personify the agency in charge of censorship, Ammar 404 was modeled on the "Error 404 Not Found" message seen by Tunisian Internet users who tried to access a blocked page.[28] When announcing the formal end of Internet censorship in Tunisia in 2012, Minister of Communication Technologies Mongi Marzouk referred to the end of Ammar 404.[29]

Previous work in the 1990s assessed the potential of the Internet as a vehicle for disseminating democracy.[30] Nicholas Negroponte considered the Internet as a way to better inform citizens and consumers.[31] In 1996, Manuel Castells analyzed the potential of new media to shape new societies.[32]

In Tunisia, the Internet and the development of social media gave people new tools that were less controlled by the government to "share feelings of repression and humiliation and to formulate a collective alternative discourse."[33] Breuer noticed that even before the revolution, Tunisians had a culture of political criticism and used the Internet and social media to challenge their government. She pointed out that the first generation of Tunisian bloggers mainly belonged to the upper classes, spoke different languages (French, Arabic, and English), had a high degree of cultural capital, and were advanced users of ICT. Moreover, she observed that a certain category of Tunisian bloggers who were initially interested in culture or entertainment shifted to political activism to fight against censorship and human rights abuses. For instance, Lina Ben Mhenni (@benmhennilina), a famous Tunisian cyber activist who was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2011, started writing a blog on night clubs and then shifted to politics. Another relevant example is Haythem El Mekki (@ByLasKo), who began by writing about Tunisian underground music and then became a popular political columnist. In a period of just over a decade (from 1998 to 2010), Tunisian bloggers began to use social media as an alternative arena for public expression and political debate.

One on the main findings of Breuer's paper is that three major elements played a fundamental role in disseminating political messages to a critical mass of Tunisian citizens. The first element is the opening of the Tunisian telecom market in 2005, which led to a significant reduction in the cost of Internet access. The second element is the Tunisian public sphere's opening onto the international public sphere. The research reports that in 2010, several Tunisian bloggers joined international communities like Global Voices Online, an online community of more than 800 volunteer citizen media reporters; some of these bloggers reportedly received training on social mobilization. The third element is the organization of offline activities as a direct result of online activities. For instance, the call for anti-censorship demonstrations organized in Tunis in the spring of 2010 was led by popular Tunisian bloggers Slim Amamou, Lina Ben Mhenni, and Yassine Ayari. During that period, new and creative forms of collective action that used the

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[28] Mohamed Kerrou, "New Actors of the Revolution and the Political Transition in Tunisia," in *The Arab Spring*, ed. Clement Henry and Ji-Hyang Jang, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2013).

[29] Telecom Paper, "Tunisian government ends Internet censorship," September 11, 2012, http://www.telecompaper.com/news/tunisian-government-ends-internet-censorship—895136.

[30] Mark Poster, "CyberDemocracy: Internet and the Public Sphere," University of California Irvine, 1995.

[31] Nicholas Negroponte, *Being Digital* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995).

[32] Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society* (London: Wiley and Blackwell, 1996).

[33] Breuer, "The Role of Social Media in Mobilizing Political Protest."

Internet as a communication channel emerged, such as flash mobs that "were organized provoking the state and gradually removing the fear from repression."[34] In May 2010, a collective of cyber activists led by Amamou and Ayari organized the "Tunisia in White" initiative to fight against censorship and called for a demonstration on May 22 in front of the Tunisian Ministry of Communication Technology.[35] The two activists were arrested by the police shortly before the demonstration, but the online community then organized a "plan B," asking supporters to gather on Avenue Habib Bourguiba in Tunis, wearing white shirts "as a symbolic show of protest against [Internet censorship]."[36] But while the initiative gathered more than 19,000 online supporters, only a few dozen Tunisians dared to participate in the scheduled flash mob. According to Breuer, "the years between 1998 and 2010 can be regarded as an important preparatory phase during which activists used digital media to build national and international networks online and offline, to identify collective political goals and to build solidarity around shared grievances."[37]

THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE NETWORKED PUBLIC SPHERE IN A CONTEXT OF POLITICAL TRANSITION

FOUR YEARS OF TRANSITION TOWARD AN IMMATURE DEMOCRACY

The turning point happened on December 17, 2011. Mohamed Bouazizi, a Tunisian fruit-seller, resorted to self-immolation to protest against police repression in Sidi Bouzid. This was the start of the revolution that spilled over into other Arab countries several weeks later. At the beginning, demonstrations that followed in Sidi Bouzid were ignored by the Tunisian state media. However, information and reports spread through social networks and mobile communications and by word-of-mouth.[38] Clashes between protesters and police were reported through international media such as Al-Jazeera, which began transmitting images and videos posted on Facebook and YouTube by activists and citizen journalists.

Ben Ali flew out of the country on January 14, 2011, and a transitional regime was put in place with the declared mission to organize new and open elections.

Among the first policy decisions made after the Tunisian uprising was to completely remove Internet censorship and to change legislation that governed civil society organizations. New laws were enacted (Decree-Law No. 2011-88 of September 24, 2011) enabling any Tunisian citizen to create an association without the authorization of the Minister of Interior. This socio-political transformation offered real opportunities to build a new democratic culture and strengthen civic engagement among the population.

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[34] Breuer, "The Role of Social Media in Mobilizing Political Protest."
[35] Breuer, "The Role of Social Media in Mobilizing Political Protest."
[36] Sami Ben Gharbia, "Anti-censorship movement in Tunisia: creativity, courage and hope!," Global Voices Online, May 27, 2010, http://advocacy.globalvoicesonline.org/2010/05/27/anti-censorship-movement-in-tunisia-creativity-courage-and-hope/.
[37] Breuer, "The Role of Social Media in Mobilizing Political Protest."
[38] UNESCO, "Etude sur le développement des médias en Tunisie."

This new legal and political environment led to the explosion of the number of associations, committees, social initiatives, and citizens' actions. According to the Le centre d'information, de formation, d'études et de documentation sur les associations (IFEDA), the number of associations in Tunisia rose steadily, reaching a total of 17,627 associations in October 2014, distributed across main Tunisians cities and regions with, for example, 3,244 in Tunis, 1,515 in Sfax, and 1,183 in Nabeul.[39]

The number of political parties also exploded. The October 11, 2011 election for the members of the Constituent Assembly who would draft the constitution included candidates from nearly 100 political parties.[40]
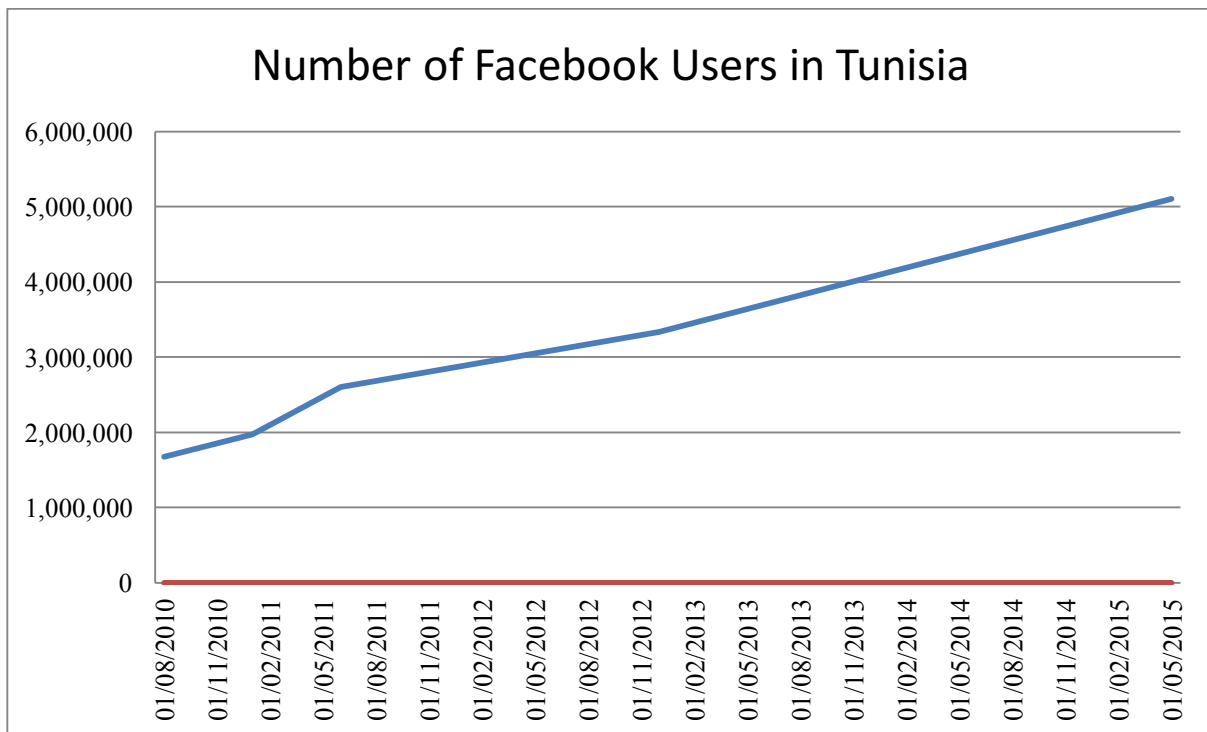

Figure 1: Number of Facebook users in Tunisia (data from WebRadar)

The post-uprising period was also characterized by the emergence of a newly open online sphere in Tunisia that significantly changed Tunisian behavior on the Internet. Adoption of social networking applications increased rapidly in Tunisia, especially Facebook. WebRadar data indicates that during the first six months of 2011, Facebook gained 119,000 new users in the country.

Furthermore, we witnessed new types of collective action via social networks. Tunisian Internet users are grouped by communities of interest and are organizing campaigns, political protests, and social demonstrations.

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[39] IFEDA, http://www.ifeda.org.tn/stats/francais.pdf.
[40] UNESCO, "Etude sur le développement des médias en Tunisie."

STRUCTURE OF THE NETWORKED PUBLIC SPHERE IN THE CONTEXT OF TRANSITION

Tunisia has more than 5 million Internet users, representing 46% of the total population.[41] But who are they? Why are they connecting? What are their interests? How do they connect? What are their main devices of connection? When do they connect? How much time do they spend online? How do they do their work online? How do they mobilize online and offline?

The following section tries to address these questions by presenting the results and findings of our quantitative and qualitative research.

SOCIAL MEDIA FOR INFORMATION

The aim of the survey we conducted was to assess whether there was any interaction between online and offline life in Tunisia. Do Tunisian Internet users necessarily participate in events on the ground? If yes, what are the factors that make them participate in these events? What are the factors of mobilization?

The first observation that comes from our survey is that social networks were widely used by Tunisian Internet users and were perceived as very important. Just over 86% of respondents affirmed that social networks were important or very important to them, whereas only 2.67% declared these networks not important. The in-depth interviews validate this observation and show that social media were perceived as a factor strongly contributing to the success of the Tunisian revolution, as well as to participation in demonstrations.
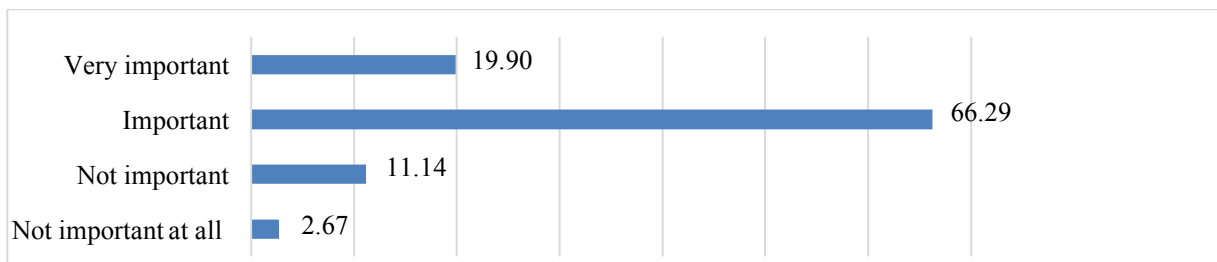

Figure 2: To what extent are social networks important to you? (n=1050)

Among these social networks, Facebook is by far the most used social network. Of respondents who are using social networks, 95.24% said they used Facebook on a daily basis.
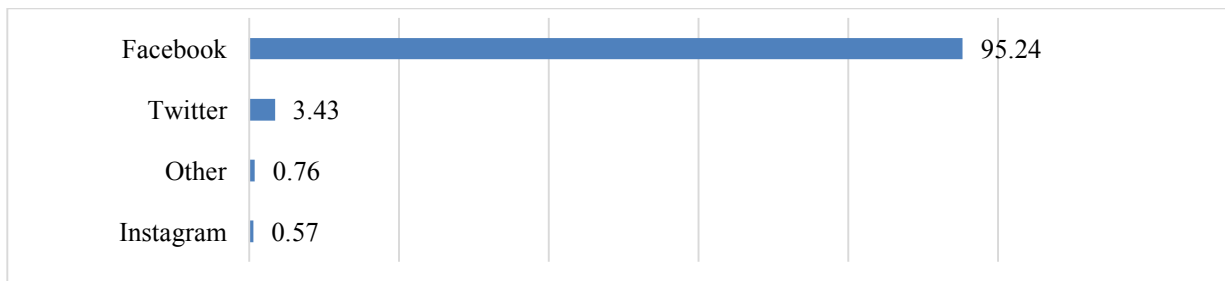

Figure 3: What is your primary social network? (n=1050)

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[41] World Bank, "Internet users (per 100 people)."

Regarding usage patterns, 46.19% of respondents who were using social networks say they spent between one to three hours of time on social networks every day, while 35.62% spent less than an hour. On average, Tunisian Facebook users had 372 Facebook friends.
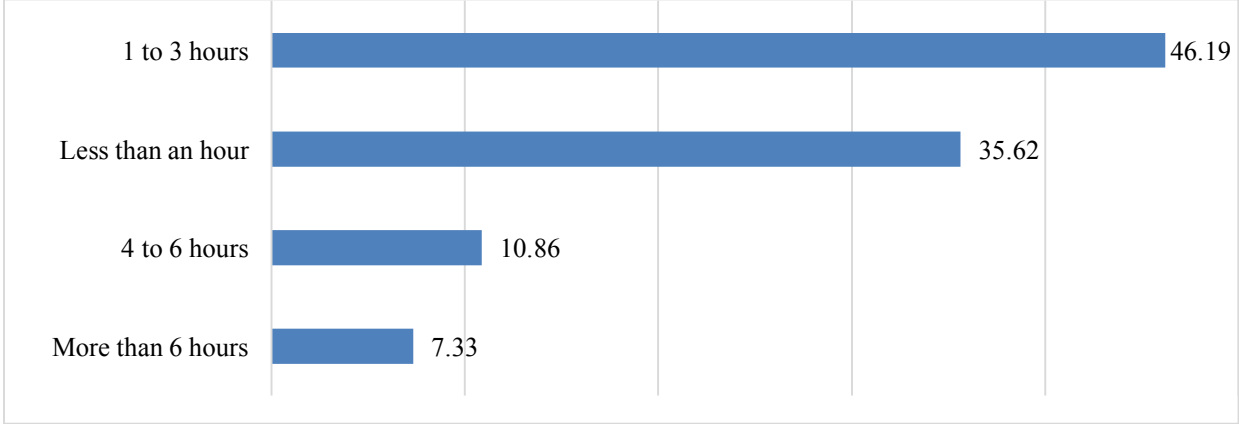

Figure 4: How long do you typically spend on social networking sites, when you log in to them? (n=1050)

The survey results suggested that Tunisians were connecting on social networks mainly to satisfy their need for information. Indeed, the top three reasons Tunisians connected to social media were to follow local news, for fast dissemination of information, and to know what was happening in the world. The following table also shows that 77.6% of Tunisians were using social media to meet other people.
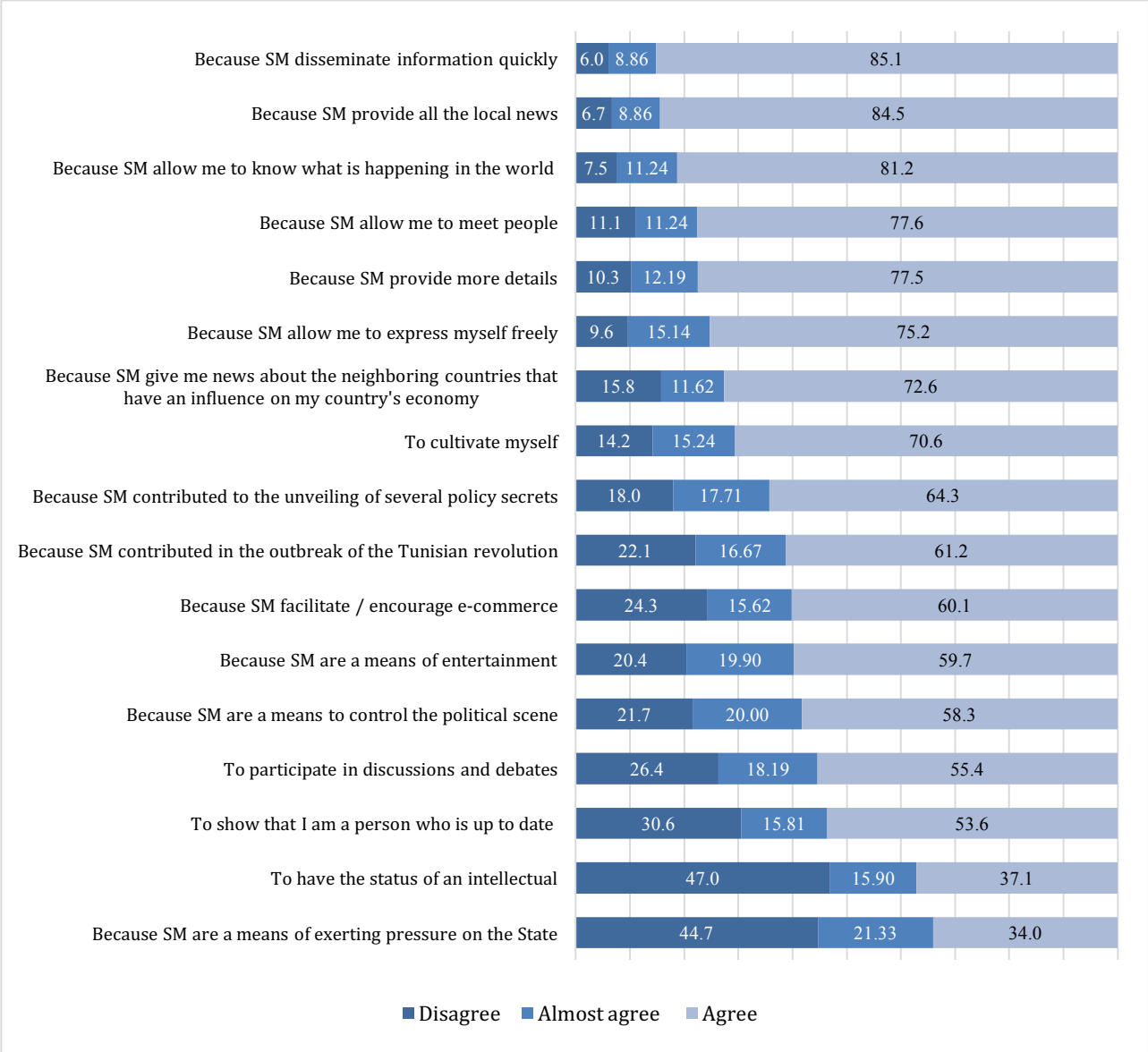
Figure 5: To what extent you are in agreement with each of the following reasons that have led other people to be interested in social networks ?

Similarly, this need for information was also demonstrated through the activities that Tunisians were doing online and on the Facebook pages that they followed.
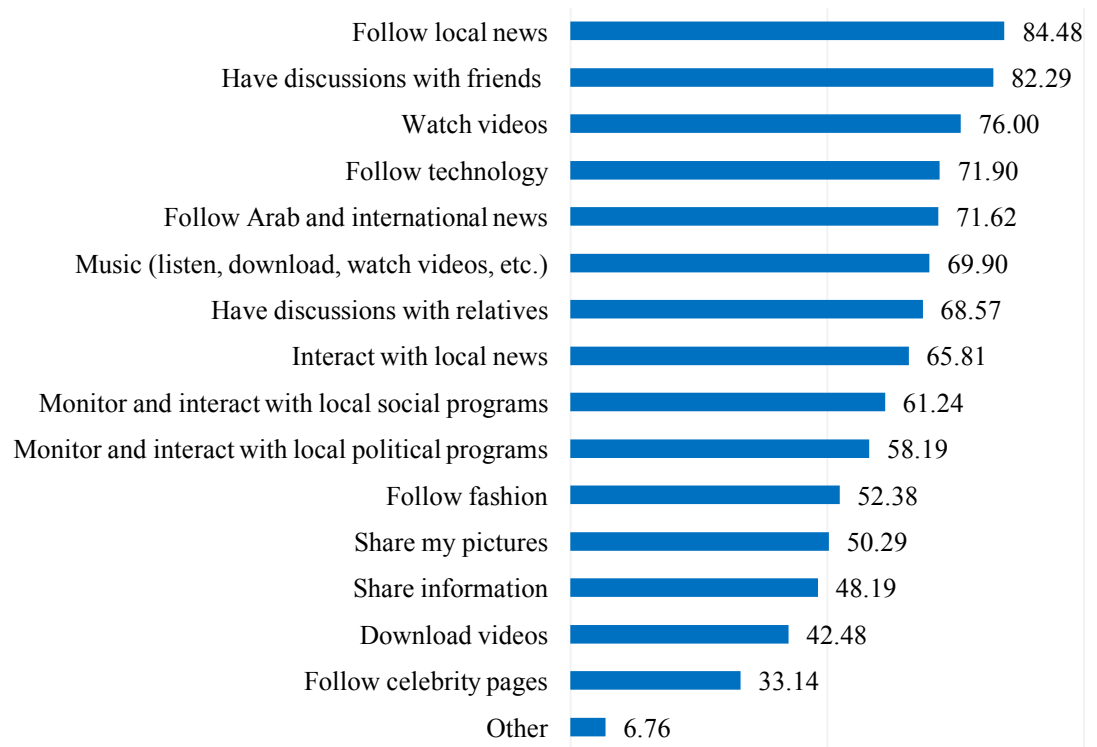
Activity	Percentage
Follow local news	84.48
Have discussions with friends	82.29
Watch videos	76.00
Follow technology	71.90
Follow Arab and international news	71.62
Music (listen, download, watch videos, etc.)	69.90
Have discussions with relatives	68.57
Interact with local news	65.81
Monitor and interact with local social programs	61.24
Monitor and interact with local political programs	58.19
Follow fashion	52.38
Share my pictures	50.29
Share information	48.19
Download videos	42.48
Follow celebrity pages	33.14
Other	6.76

Figure 6: Among the following activities, which do you do the most often on social networking sites?

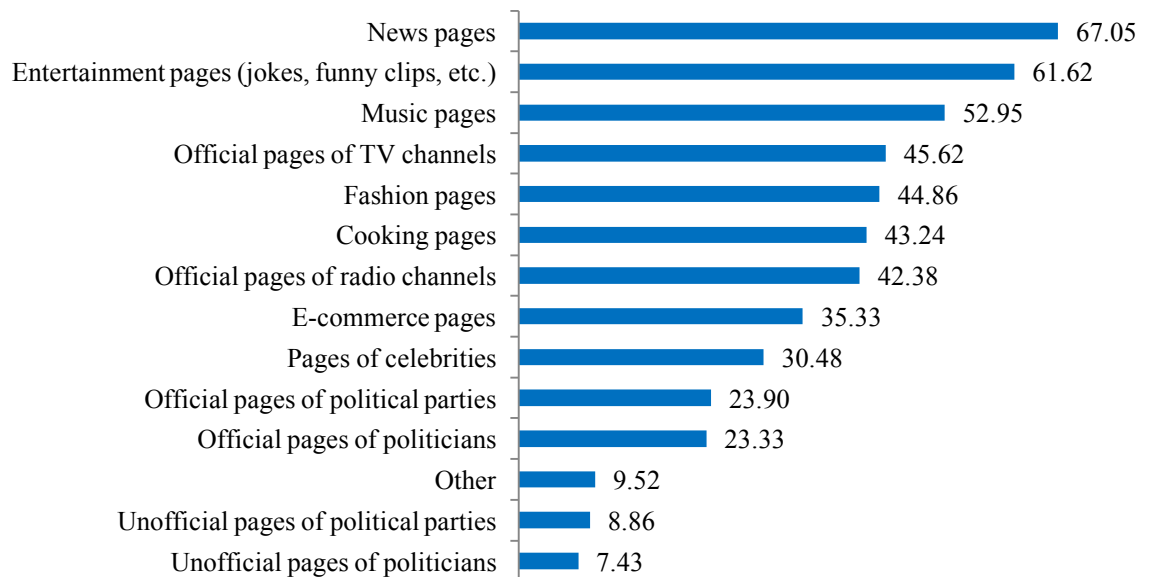| Page type	Percentage
News pages	67.05
Entertainment pages (jokes, funny clips, etc.)	61.62
Music pages	52.95
Official pages of TV channels	45.62
Fashion pages	44.86
Cooking pages	43.24
Official pages of radio channels	42.38
E-commerce pages	35.33
Pages of celebrities	30.48
Official pages of political parties	23.90
Official pages of politicians	23.33
Other	9.52
Unofficial pages of political parties	8.86
Unofficial pages of politicians	7.43

Figure 7: What are the pages on social networks that you visit the most often?

Of the respondents, 84.48% said that their main activity on social networks was to follow the local news, and 67.05% followed at least one Facebook page dedicated to Tunisian news.
This is corroborated by our web analysis through WebRadar as seen in the table below, which shows the proportions of content posted online, audience share, and engagement in 2012, 2013,

and 2014 for Facebook, Twitter, and online newspapers, which represent the three major online platforms used in Tunisia. In 2012, 39.9% of the total content in the Tunisian online sphere was posted on Facebook. The data shows that Facebook overwhelmed online newspapers in the competition for public attention, capturing 97% of page views in Tunisia during 2014 and generating up to 86% of the total comments left by Tunisians on major platforms in 2014. The audience share represents the total reach (number of views) of all content on a given platform, divided by the total page views of all content monitored by WebRadar during this period. And the level of engagement calculates the number of social interactions (shares, comments, likes) per content item on a given platform, divided by the total number of social interactions.

		2012	2013	2014
News	Content	46.90%	7.90%	8.70%
	Audience	30.20%	3.40%	2.60%
	Engagement	16.60%	3.90%	11.70%
Facebook	Content	39.90%	63.60%	60.00%
	Audience	69.70%	96.20%	97.10%
	Engagement	82.60%	94.10%	86.30%
Twitter	Content	3.20%	27.00%	29.20%
	Audience	<0.10%	0.30%	0.10%
	Engagement	<0.10%	1.30%	N/A

Table 2: Content, audience, and engagement by platform, 2012-2014

The situation was more complex in 2012. Online newspapers were still capturing a third of the online audience and producing nearly half of online content (46.9%). The year 2013 was a dismal year for online newspapers. Their share of page views decreased to just over a tenth of its 2012 value, dropping to 3.4%. Many Tunisian online newspapers died that year, but many new outlets were launched. In 2014, and despite low audience levels, online newspapers increased their ability to engage readers fourfold and captured 11.7% of the total comments left by readers. A closer look shows that major media outlets successfully embraced Facebook and become a major source of information through their public Facebook pages. A manual assesment of the five most popular media in terms of audience using the WebRadar tool confirms this trend. For instance, Mosaique FM, the most popular Tunisian radio station in terms of audience both offline and online, illustrates this phenomenon. In 2012, 38% of Mosaique FM's total audience came through its Facebook page. This ratio jumped to 72% in 2013 and 77% in 2014.

LANGUAGE SHIFTS

The shifting use of language in the Tunisian networked public sphere indicated changes in the sphere's composition. The table below shows the proportions of online content in the three major languages used in Tunisia between 2012 and 2013 on the three major digital platforms: Facebook, Twitter, and online newspapers.

The language detection tool of WebRadar shows that roughly 70% of posts and articles that are linked, shared, and published on Facebook in the Tunisian online sphere are in Arabic. Online newspapers adapted to their Arabic-demanding audience, producing less French and more Arabic

content: between 2012 and 2014, the proportion of French content decreased by a third, while the proportion of Arabic content increased by 60%.

		2012	2013	2014
News	Arabic	36.40%	50.20%	58%
	French	62.50%	49.30%	41.20%
	English	1.10%	0.50%	0.90%
Facebook	Arabic	66.80%	75.60%	70.30%
	French	29.20%	16.10%	16.80%
	English	3.90%	8.40%	12.90%
Twitter	Arabic	34%	35.20%	39.90%
	French	40%	49.70%	42.60%
	English	26%	15.10%	17.50%

Table 3: Proportions of content language by platform, 2012-2014

French was the leading language, used in 53.1% of online content in Tunisia in 2012. The second most popular language was Arabic (44%). Looking closely, we discovered that Arabic was much more popular on Facebook (66.8%) than French (29.2%). In online newspapers, French was dominant, with 62.5% of content, nearly double Arabic's 36.4%. The situation on Twitter was very different: French, Arabic and English had closer shares, 40%, 34% and 26%, respectively. We also observed that Arabic replaced French as a top language in online newspapers and that French and English were over-represented on Twitter, together totaling 60-66% of all tweets.

KEY TOPICS IN THE TUNISIAN NETWORKED PUBLIC SPHERE: POLITICS AND VIOLENCE

		2012	2013	2014
News	Politics	56%	57.10%	52.90%
	Economy	12.60%	11.10%	11.30%
	Sports	19.80%	20.30%	23.50%
	Tech/Science	5.10%	4.50%	5.40%
	Art/culture	6.50%	7%	6.90%
Facebook	Politics	45.10%	36.40%	30.80%
	Economy	10.10%	6.70%	8.20%
	Sports	13.80%	18.50%	16.40%
	Tech/Science	19.20%	26.70%	35.50%
	Art/culture	11.80%	11.70%	9.10%
Twitter	Politics	25.80%	39.30%	39.20%
	Economy	11.40%	13.20%	12.30%
	Sports	7.70%	14.40%	15.30%
	Tech/Science	35.80%	17.40%	18.60%
	Art/culture	19.30%	15.80%	14.50%

Table 4: Proportions of content category by platform, 2012-2014

Using the WebRadar automatic content categorization features presented in the methodology section, we measured the proportions of different categories of content for each platform between 2012 and 2014. We observed that online newspapers were still strongly focused on politics (which accounted for over half of online newspaper content).

Facebook content also focused on politics, but the share of political content had been dropping: in 2014, the hottest topic was Tech & Science, which made up 35.5% of the site's content.
In 2012, a third of tweets were about Tech & Science. This ratio was halved by 2014, while content related to politics grew to appear in 39.2% of tweets.

Economic content was present in similar proportions throughout the three platforms, hovering between 11 and 13 percent on Twitter and in online newspapers and coming in slightly lower on Facebook (6 to 10%). Art & Culture were best served on Twitter, comprising 19.3% of content in 2012, but declining to 14.5% in 2014. This information gave us some insight into the typical profile of users of each platform: the news reader was mainly interested in politics, followed by sports, and was not very interested in culture. The Facebook user was more tech-oriented and more interested in entertainment, including culture and art. The typical Twitter user was geekier—though may have been losing this edge to the Facebook user—and more "hipster."

Another major finding of the survey is that participation and the level of engagement of Tunisians on social networks were strongly correlated with violent events. The results showed that the five events that attracted the most interest on social networks were all linked to assassinations of several members of the Tunisian army in July 2014, and the opposition politicians Chokri Belaid in February 2013 and Mohamed Brahmi in July 2013. This interest is evident through the likes, comments, and shares associated with each of these events.
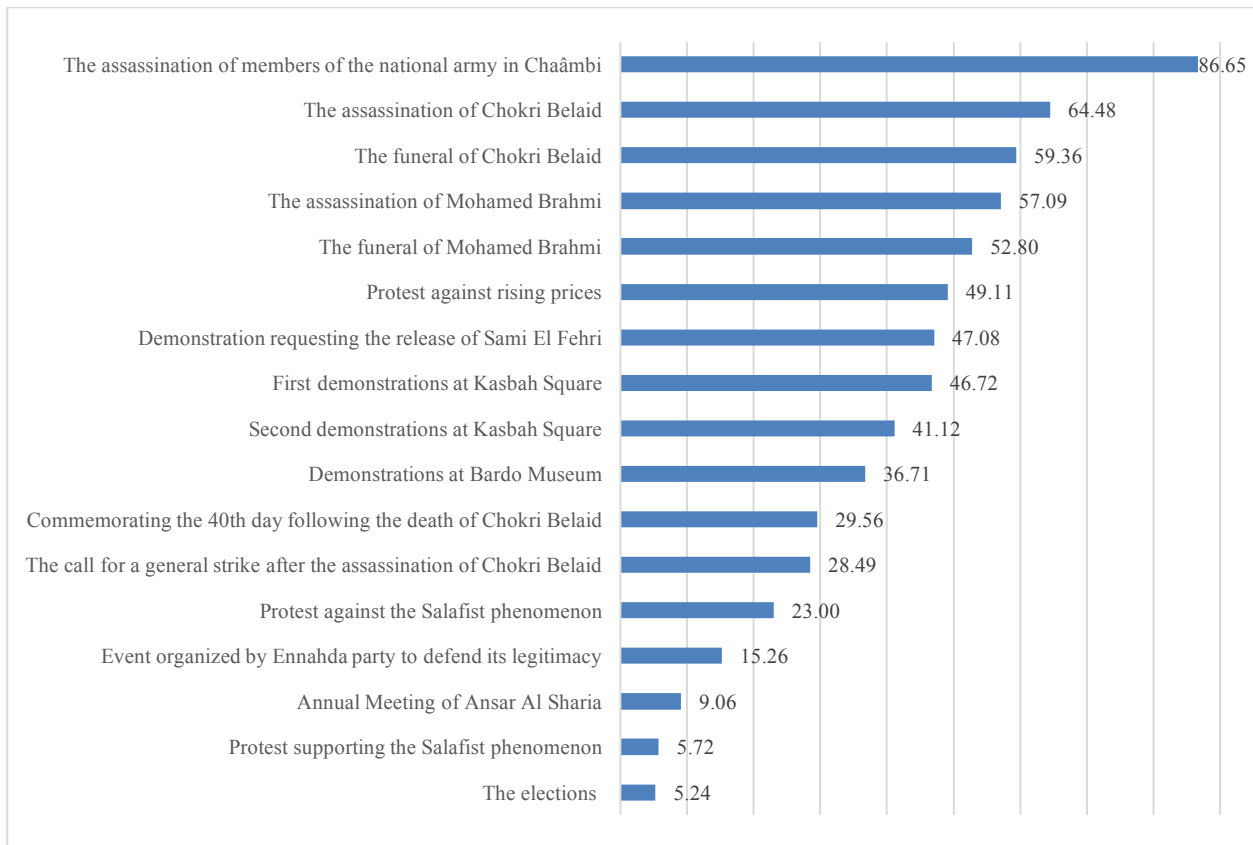
Figure 8: Which local events did you interact with the most on social networking websites? (n=1050)
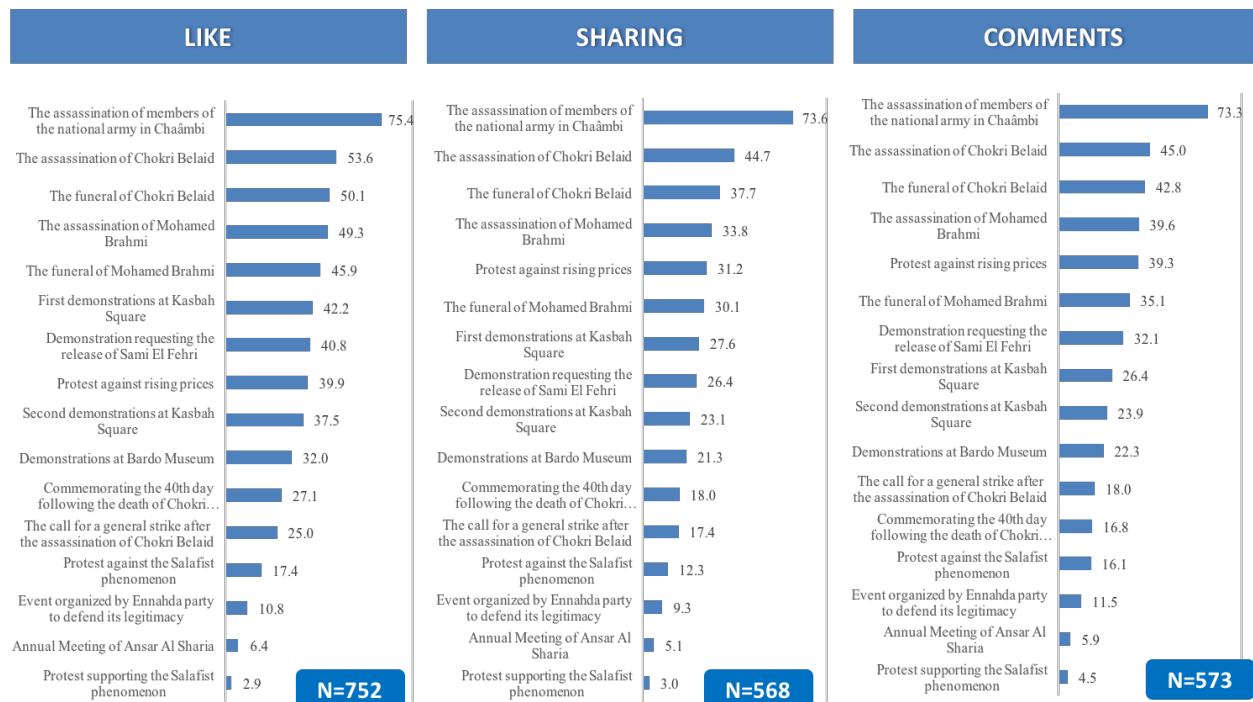

Figure 9: How did you interact with each of these events?

19

ONLINE-OFFLINE DYNAMICS

Survey results show that 23% of respondents have participated in at least one offline event.
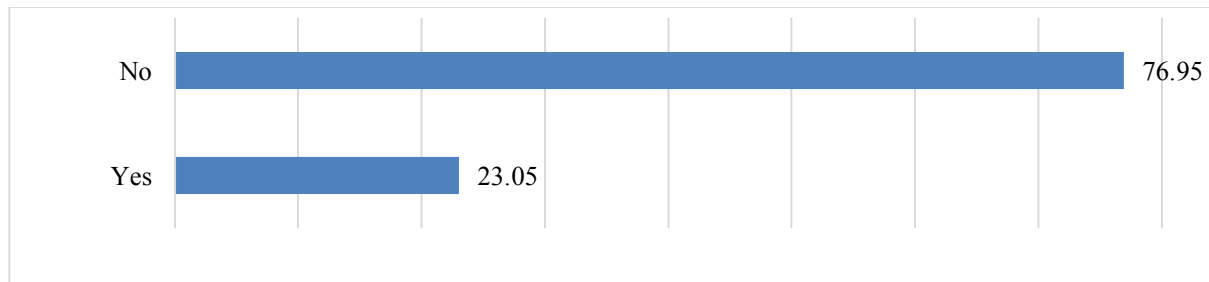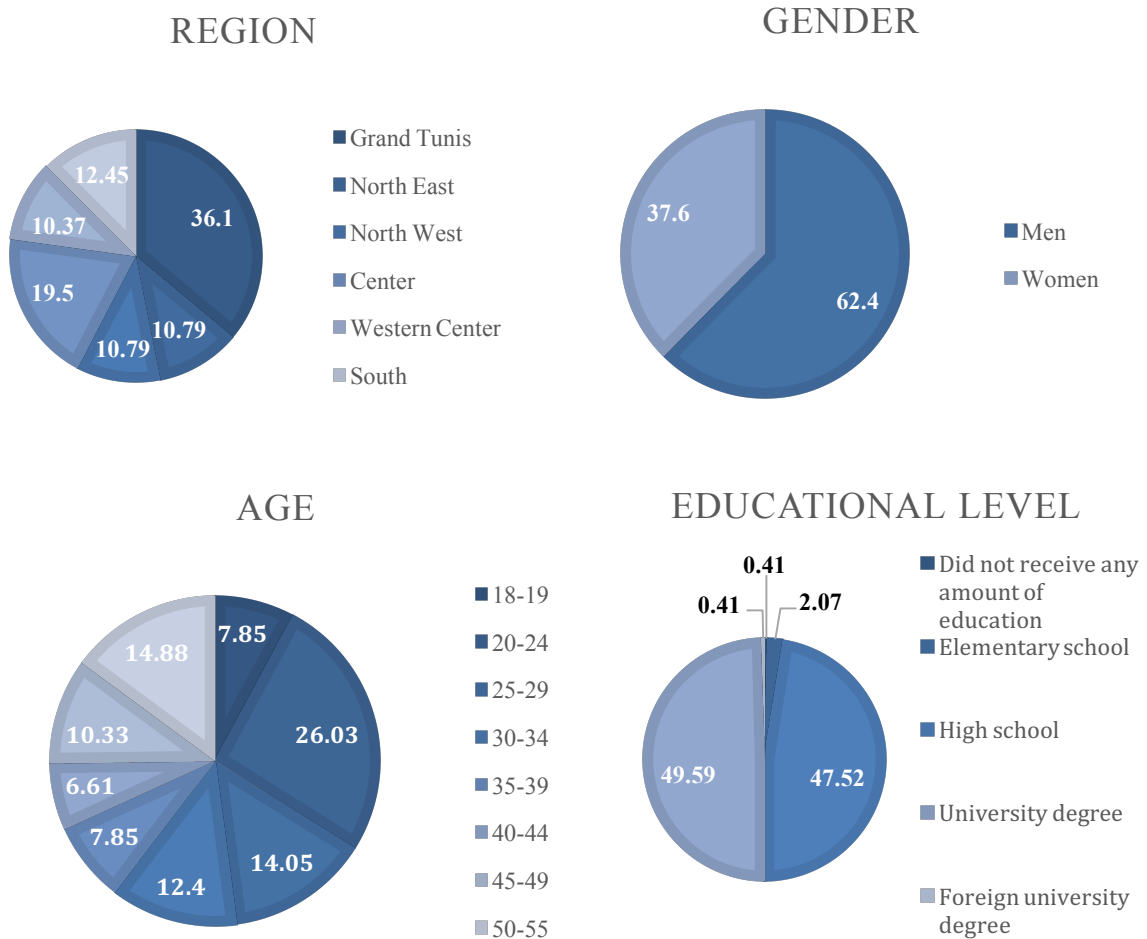

Figure 10: How did you interact with each of these events (physical participation)? (n=1050)

Respondents who participated in offline events were mainly men living in Tunis, aged between 20 and 24 years old, who belonged to the middle-class and had a high school diploma or university degree.

SOCIO PROFESSIONAL CATEGORIES

2.48   **2.07**

Pie chart segments: 20.66, 31.4, 25.21, 11.16, 7.02, 2.48, 2.07
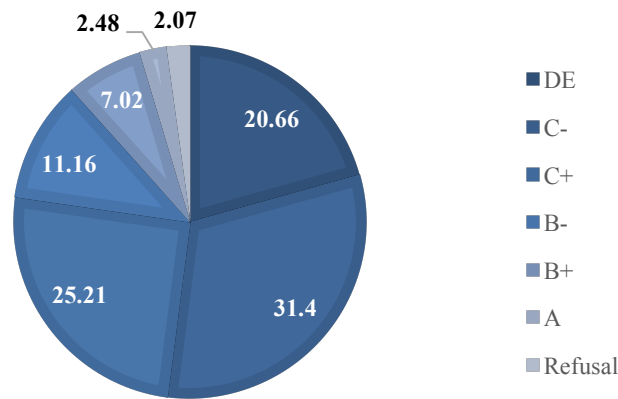
Legend:
- DE
- C-
- C+
- B-
- B+
- A
- Refusal

Figure 11: Demographic breakdowns for those who participated in at least one offline event

According to the survey results, key motivating factors for Tunisians who participated in events on the ground were to defend freedom of expression, to participate in the fight against terrorism, to defend social equality between different parts of the country, to support a person who interested them and with whom they shared the same ideals, and to support the army, the security forces, and the National Guard (a separate military force in Tunisia) and boost their morale.

A strong interconnection between online and offline happenings was also captured through our web analysis tools. For the purpose of this study, we used WebRadar to compile and assess 15 of the most important events that happened in Tunisia in 2013. The findings of this assessment show that there existed a strong relationship between the online and offline spheres in Tunisia. Determining whether online activities led to street protests or whether the presence of a critical mass in the streets fed online debates was difficult.[42] The evidence we found when assessing these 15 cases suggested that major events were always followed by online spikes. The following graph shows the content production, comments, likes, shares, and total reach of all blog articles, Facebook posts, and tweets in the Tunisian online sphere from July 1, 2012 to December 24, 2014. The vertical red lines represent the dates of major events that happened in Tunisia during this period. We observed that every important event in Tunisia was always followed by a spike online. For instance, the murder of Mohamed Brahmi on July 25, 2013 led to a spike of shares, comments, posts, and likes in the Tunisian online sphere. This relationship has been verified for all 15 of the events.

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[42] P. E. N. Howard and M. M. Hussain, "The role of digital media," *Journal of Democracy* 22, no. 3 (2011): 35–48.
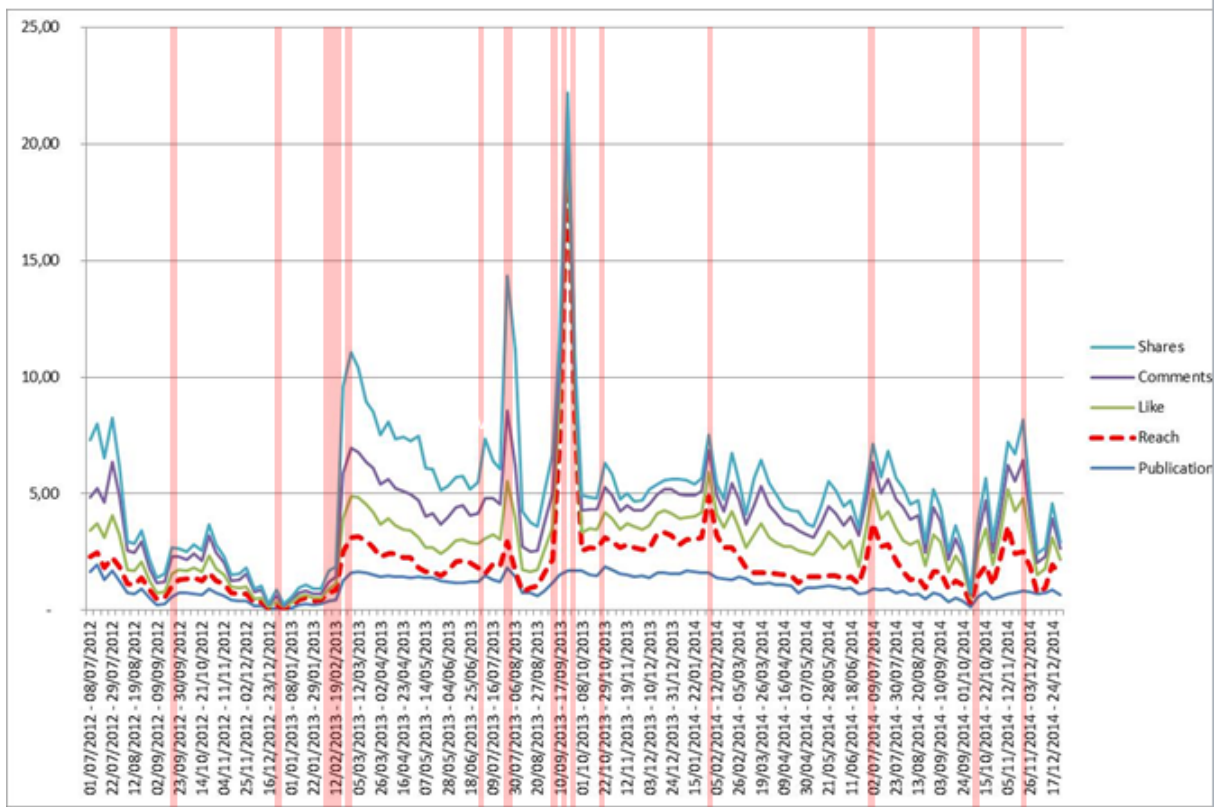
Figure 12: Content production, comments, likes, shares, and total reach of content in the Tunisian online sphere between July 1, 2012 and December 24, 2012.

The following two case studies show concrete examples of calls toaction broadcast by social networks to participate events in Tunisia.

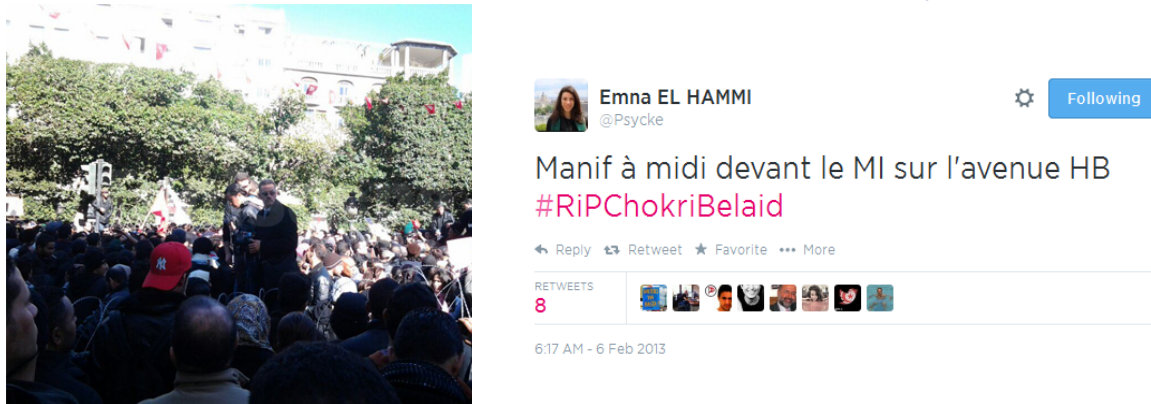## CASE 1: CALL TO PROTEST AFTER THE ASSASSINATION OF CHOKRI BELAID (FEBRUARY 6, 2013)

Figure 13: Tweet from Emna EL HAMMI (@Psyche) on February 6, 2013, reading "Manif à midi devant le MI sur l'avenue HB #RIPChokriBelaid" ("Protest at noon in front of the MI [Ministry of the Interior] on Avenue HB [Habib Bourguiba]").

In December 2010, Chokri Belaid was leading a national uprising against former Tunisian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali.[43] Two years and two months later, on the morning of February 6, 2013, Belaid—then the secretary general of Tunisia's leftist secularist party, the Democratic Patriots' Movement—was shot four times outside his home in an upscale Tunis neighborhood by two men on motorbike. In the months preceding his death, Belaid had openly called out "Ennadha mercenaries and Salafists," and two of his email accounts had been hacked. The night before his death, Belaid had appeared on a Tunisian political talk show and said, "Rashid Ghannushi considers the leagues to be the conscience of the nation, so the defense of the authors of violence is clear. All those who oppose Ennahda become the targets of violence." According to his friends and family members, Belaid's assassination was almost expected; the national response on social media was not.

The assassination—the first political assassination in Tunisia in several decades—represented a challenge to the Ennahda Party's promise of pluralism and tolerance and sparked a wave of public demonstrations. Details about the shooting hit Twitter at 7:33 AM, eight minutes after it happened. Belaid supporters began to gather in front of the clinic to which he had been taken; at 7:45 AM, the first announcement of Belaid's death was posted to Twitter. By 8:00 AM, Belaid's supporters had posted calls for protest on Facebook and Twitter. Shortly thereafter, people set fire to the Ennahda party offices in Mezzouna and attacked offices in Gafsa. Protesters gathered in cities around the country—some violently, burning tires and throwing rock—and called for a "second revolution;" they were met with tear gas.[44] Later that day, Tunisia's UGTT, the leading union, called for a nationwide strike, just as President Moncef Marzouki of the Al Mottamar Party proclaimed that Belaid would receive a state funeral the next day. The funeral was attended by hundreds of thousands of people.

In the immediate aftermath of Belaid's assassination, "Chokri Belaid" received 300 mentions online per hour; according to WebRadar data, content related to his assassination represented 31% of total mentions, 46% of pageviews, 42% of likes, 46% of comments, 48% of shares, and 14% of tweets in the Tunisian online space.

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[43] A well-developed timeline of events preceding and following Chokri Belaid's assassination is available here: Yasmine Ryan, "Timeline: the assassination of Chokri Belaid," *Al Jazeera*, September 12, 2013, http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/interactive/2013/09/201391114310833313.html.
[44] BBC, "Tunisia: Chokri Belaid assassination prompts protests," February 6, 2013, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-21349719.

CASE 2: DEMONSTRATION TO DEFEND THE LEGITIMACY OF THE ENNAHDA PARTY (FEBRUARY 16, 2013)

Figure 14: Tweet from Imen Ben Mohamed (@ImenBenMohamed) on February 16, 2013, reading "Defending sharia, it's the defense of the people's will."

On February 16, 2013, tens of thousands of supporters of the Ennahda-led coalition government rallied in Tunis as part of a series of both pro-government and opposition rallies in the aftermath of the assassination of Chokri Belaid. In response to public reaction, Prime Minister Hamadi Jebali denounced the killing and promised to replace cabinet ministers with technocrats not tied to any political party until elections were held. It was in opposition to this restructuring of the cabinet that the rally took place.

According to a spokesperson in the Interior Ministry, 100,000 people attended the rally, which was not violent. Three days after the rally, and following opposition from other members of the Ennahda party, Jebali resigned, amidst calls for elections and "the formation of a mixed government," after failing to establish the technocratic cabinet.

The rally was discussed actively online, with up to 80 mentions of the rally per hour. According to WebRadar data, content related to the rally made up 13% of total page views, 13% of likes, 16% of comments, 15% of shares, 3% of Tweets, and 10% of total mentions on Twitter.

POLARIZATION OF THE TUNISIAN NETWORKED PUBLIC SPHERE

When assessing the Tunisian online sphere, we have observed two major and distinct currents of civic engagement: partisan and non-partisan. A major difference between the two currents is the type of relationship between stakeholders. On one hand, partisan groups were in competition mode. They mainly competed for power, with the elections being the gateway to power. On the other hand, non-partisan groups were in cooperation mode. They were trying to work productively toward common goals, for example, a better constitution, a better government, better laws, or better social outcomes.

We observed several civil society initiatives and advocacy efforts during the democratic transition. In the case of Opengov.tn, we saw a purely online movement that started in November 2011 in Tunisia advocating open governance. This initiative grew to 8000 supporters by early 2015, illustrating the different dynamics of non-partisan civic engagement. Using a combination of digital campaigns to raise awareness, the group members convinced 15% of parliament

members from all major political parties to support the inclusion of principals of open governance in the Tunisian constitution.

Figure 15: Several members of the parliament holding the "7ell" sign ("open up" in Tunisian dialect) during deliberations about public access to information in January 2012.
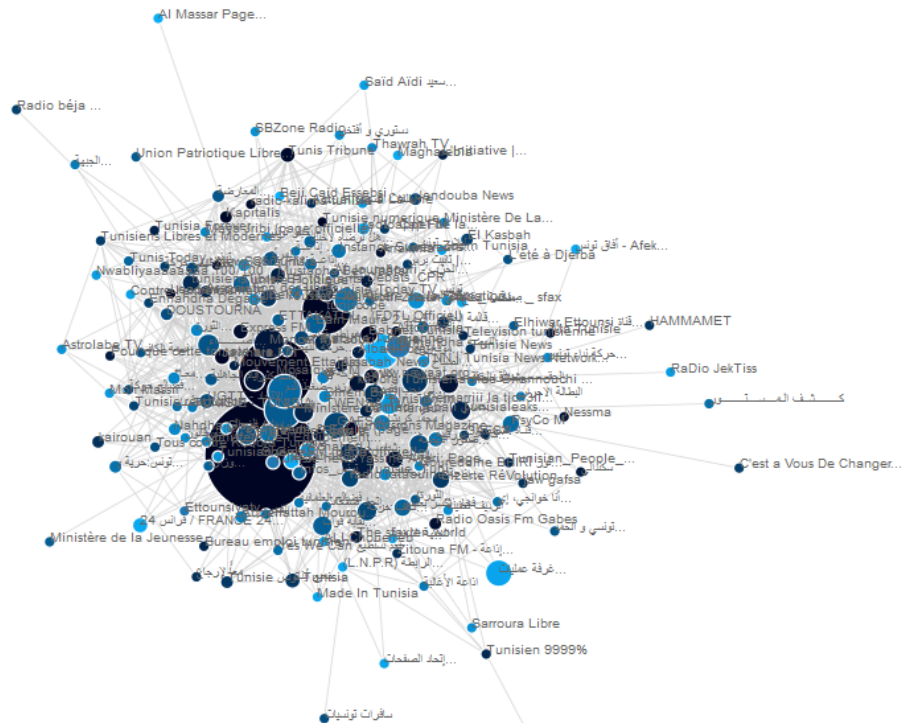

Figure 16: Graph of the top 200 Facebook pages that published content about civil society between January 2012 and December 2014.

The graph above shows the top 200 Facebook pages that published content about civil society between January 2012 and December 2014. Each node's size is an indication of how many posts the page published about civil society. Each link between two nodes has a weight proportional to the number of Facebook users commenting on both pages. To make the graph more readable, we removed the weakest links.

This illustration shows one single highly connected cluster, despite several partisan Facebook pages from opposing sides being part of the discussion. One interpretation of the observed structure is that the discussion of topics related civil society was not polarized in the Tunisian networked public sphere.

CASE STUDY: ENNAHDA AND NIDAA TOUNES
Not all issues appeared this way in the Tunisian networked public sphere: our research shows that certain topics are strongly polarized. This is the case for politicized communities.

After Ben Ali fled the country on January 14, 2011, the Constitutional Council designated the president of the Chamber of Deputies, Fouad Mebazaa, as the president of Tunisia, according to Article 57 of the Constitution of 1959. However, his designation and the formation of a new transitory government led by the outgoing Prime Minister Mohamed Ghannouchi did not end the crisis, and protests took place in Kasbah square in Tunis against some ministers of this new government who were considered to be close to the old regime.

The pressure of the opposition and the powerfull UGTT, the Tunisian workers' union, led to the appointment of a new government led by Beji Caid Essebsi and the dissolution of the Democratic Constitutional Rally (the former ruling party) on March 9, 2011.

Transparent and free elections were organized on October 23, 2011 to elect 217 deputies, forming the National Constituent Assembly. The assembly was tasked with the drafting of the new Tunisian constitution (approved on January 26, 2014). Moncef Marzouki, the president of the Congress for the Republic (CPR) party, was appointed interim president after a vote by the Tunisian National Assembly. A troika composed of the three winning parties in the elections (Ennahda, the Tunisian Islamist party; CPR, led by Marzouki; and Ettakatol) was formed and the Secretary General of Ennahda, Hamadi Jebali, was chosen as the first head of government. In the meantime, Beji Caid Essebsi, the former head of the transitionary Tunisian government, created Nidaa Tounes ("Tunisia's call" in Arabic). Nidaa Tounes is a modernist social democratic party that has brought together members of the former Democratic Constitutional Rally, the UGTT, and others.

The post-election period was followed by tension between pro-troika and pro-Nidaa Tounes groups. The pro-Nidaa side accused Ennahda and the troika of violence and of financing terrorist attacks. The pro-Ennadha side accused Nidaa Tounes of being too close to the old regime and of being a threat to Islam.

The strong division between the two groups is reflected online: the graph below shows the top 200 Facebook pages that published content about Ennahda between January 2012 and December

2014. The graph clearly shows two large clusters of Facebook pages. An examination of the pages' content reveals two distinct groups: a pro-Ennahda group, led by "The youth of Ennahda" page (40,000 fans) and containing some anti-Nidaa Tounes pages, and an anti-Ennahda group, led by the "Delta News" page and containing some Nidaa Tounes supporters.
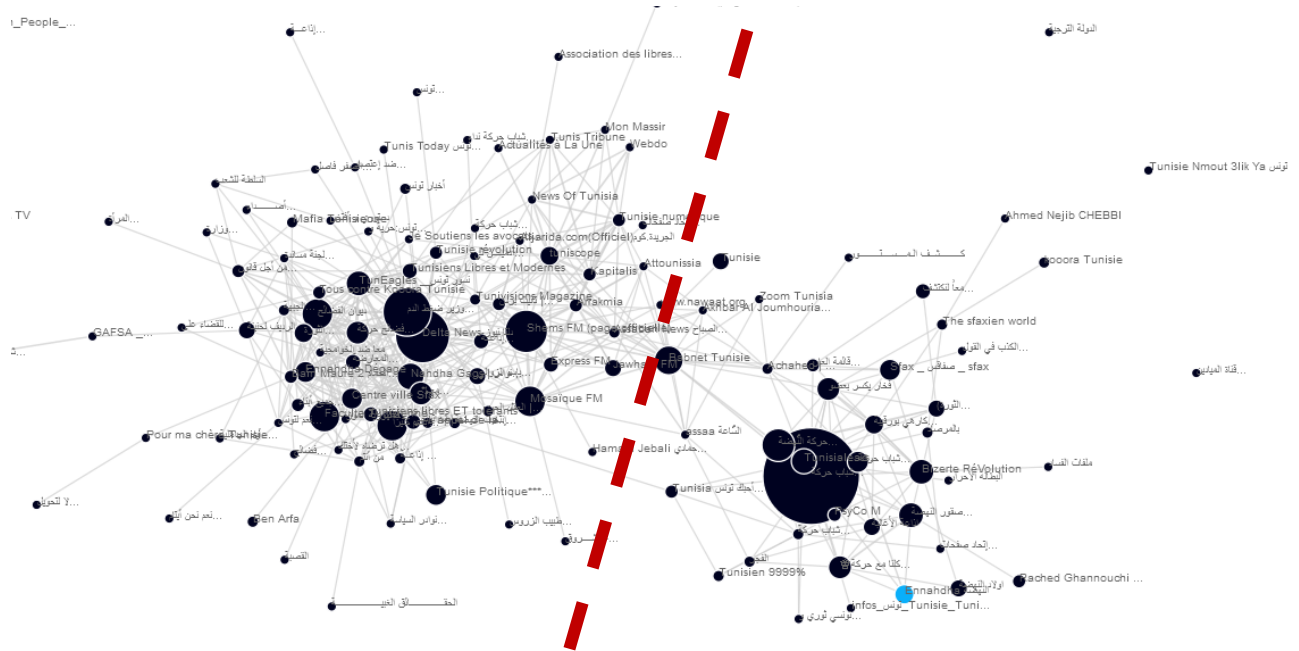

Figure 17: Graph of the top 200 Facebook pages that published content about Ennahda between January 2012 and December 2014.

This polarization can also be seen through the main messages that both sides disseminated online. The language that Nidaa Tounes and Ennahda supporters used online in reference to each other reflects the tension between the two groups.
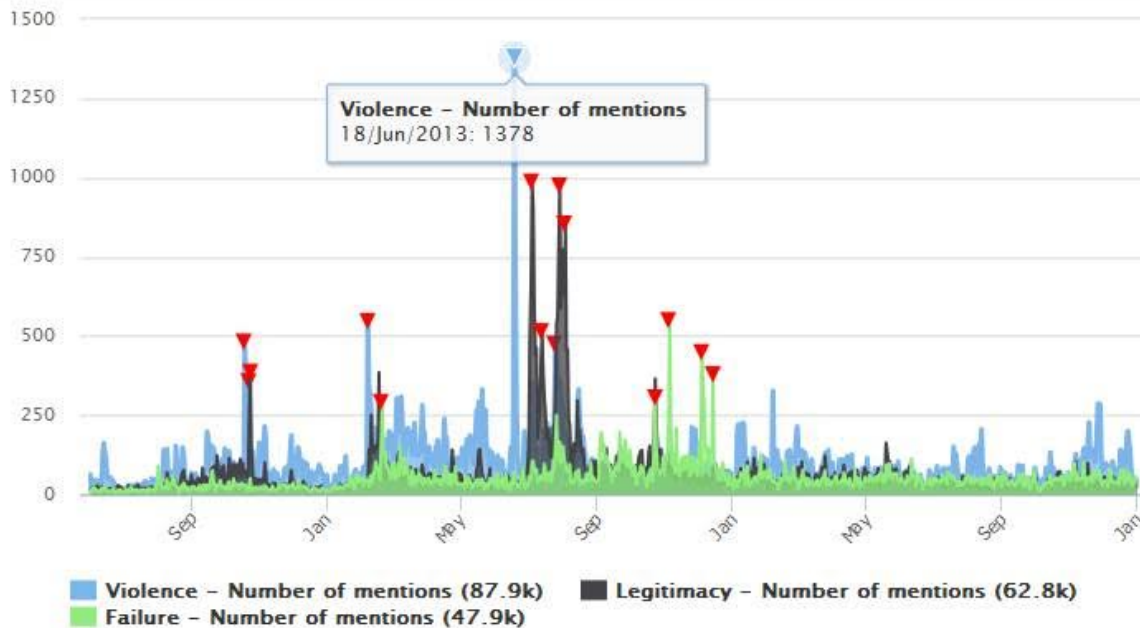
Figure 18: Graph of mentions of "violence," "legitimacy," and "failure" in posts about Ennahda between June 2012 and December 2014.

The graph above shows the number of mentions of three frames—failure/incompetence, non-legitimacy, and violence/terrorism—in posts about Ennahda between June 2012 and December 2014. According to our research, these are the three frames that Nidaa Tounes supporters used most frequently online in conjunction with "Ennahda" (data provided by WebRadar).

The chart above shows the frequency of these concepts between October 2012 and January 2014, as can be seen in the chart above. The main messages collected through Facebook comments, blog posts, and news articles can be summarized as follows:

- Failure/incompetence: Typical messages included allegations that Ennahda members were incompetent, that they spent years in Ben Ali prisons, that they had no real life experience, and that they were uneducated.
- Legitimacy: Typical messages included allegations that Ennahda was no longer legitimate and that the party had had a year to write the constitution but was now holding on to power without a clear mandate from the people.
- Violence/terrorism: Typical messages included allegations that Ennahda members were violent, that they used to be terrorists (including allegations that they were responsible for putting bombs in hotels and attacking women on beaches), that they were protecting and supporting the terrorists who were secretly training in mountains, and that they were sending Tunisians to Jihad in Syria.

Based on our review of Facebook comments, blog posts, and news articles, Ennahda supporters used the following frames to describe Nidaa Tounes supporters:

- Threat to Islam: Typical messages alleged that Nidaa Tounes members were depraved, that they lacked morality, and that they wanted to remove Islam from Tunisia.

- Connections to RCD: Typical messages alleged that Nidaa Tounes members were part of the Democratic Constitutional Rally (RCD, the political party of Ben Ali), that they were corrupt, that they still controled the public administration, that they owned corrupt media, and that they were preparing for a coup (like in Egypt) and attempting to bring a dictatorship back to Tunisia.
- Violence/terrorism: Typical messages allegeed that Nidaa Tounes infiltrated the jihadists and were funding them to commit terror acts in the name of Islam to attack Ennahda's credibility.

The graph above shows heightened activity between February and November 2013, as tensions between the two sides grew. On June 19, 2013, we observed a peak in mentions of violence associated with Ennahda when Nidaa Tounes issued a statement holding Ennahda responsible for "the generalization of acts of violence and terrorism."

The confrontation between Ennahda supporters and opponents peaked in August 2013, with each side organizing gatherings in Tunis: Ennahda supporters in Kasbah Square (near the presidential administration building) and Ennahda opponents in Bardo Square (in front of the parliament).

Amidst rising tensions and increased violence between Ennahda supporters and opponents, the Ennahda Party's alleged efforts to fill open cabinet seats with party members, and controversy over the drafting of Tunisia's new constitution, four organizations known as the Quartet—General Tunisian Labor Union (UGGT), the Tunisian Bar Association, the Employers Union (UTICA), and the Human Rights League (LTDH)—convened a National Dialogue Forum on October 5, 2013. The goal of the forum was to bring together two dozen political parties, including both Ennahda and Nidaa Tounes, to work toward Tunisia's democratic transition.
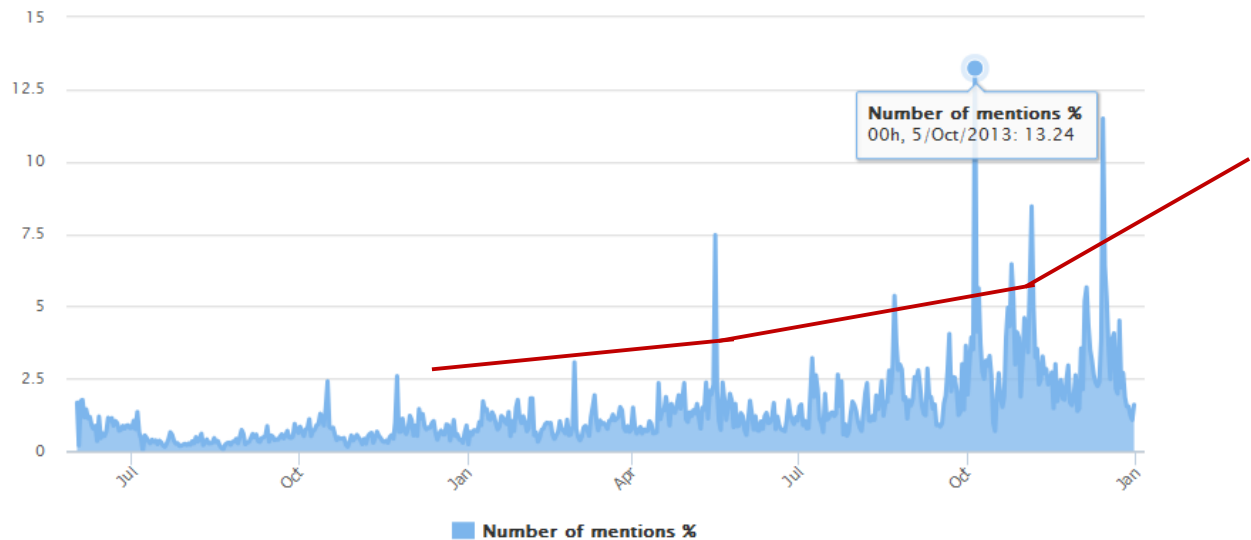

Figure 19: Percentage of daily content in the Tunisian networked public sphere related to the topic "dialogue" between June 2012 and December 2013.

The graph above shows the percentage of daily content related to the topic "dialogue" in the

Tunisian networked public sphere between June 2012 and December 2013. We clearly see a steady increase of the topic, peaking on October 5, 2013, the date of the forum's launch, with 13% of all content mentioning "dialogue." The second most significant peak was on December 14, 2013, the day the consensus around a new technocratic government was reached by the competing political parties engaged in the national dialogue. This de-escalation of tension allowed a relative period of calm. Elections were peacefully held in October 2014 and deemed fair and successful by most observers.

The efforts of Nidaa Tounes supporters eventually led to victory in the 2014 elections. Nidaa Tounes leader Beji Caid Essebsi was elected president, and the party formed a government coalition with four of the top five parties, including Ennahda.

CONCLUSION

After several years of censorship and other obstacles to freedom of expression, the Tunisian revolution offered a new opportunity for the public sphere to become a free space less controlled by the state. It has developed into a venue to exchange ideas and opinions, create communities of common interests, and organize collective action.

In less than ten years we have witnessed a shift in Tunisia from a top-down authoritarian regime that controlled media and information to the emergence of a flatter, less hierarchical, and multi-directional information system that allows individuals to contribute to the public sphere.

The Tunisian case shows that ICT and social media in particular played a significant role before, during, and after the Tunisian uprising in terms of building communities, exchanging information, and organizing collective action. The first generation of Tunisian cyber activists were part of a less-developed digital media landscape. They were able to produce content but with limited interactions between them. As a result of the constraints, they were unable to reach a sufficient critical mass to bring about collective action. It is only after the democratization of the Internet in 2005 and the Tunisian public sphere's opening onto the international public sphere that things began to change. It is not a coincidence that one of the first online calls to action ever in Tunisia was about an anti-censorship event in 2010. ICT during that time played a major role in giving Tunisians tools to build networked communities of interest that cooperated together in order to effect change.

The emergence of a newly free networked public sphere in Tunisia also significantly changed Tunisian behavior on the Internet. Between 2012 and 2014, we saw declining public interest in online newspapers, which were seen as more subject to government control, and growing interest in social media—Facebook in particular. Online newspapers, which appeared close to extinction in 2013, took note, embraced Facebook and became a major source of information once again through their public Facebook pages.

This study shows that the new context of democratic transitions that appeared after the Tunisian uprising led to a structural change in the Tunisian networked public sphere. The Tunisian networked public sphere nowadays can be seen as an arena with different stakeholders sharing

their ideas in order to rally others to their cause. This is reflected in the polarization of the Tunisian networked public sphere around certain topics: social media played a significant role in polarizing the Tunisian political scene in 2012-2014: we see this in the clear division between pro- and anti-Ennahda pages on Facebook.

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