"Tweeting Out a Tyrant:"

Social Media and the Tunisian Revolution

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Biography

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the Tunisian Revolution that occurred in January 2011. The revolution was dubbed by many on television, on the Internet, and in the blogosphere, as the "Twitter Revolution." I focus on how social media serves as an effective tool in the political climate of Tunisia, but in analyzing critiques of the Twitter title in conjunction with survey responses from 50 Tunisians, I argue that the "Twitter" title is Orientalist as it emphasizes the role of Western-made technologies, rather than the role of Tunisians themselves.

On December 17, 2010, in a now famous act of desperation, Mohamed Bouazizi, a young, college-educated Tunisian man from Sidi Bou Zid, set himself on fire in front of a municipal office. His action was in protest to having his fruits and vegetables cart, which served as his only source of income, seized by police for not having the appropriate permit. This action, in a non-urban, central Tunisian city, reverberated throughout the country and spurred a revolution that toppled an over 20 year dictatorship in less than a month (Rifai, 2011, para.1-2). This uprising became widespread news and its eventual success was observed from both the Arab and non-Arab worlds. During and following the event, news coverage on television, the Internet, and the blogosphere began to categorize the revolution in many ways. The novelty of an Arab country demonstrating for democracy proved a challenge for news outlets and Internet commentators attempting to identify and understand the event (Dyer, 2011, para.1).

One manner in which the revolution was defined was through naming it a "Twitter Revolution." This paper critiques the "Twitter" title, focusing on how digital activism operates in the age of new media, within the political context of the Internet in Tunisia. The responses I received from conducting 50 surveys with Tunisians both inside and outside of the country further frame the context in which the "Twitter" title was deployed. I argue that the age of new media allows for more dispersed methods of communication and activism, and that these are particularly relevant to the Arab world due to its increased censorship and surveillance. While social media served a role in the revolution, however, I would further argue that naming the movement the "Twitter Revolution" reinforces an Orientalist perspective about the Middle East and North Africa region. This title functions to identify the revolution in the manner in which the West participated and erases the other methods of communication, including physical demonstrations, which Tunisians used in conjunction with social media. Finally, naming the movement the "Twitter Revolution" devalues and trivializes the causes that Tunisians identify as the real reasons for the movement.

<u>Arabs and New Media</u>

Several scholars have analyzed activism in the Middle East and North Africa region from a social movement theoretical perspective. Quintan Wiktorowicz defines "Islamic activism" as "*the mobilization of contention to support Muslim causes*" (2004, p.2, emphasis in original). Wiktorowicz leaves this definition explicitly vague because to define what is "Islamic" varies in accordance to a group's interpretation (2004, p.2). When it comes to social movement tactics, Diane Singerman argues, "Islamic activism is not unique but rather has elements common to all social movements" (2004, p.143). Singerman notes that Islamic activism movements rely on the same types of networks and organization as other movements, but identifies the political climate as the point of divergence. Singerman contends that due to this atmosphere, political movements rely heavily on informal networks and "it is this character of the Islamist movement which makes it distinct from other social movements" (2004, p.144). Singerman identifies the "invisibility" of these networks as their usefulness to the Islamic movements as this enables activists to form unseen and widely dispersed groups.

These invisible networks become even more important in Arab countries with dictators, an environment that Ibrahim Saleh characterizes as "media cocooning." This concept refers to the way in which many Arab countries have state-run media and only portray to the citizens what the government condones. This places Arab populations within a "cocoon" of acceptable media images that neglect to portray anything anti-government. However, Saleh contends that this "cocooning" has a dual aspect in that "the West has cocooned their publics by ingraining in their minds an unfair image of the Arabs by projecting the exceptional cases of extremism as the norm" (2007, p.21). Saleh argues that the current state of journalism and news coverage serves as one of the reasons for this type of cocooning, noting that "media routinely adopt the news frames that fit their agendas" (2007, p.24). However, Saleh maintains that the introduction of new media, new satellite channels, and new methods of communication allow for more diverse outlooks within dictatorial regimes (2007, p.27). These new technologies,

combined with the "informal networks" Singerman discusses, begin to allow for resistance under authoritarian dictatorships.

New media, then, plays an important role in this new context of activism. Peter Seib argues that new media are playing a major factor in democratization in the Middle East, where the "irrelevance of borders" allows for movements to become transnational through communication networks (2007, p.2). Media tools such as satellite television, including Al-Jazeera, the Internet, blogging, cell phones, and text messaging, "will affect the dynamics of democratization by reducing the isolation of movements for political change and by facilitating detours around obstructions created by governments that have traditionally controlled the flow of information" (Seib, 2007, p.2).

Seib reiterates that it is difficult to influence and maintain democratization, however, and therefore "it is important to resist the temptation to assume that technology can, in and of itself, transform political reality" (2007, p.1). As such, while new media are an important element to social movements, "[i]n the end, the public's willingness to act is the most crucial factor in reform" (Seib, 2007, p.10). Even with these caveats, new media do constitute important tools in revolutions where social movements are able to subvert government control.

Tunisia and the Internet

Tunisia first gained independence from France in 1957 when the first Tunisian president, Habib Bourguiba, took office. Bourguiba maintained power until 1987 when President Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali assumed office (BBC, 2000, para.7, para.16). President Ben Ali stayed in power from 1987 until January 14, 2011. During this period, Tunisia had an uncomfortable relationship with Internet technology. In 1991, Tunisia became the first Arab country to allow the Internet on a probationary period (El Gody, 2007, p.213). In 2006, nine percent of the Tunisian population, which translates to 900,000 people, was using the Internet (El Gody, 2007, p.216); by March 2011, according to UNHCR, 33% of the population, or 3.5 million Tunisians, were Internet

users (UNHCR, 2011, para.1). The increase in Internet users in Tunisia, as well as across the Arab world, led to fear among Arab dictators that the increased Internet use would produce resistance to the government, as "[e]ach Internet user is a potential regime opponent" (El Gody, 2007, p.224). According to Ahmed El Gody, "Tunisia has developed the region's most detailed Internet-specific laws. Tunisia also explicitly extends to the Internet existing press laws limiting free expression, something that few other countries in the region have done" (2007, p.224). Tunisia uses "Internet police" and has issued Internet activists "prison sentences due to 'disturbing social welfare'" (2007, p.225). In Tunisia, between 2000 and 2006, there were 36 censorship cases (2007, p.223). Yet El Gody predicted that the Internet would serve as a tool for democratic reform in the region because, together, Internet users will have the power to force their governments into democracy (2007, p.232). During the Tunisian revolution, many news outlets and blogs argued that such was the case, and that the Internet activists were at the center of this achievement.

The "Twitter Revolution"

The concept of the "Twitter" or "Facebook" Revolution is a notion that was previously used in Moldova and Iran during recent movements, however, the reporting of these events received criticism of its technology-focused coverage. For instance, as Evgeny Morozov describes in *The Net Delusion,* Iran "buffeted by the conflicting forces of populism, conservatism, and modernity, was facing its most serious political crisis since the 1979 revolution that ended the much-disliked reign of the pro-American Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi" (2011, p.1). Yet, Morozov continues, "this was not the story that most Western media chose to prioritize; instead, they preferred to muse on how the Internet was ushering in democracy into the country" (2011, p.1). Western media tend to cover movements in the Middle East and North Africa region without a deeper historical lens, instead focusing on the role of social media. Morozov does credit social media has having a role in the revolution, but asks the question: "If a tree falls in the forest and everyone tweets about it, it may not be the tweets that moved it. [...] One

didn't need to go online to notice that there was a big public protest going on in the middle of Tehran. The raging horns of cars stuck in traffic were a pretty good indicator" (2011, p.16). Morozov demonstrates the way in which physical protests and action, although completely visible, were not given the credit that "tweeting" received. Moreover, in the Western media coverage, "those challenging the dominant account that emphasized the Internet's role in fomenting the protests—received far less prominence than those who cheered the onset of the Twitter Revolution" (Morozov, 2011, p.16). The concept of the "Twitter Revolution" generated attention in the press and was consistently reinforced throughout coverage.

Framing the Revolution

In Tunisia, the revolution seemed to emerge so quickly in the middle of December as protests built momentum, culminating in the flight of Ben Ali on January 14. The rapid and unprecedented speed of the revolution left news outlets and blogs with an urgent need to frame and categorize the events. While not all the coverage classified the revolution in the same way, certain streams emerged that generated controversy, chief among them the stream of the "Twitter Revolution" that elicited strong responses, both in support of and opposition to, this type of framing. The importance of framing, as Judith Butler describes it in *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?,* is the manner in which, through photography and video, the frame serves not only to portray reality, "but actively participates in a strategy of containment, selectively producing and enforcing what will count as reality" (2010, p.xiii). Butler further claims that the frame is always "throwing something away" (2010, p.xiii), simplifying the picture that in turn shapes how viewers perceive an event and how it is valued.

The concept of "framing" serves as an important aspect of social movements. How a cause is defined by activists and the media may differ because, while activists identify their movement in one manner, they are always secondary to a media system which has a greater influence (Walgrave & Manssens, 2005, p.116). The media can serve

to trivialize and marginalize social movements or can aid in justifying and legitimizing particular demonstrations (Walgrave & Manssens, 2005, p.117). Revolutions and social movements can be framed in many ways, but "[s]uccessful frames must not only analyze events and identify who is responsible but also ring true with an audience—or *resonate*" (Noakes & Johnston, 2005, p.2, emphasis in original). If protestors are fighting for a specific cause that may not be deemed exciting or sympathetic to an audience, the media may choose another angle to make the event appealing. This type of framing, as Butler contends, serves to create a form of reality and may not coincide with the protestors' goals.

Framing the Tunisian movement as the "Twitter Revolution" relies heavily on an already existing distinction between the East and West. As Edward Said describes in *Orientalism*, the East is understood as a complete opposite and counterpoint to the West, and "the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience" (Said, 1994, pp.1-2). This distinction serves to maintain a set of "Western" ideals that the East does not share and cannot share without the help of the West. This understanding of

the East permeates into media and news coverage, and aids in formulating perspectives to its viewers. Said argues that Orientalism gains such momentum because "Orientalism is after all a system for citing works and authors" (1994, p.23). This citing and re-citing of each other's works serves to reinforce and strengthen the image of the Orient and functions to give these descriptions of the Orient credibility. This perspective, which is so prominent in Western framing of the East, influences news coverage of the region.

Critiquing the "Twitter" Framing

In critiquing the coverage of the Tunisian Revolution in the West, Luke Allnutt argues that the 24-hour news cycle requires catchy and simple headlines, or ones that will "resonate" with the audience. Allnutt states that the "Twitter" title begins by being

circulated, "but quickly that moniker becomes a narrative, an established truth that is often wildly divergent with the reality on the ground" (Allnutt, 2011, para.5). However, as Allnutt argues, this framing is not necessarily required to coincide with what is happening in the event. This established truth, in turn, begins to stand in for the event itself and is understood as the cause for which the demonstrators are fighting. Stating that the event is the "Twitter Revolution" places social media in the forefront of the coverage and Tunisians remain in the background of their own revolution.

For example, in her piece for NPR entitled "Social Media Gets Credit for Tunisian Overthrow," Eleanor Beardsley interviews Tunisians about the use of social media during the revolution. Beardsley focuses on the manner in which demonstrations were organized online and the important aspect that this served in arranging the revolution. At the end of her piece Beardsley states, "Tunisians say theyre [sic] proud that the worlds [sic] eyes are upon them and for being the first country to tweet out a tyrant" (Beardsley, 2011, para.24). By emphasizing the use of the verb "to tweet" in this sentence, Beardsley places the focus on social media as the major component that should receive credit for the revolution. Similarly in Mike Giglio's piece "Tunisia Protests: The Facebook Revolution," the emphasis of the revolution is on social media. Giglio writes that "Ali," an organizer for the revolution, "has hardly left his home in a midsize town far away from the capital. In fact, he seldom leaves his desk." The description continues that Ali "estimate[s] that he spends at least 18 hours a day in front of his computer running a Facebook page that has become one of the primary sources of information on the protestss [sic]" (2011, para.1). Both Beardsley and Giglio's pieces frame social media at the center of the revolution.

At the same time that the "Twitter" title places social media at the center of the frame, it also, by trivializing the revolution, trivializes Arabs. Gwynne Dyer argues that the difficulty in finding a way to understand the revolution reflects Western media's "struggling to come to terms with the notion of Arab democracy" (Dyer, 2011, para.1).[1]

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[1] This notion is similar to Mahmood Mamdani's concept of the "good" and "bad" Muslim in which "good" Muslims are secular and relateable to the West, whereas the "bad" Muslims are fundamentalists and foreign to the West (p. 24).

As Said described, this difficulty coincides with an Orientalist perspective which favours a distinct East versus West dynamic. If the West is democratic and the Arab world is considered undemocratic, then this dynamic becomes complicated by Arabs fighting for democracy without the aid of American soldiers. In using a headline like the "Twitter" revolution, media coverage redresses this apparent inconsistency by establishing Western technology at the forefront to stand in for Western aid. As Tarak Barkawi argues, "Via its technologies, the West imagines itself to have been the real agent in the uprising"; this narrative is part of a colonialist storyline in which "Western white men [are] burdened with [the] responsibility for interconnecting the world, by colonising it, providing it with economic theories and finance, and inventing communications technologies" (Barkawi, 2011, para.2, para.3). Rabab El-Mahdi makes a similar statement in reference to the Egyptian revolution, stating that due to the media coverage, "Once again we are witnessing the 'empire' painting the picture of the 'fringe' and within this fringe the subaltern—'the fringe of the fringe'—are being outcast" (El-Mahdi, 2011, para.5). In Western media coverage, Arab democracy needs to be packaged in a fashion that will somehow connect it to the Western world, so that its audience can understand an Arab democratic revolution as connected to Western ideals of freedom and democracy.

These critiques of the "Twitter" title demonstrate the manner in which the framing of the revolution relied heavily on an Orientalist understanding of the East and the dependence on the simple headlines and uncomplicated framings of the 24-hour news cycle. To make headlines easy to understand, in this case, media outlets used an already established narrative of the East and the West as distinct entities with different values and societies. With this emerging change in the East, the Western coverage that used the Twitter title needed to find a manner to understand this transformation.

Surveys[2]

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[2] I created the questions for the survey after a conversation with one of the Tunisians who would later answer one of the surveys.

In order to further contextualize the "Twitter" title assigned to the Tunisian Revolution, I surveyed 50 Tunisians with questions addressing how Tunisians used social media, how they viewed the role of social media, what was the role of physical demonstrations, and how they viewed the "Twitter" title. Through these responses, I received information on how the political climate influenced their use of informal networks and social media and if "media cocooning" was a factor involved in their use of social media. Furthermore, I received insight into how these Tunisians viewed the framing of the revolution as the "Twitter Revolution."

Out of the 50 Tunisians I surveyed, 20 were inside of Tunisia during the revolution and 30 were outside of the country. From the respondents who were outside of the country, their locations were as follows: 24 in Quebec, two in Ontario, one in Senegal, one in Saudi Arabia, one in Mauritania, and one in Prince Edward Island. There were 31 male and 18 female respondents, with one undeclared. The majority of respondents, 26, were between the ages of 25-34, 15 between the ages of 35-54, seven from the age 55 and up, and one person in the 18-24 age range, with one person undeclared. While these figures are not representative of all Tunisians, they do represent a range in age, gender, and location. These figures represent diverse perspectives from those who were living inside Tunisia during the revolution and Tunisians outside the country who connected and followed the revolution using different forms of communication.

The vast majority of the respondents were using social media prior to the Tunisian revolution. Many of the respondents named Twitter, Facebook, Skype, and cell phones as social media platforms they were using. Prior to the revolution most of the respondents stated that they were using social media to exchange information, stay in contact with family, and receive uncensored news. During the revolution, the respondents expressed an increased use of social media for several reasons:

> -Les médias sociaux et surtout Facebook a été LE MOYEN
> de communication avec les reste du monde et a permis de

suivre l'évolution des événements dans le pays et de
mobiliser les gens pour sortir manifester dans les rues.

-For most of the time, it was a way to interconnect with my
friends, share thoughts, watch some videos (it was almost
the only video sharing platform accessed in Tunisia without a
proxy), etc. But then, it became a good way to get real news
concerning my country and my region (I am from Medenine.
It is hard to get news about this region from the state TV)
with a good prospective [sic] and off [sic] course
commenting them with my friends.

-J'ai surtout utilisé Facebook pour rester informée

-to get instant infos [sic]

-I only used Skype to communicate with relatives in Tunisia

This range of answers demonstrates that Facebook and social media served the
functions of communicating and keeping in contact with family, information seeking,
and initiating mobilization. These responses illustrate, as Singerman argues, the need
for these informal networks due to political repression. The first response highlights
that social media served as "the means" of communication during the revolution by
allowing Tunisians to receive uncensored information since the state television was
unreliable. This response also points to the use of social media due to "cocooning" from
the state-sponsored television that is censored and therefore untrustworthy.

While social media serves as a tool to circumvent censorship, it does not circumvent surveillance. Several of my respondents expressed trepidation in expressing themselves openly through social media:

-Au fait au départ j'étais très réticente puisque je savais que nos comptes sur facebook [sic] étaient piratés par les autorités et je me contentais de lire et de visualiser tout ce qu'on m'envoi sans faire des commentaires.

-At first, I was a little bit afraid because I know that the state police have all people's logins and password, so, what, I did is only watching videos from facebook [sic] pages that I know were good and reliable. I will show these videos to some friends of mine but never publishing them or commenting them. Then, when the extent of the horror grew and the number of peoples sharing videos grew, I knew that the situation was out of control for the government and they couldn't monitor everybody. So, I started sharing videos, news and of course sharing thoughts and comments.

The respondents thus rejected the notion of the Internet as a completely free and open space without repercussions, instead illustrating that while social media served as a crucial way to communicate, there are limitations to this type of technology. With strict Internet laws in the country, Tunisians are always at risk even while using social media.

While social media proved to be a useful tool for Tunisians, it did not serve as their sole means of information about the revolution. As Seib argues, other means of communication are important during revolutions, including Al-Jazeera; accordingly, the Tunisians I surveyed combined their social media use with other forms of communication:

-J'ai utilisé les sites de France 24, Jeune Afrique, The
Independent, Alarabiya Tv, nawaat.org et par intermittence
facebook [sic] quand il n'était pas fermé.

-La tele [sic] en suivant les informations sue [sic] Al Jazeera,
l'internet : la presse etrangere [sic], dans le cadre
d'associations non gouvernementales.

-Les sites d'infos tunisiens : businessnews,
webmanagercenter

Social media did not serve as the sole means of avoiding dependency on the state news.
Many Tunisians were able to use websites by proxy that were censored in the country,
satellite channels, and foreign press.

These responses counter what Alexia Tsotsis argues in "The #Tunisian
Revolution Wasn't Televized [sic], But You Could Follow It On Twitter." In discussing
the events that were occurring in Tunisia, Tsotsis asks the reader, "How do I know all
this? Twitter. And where did you first hear about the Tunisian revolution? If the
answer's not Twitter, it's probably Facebook. If the answer's not Facebook, then it's
probably a blog, or some other sundry social feed" (Tsotsis, 2011, para.4). In her piece,
she juxtaposes the information she received on social media and blogs with American
television news, specifically MSNBC, which failed to recognize Tunisia as a legitimate
news story. For example, Tsotsis notes that instead of covering Tunisia, MSNBC
included a story on Martha Stewart's dog and "a guy who was arrested for drunk-driving
a donkey in Texas" (Tsotsis, 2011, para.1, para.9). While Tsotsis illustrates a trend
among American news outlets, her experience does not necessarily reflect the only way
people sought information about the Tunisian Revolution. In fact, the Tunisians I

surveyed found various means to find information about the revolution, both inside and outside of the country. Tsotsis hails the "Twitter" revolution because she, in the United States, found her information through social media, and in this way, her article says more about how she, in the West, understood the revolution than about how Tunisians understand their revolution.

Another aspect of the revolution that divides Tunisians and the Western media coverage is the physical demonstrations. Several of my respondents attended physical demonstrations and their responses highlighted how these protests aided in establishing relationships among Tunisians that they did not have online. While some respondents did not attend any physical demonstrations, there were only positive responses about the experience from those who were in attendance:

> -Oui, c'était une très bonne expérience, malgré la peur de la police, j'ai ressenti une solidarité montante entre les tunisiens

> -J'ai participé aux manifestations qui ont suivi la chute de régime, c'était un moment de grâce extraordinaire.

> -A [sic] beaucoup, de marche, le sentiment, c'est que les jeunes sont apparus moins superficiels, on les a découverts ils nous ont découverts.

> -I only went to the final big one in Tunis in front of the ministry of Interior. The experience was life changing, because, I felt proud to be Tunisian, proud to be member of this group of people that were there. Strangely, also, for the

first time of my life, I was not afraid of the police or the riot
police. I was finally free.

The demonstration was peaceful; the police did not attack us
until 2 or 3 in the afternoon. Then, it was tear gas' white
smoke everywhere; I was stifled by the smell, dizzy,
disoriented and partially blind while trying to run,
thankfully, I got my way into a building staircase nearby,
where people give me some milk to wash my face.

The respondents discussed a sense of unity, solidarity, pride, and connection, fostered
through the physical demonstrations. These four responses also evidence how
Tunisians overcame fear of the regime through the visibility of these demonstrations,
providing a counterpoint to Singerman's assertion that the invisibility of social networks
is crucial under authoritarian regimes. While invisible networks aided in organizing the
revolution, and the demonstrations were organized online, the visibility of the citizens is
what enabled connections to be forged within the networks. Anastasia Kavada argues
that along with social networking tools, a "movement becomes dispersed in the online
realm,"

face-to-face meetings and street demonstrations can
counterbalance such dispersion by bringing activists together
in the same physical space at the same time. This
strengthens feelings of belonging as it makes the collective a
tangible reality, something that's more difficult to achieve
online. (2010, p. 115)

The physical demonstrations generated both a sense of discovery and a sense of community, feelings that coalesced into what Seib identifies as the "public's willingness," a necessary precondition for the revolution to gain its impact. Furthermore, as my survey respondents indicate, the physical demonstrations ushered in a feeling of solidarity because the public were willing to risk going into the streets together.

In addition to the sense of solidarity generated through the demonstrations, the Tunisians I surveyed discussed the physical demonstrations as the key aspect of the entire movement that had the most important and lasting impact on the revolution. The respondents believed that had there been only social media and no physical demonstrations, the revolution would not have had an impact:

-Ca [sic] aurait été frustrant de ne pas bouger et faire vivre les idéaux qu'on faisait circuler sur le net.

-Sans les manifestations dans les rues, les médias sociaux auraient contribué à amplifier un sentiment de frustration qu'il fallait refouler.

-Aucune! on ne fait pas la révolution pat [sic] mail ou en publiant une video, c'est dans la rue, que la révolution se fait et a été faite

-Les manifestations physiques se sont préparées entre autre avec les medias [sic] mais jamais une si importante conjoncture peut être guidée par un bouton sur un écran!

-there was social media since 1987, that did never have an impact on real life. but maybe helped to boil more and to prepare for the "physical demonstration"

-un sentiment s'inachevé

These responses convey a level of frustration at the media coverage that portrayed the revolution as having been conducted solely online. As one respondent noted, the revolution does not happen by pressing a button on a screen, which suggests that online, the discussion of the revolution is simply in the abstract and not tangible, but it is in the streets that the revolution happens. Similarly, Cameron Abadi argues in his piece on Iran that "Twitter" or "Facebook" Revolutions require physical demonstrations in order for them to have an impact (2010, para.10); social media can only serve as an initiator, not the agent of change itself. Not one Tunisian that I surveyed responded that the revolution would have been successful without the physical demonstrations. One respondent offered this assessment about whether or not the movement would succeed without protests in the streets: "The revolution would not have taken place, the president still in power, and no political or economic reform."

These respondents' assertions that social media was not sufficient for creating the revolution points to another disconnect between the accounts of the Tunisians I surveyed and those of pieces crediting social media. In Nate Anderson's "Tweeting Tyrants Out of Tunisia," for example, he states:

Even yesterday, it would have been too much to say that blogger[s], tweeters, Facebook users, Anonymous and Wikileaks had 'brought down' the Tunisian government, but with today's news that the country's president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali has fled the country, it becomes a more plausible claim to make. (Anderson, 2011, para. 1)

While Anderson mentions physical demonstrations, and does state that social media did not serve as the only means of the revolution, he discusses these other means as secondary to social media. However, this was the opposite of the way my respondents understood the revolution. Social media was the catalyst; the physical demonstrations were the revolution.

Regardless of how the Tunisians I interviewed were adamant of the larger impact of physical demonstrations, they did recognize a role for social media in the revolution:

-They helped to make people aware of the importance of the problem, but nothing to do with the courage that Tunisian [sic] had to fight

-I think for the most part it helped people stay in touch and plan demonstrations. I think staying connected had a big part in the planning and organization which allowed the demonstrations to get larger and larger: and hence, have a greater impact.

-les medias [sic] sociaux ont joués un rôle très important dans la revolution [sic] tunisienne le faite qu'elle a mis tout le monde au courant de tout ce qui se passe.

-Les médias sociaux étaient un outil fédérateur et mobilisateur qui a permis au peuple de communiquer et de s'informer et a facilité l'organisation des manifestations.

-Un bon moteur qui a eu un effet d'entrainement [sic]
conséquent

-les médias sociaux ont joué le rôle de catalyseur pour
renforcer et propager la révolte des tunisiens.

As Seib states, "[t]he complexity of democratization should be respected, however, and
no single factor's impact should be overrated [...t]hat said, the role of media should also
not be *underrated*" (2007, p. 2, emphasis in original). My respondents recognized
several roles for social media, including: to spread the word about the events in Tunisia,
to communicate and organize the resistance, and to mobilize Tunisians to go into the
streets in protest. However, a few respondents recognized that, while social media
played a role in this revolution, as one respondent wrote, "il n'est pas l'unique à avoir
réussi ce mouvement." The Tunisians I surveyed wanted to legitimize the role of social
media in the movement, but not allow it to overshadow other factors.

        According to the Tunisians I surveyed, the role of social media was important,
but it was not defining of this revolution. The majority of the Tunisians who responded
to my survey did not identify strongly with the "Twitter Revolution" title, although they
recognized the role of social media in the revolution:

-Le web a eu une grande part dans l'information des citoyens
sur les lieux des manifestations

-Oui elle est juste, puisqu'elle situe, la révolution dans le
temps.

-In part it is true.

-that's right. I agree that it's the first Twitter Revolution. I think that the trigger is wikileaks [sic] but Facebook was the fuel.

Another frequent response to this question was that naming the revolution the "Twitter Revolution" suggested that it erases Tunisians, the physical demonstrations, and the deaths from the frame:

-NON! LA REVOLUTION [sic] TUNISIENNE C'EST LA REVOLUTION [sic] DE LA LIBERTE [sic] ET DE LA DIGNITE [sic] ELLE A ETE [sic] GAGNE [sic] DANS LA RUE AVANT TOUT! LES MORTS NE SONT PAS DU TOUT VIRTUELS!! LES PREMIER A MOURIR N'AVAIENT PAS INTERNET ET ENCORE MOINS FACEBOOK OU TWITTER

-Appeler la révolution d'un peuple une révolution Facebook/ Twitter c'est en fait la Rabaisser, ceux qui sont morts de vrais ce n'est pas un vidéo Game, et je ne crois pas qu'un peuple cultivé et conscient des problèmes qu'il vit tous les jours va se Laisser guider par la propagande de tous ces médias, quant à moi je leur réserve toujours Leur rôle qu'ils ont toujours joué! Quand on parle de propagande il est impératif d'avoir toujours un espace de critique et d'analyse et surtout un esprit sélectif entre l'info et l'intox.

These responses illustrate a disconnection from the "Twitter" title because it implies that the action occurred in a safe virtual world separate from Tunisia and the events on

the ground. By giving precedence to Twitter, Tunisians are not seen as having agency or making any sacrifices. These responses reveal that these respondents feel the "Twitter" title fails to recognize the materiality of the revolution.

While many respondents did not identify with the Twitter title, they also did not identify with other titles:

> -Des termes comme « révolution Twitter » ou « la révolution Facebook » ne me dérangent pas mais par contre je n'aime pas du tout le terme « la révolution du Jasmin » beaucoup utilisé en Europe et aux États-Unis.

> -C'est pas une révolution twitter [sic] ni révolution du Jasmin : révolution pour vivre avec respect.

Several respondents offered titles they feel is more representative of how they viewed the revolution:

> -C'est la révolution de la jeunesse suivi par toutes les catégories sociales c'est la révolution de la liberté et de la dignité ce n'est twitter [sic] ni jasmin

> -I don't like this title, over 230 people died for this revolution; none of them was killed for using Twitter or facebook [sic]. Facebook and Twitter helped yes, but the sacrifices that the Tunisian people made were the key element to the success of our revolution.

> My best title for the Tunisian Revolution is: **The Dignity Revolution**.

> We did the revolution to restore our dignity and to preserve it.

-Moi à mon Avis je pense que le nom Twitter c'est un nom que ne merite [sic] pas de prendre place à la revolution [sic] tunisienne parce ce qui merite [sic] ce nom la c'est
MOHAMED BOUAZIZI

-Revolution [sic] Tunisenne pure laine

-TOTALEMENT EN DÉSACCORD. LES MEDIAS [sic] SOCIAUX AVAIENT EU UN RÔLE TRÈS IMPORTANT MAIS IL NE S'AGIT PAS NON PLUS DE « REVOLUTION [sic] TWITTER, » IL S'AGIT D'UNE REVOLUTION [sic] FACE AUX INJUSTICES ET AUX INEGALITÉS [sic]. DES MANIFESTANTS SONT DÉCEDÉS ET CE N'ÉTAIT PAS SUR TWITTER.

-C'est la revolution [sic] du peuple

These responses particularly highlight how the 50 surveys conducted demonstrate several tensions, of these, two stand out: the first tension includes understanding social media as a liberating tool, but also a tool of surveillance; and the second evidences a disjuncture between activities online versus activities "in person." Together these tensions demonstrate that the "Twitter" title is disconnected from how Tunisians themselves view the event. Naming the revolution the "Twitter" revolution suggests that social media is a completely liberating tool and can be used to circumvent government restrictions. Most of my respondents were using social media before and during the revolution, and most agreed that it was useful to communicate around those restrictions. This notion of free communication is celebrated in naming the revolution the "Twitter" revolution, however, this was complicated in the responses where several respondents emphasized that there is still a risk using social media in that the government still observes these actions. Therefore, the concept that social media is an

emancipatory communication tool fails to recognize that many Tunisians still use social media cautiously.

With the regard to the tension between online activity and "in person" activity, all of the respondents agreed that had there been no physical demonstrations, there would have been no revolution. Many Tunisians argued that events that happened in the street were more valuable to the cause as Tunisians were physically reclaiming their country. The physical demonstrations were also symbolic of rejecting a state in which Tunisians had been unable to express themselves freely in their own country and, as reported in the surveys, doing so provided a greater sense of community than could be achieved online. To many respondents, the "Twitter" title stated that using social media suggested that the revolution was as simple as creating a "status update," but for many Tunisians the revolution came at a greater cost. What occurred online was not considered sufficient revolution because in the end it was words and communication without action, but the physical demonstrations were action, a physical manifestation of revolution.

While the responses thus underscored the risk involved in physical demonstrations, they also conveyed that there was a risk in the use of social media, where respondents stated that they were still careful online due to government observation. These responses suggest that the "Twitter" title does not reflect the risk of surveillance as well as the physical risk Tunisians undertook, implying that Tunisians were safely inside their homes texting and emailing when the revolution occurred. However, as my respondents stated, the revolution was not only for Twitter users and many responses implied that these individuals will be forgotten with this title. I would argue that this is not a contradiction, but a response to media that tended to categorize the revolution through a playful, social media framing. The responses suggest that the Tunisians I surveyed did not agree with this framing, because they did not want the risk to be minimized by the promotion of social media.

One of my respondents from outside of Tunisia stated that the "Twitter Revolution" title "is a western thing, they would like to take all the credit, I doubt its

[sic] called the twitter [sic] revolution in Tunisia." While some Tunisians did recognize that the title did, in part, represent the revolution, most of the Tunisians I surveyed identify the revolution as belonging to Tunisians, their youth, and their dignity. In this sense, the "Twitter" title fails to represent the revolution as embedded within the Tunisian experience, even more so considering that the title erases the majority of Tunisians who do not use the Internet from the frame. As one of my respondents noted: "Having social media is ok but I think that in Tunisia not everybody has access to it and it doesn't represent more than 20% of the population." According to the UNHCR, the number is approximately 33% in Tunisia, but the respondent makes a good point about framing. If this frame includes only Internet users, then 67% of Tunisians are not represented. Similarly, in his piece about the revolution in Moldova, which was also named a "Twitter" revolution, Vadim Nikitin includes an image of graffiti on a brick wall which states "This Revolution is for Twitter Users Only" (2009). This image, in addition to commenting on the exclusion of people without Internet access from the revolution's framing, points to how the "Twitter" title renders "Twitter" or "Facebook" users in general responsible for the revolution, as though everyone can take part in this victory. In contrast, my survey respondents, when asked about the "Twitter" title, gave their own titles that were more Tunisia-centric. These responses suggest that they are taking the responsibility for the revolution away from all social media users and back to Tunisians themselves. The tensions around the framing of the revolution show how Tunisians were trying to bring the focus back to Tunisia and away from Twitter.

Conclusion

The Tunisian Revolution's success in ousting a dictator was celebrated as a sign of democracy and quickly spread throughout the Arab world. Naming the event the "Twitter Revolution" was one manner in which the movement was categorized to contain the revolution within a pre-existing understanding of the dynamic between the East and West. This revolution did occur in a period of new media and media cocooning in the Arab world, where Tunisians mobilized through social media as an unregulated, yet surveilled, communications tool. In identifying how digital activism operates and the types of informal networks used in Arab countries due to authoritarian rule, social

media played a role in the revolution, but many of the Tunisians I surveyed are hesitant to accept the "Twitter" title as the definition of their revolution. The respondents to my survey all recognized the usefulness of social media for connecting with family and friends, seeking information, and organizing demonstrations, but they valued other reasons for their revolution, namely issues like "dignity" and "respect." Therefore, while Tunisians recognize the importance of social media, they did not view it as defining their experience. Furthermore, since understanding the revolution as the "Twitter Revolution" excludes the majority of the population from the frame, I would argue that this framing only celebrates the population familiar to the West and erases non-users of social media from the frame. By accrediting physical demonstrations as the aspect of the revolution with the most impact, the Tunisians I surveyed demonstrate that the visible and unified Tunisians willing to sacrifice their lives in the streets are those who won the revolution.

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