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# The Role of Social Media in Mobilizing Political Protest

## Evidence from the Tunisian Revolution

*Anita Breuer*

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## Abstract

One of the hallmarks of the Tunisian uprising that ousted President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali in January 2011 was its broad base of support. To the surprise of many Middle East experts who had previously regarded co-opted and quiescent middle classes as the bedrock of stability for authoritarian regimes in the region, the Tunisian revolution rode on the back of a broad coalition of social forces that united an alienated intellectual elite with the rural poor and urban middle classes in opposition to the regime. It is a widely shared assumption that this joining of disparate forces would not have been possible without modern communication technologies and social media. But it is less clear exactly how such social media interacted with other contextual factors to bring about a national protest movement of sufficient proportions to topple an extremely entrenched authoritarian regime. Drawing on evidence from the popular protests in Tunisia between December 2010 and January 2011, expert interviews with Tunisian bloggers, and a web survey conducted among Tunisian Facebook users, this paper argues that social media (1) allowed a “digital elite” to form personal networks and circumvent the national media blackout by brokering information for outside mainstream media; (2) helped to overcome the “free rider” problem of collective action by reporting the magnitude of protest events; and (3) facilitated the formation of a national collective identity which was supportive of protest action and transcended geographical and socio-economic disparities by providing a shared, mobilizing element of emotional grievance.



## Contents

### Abbreviations

<b>1.</b>	<b>The role of new information and communication technologies (ICT) in the mobilization of political protest</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>2.</b>	<b>Theoretical approaches to protest mobilization and the role of new ICT in authoritarian contexts</b>	<b>4</b>
2.1	Psychological and attitudinal approaches	4
2.2	Rational choice approaches	5
2.3	Resource mobilization and social capital approaches	6
2.4	Structural or network account of activism	7
<b>3.</b>	<b>Methodology of data collection</b>	<b>8</b>
3.1	Sampling	9
3.2	Socio-demographic sample statistics	11
<b>4.</b>	<b>The role of ICT and social media in protest mobilization during the Tunisian uprising</b>	<b>13</b>
4.1	ICT infrastructure development in Tunisia	13
4.2	ATI censorship activities	13
4.3	The preparation phase: 1998–2010	15
4.4	The ignition phase, 17 <sup>th</sup> December – late December 2010	18
4.5	The escalation phase, late December 2010–12 <sup>th</sup> January 2011	19
4.6	The collapse of the regime, 12–14 January	21
<b>5.</b>	<b>Conclusions</b>	<b>25</b>

## **Figures and Tables**

Figure 1: Emotional response to regime repression	21
Figure 2: Awareness of upcoming protest events and expected event turnouts	22
Figure 3: Perception of personal risk and group efficacy in relation to protest	23
Figure 4: Personal participation in street protests between 17 December and 14 January	23
Figure 5: Normative ethical views on protest movement and personal protest participation: patriotism	24
Table 1: Conventional and unconventional political behaviour before and after the revolution	10
Table 2: Patterns of Internet use and social network embeddedness	12
Table 3: Country-wise Internet traffic for Nawaat.org prior to January 2011	17

## Abbreviations

ATI	Agence Tunisienne d'Internet
CPG	Compagnie Phosphate de Gafsa
CPJ	Committee to Protect Journalists
ICT	Information and Communication Technologies
ISP	Internet Service Provider
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
MEPI	Middle East Partnership Initiative
NGO	Nongovernmental Organisation
RCD	Rassemblement constitutionnel démocratique
RMT	Resource Mobilization Theory
UGTT	Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail
WSIS	World Summit on the Information Society



## **1. The role of new information and communication technologies (ICT) in the mobilization of political protest**

Over the past two decades, the political role of the Internet and digital social media has become a well-established topic of research concerning political communication and participation. The Internet's prominent role in the diffusion of popular protest across the Arab World and the ouster of authoritarian regimes in Tunisia and Egypt has reinvigorated the debate on the implications of social media for strategies of political mobilization and for patterns of protest diffusion, as well as for influencing individual political engagement.

Prior research on these aspects has largely been conducted in the context of consolidated Western democracies and has focused on system-supporting forms of political participation, i.e. activities designed to influence the actions of legitimate governments either directly, by trying to affect the decisions of elected officials, or indirectly, by influencing the selection of officials.<sup>1</sup> This includes both conventional political participation (voting, donating money to a campaign or political group, canvassing, attending political meetings and electoral rallies, taking an interest in and talking about politics) and legal but unconventional forms of participation (signing petitions, participating in authorized demonstrations, political consumerism).

The question that has clearly received most attention in political science literature is whether and how digital media affect the political process at the micro-level of individual behaviour. From a resource perspective (Brady / Verba / Schlozman 1995), it appears plausible that a positive relationship exists between the individual's exposure to and use of digital media on the one hand and the extent of his or her political engagement on the other. Platforms for social networking such as Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook have exponentially multiplied the possibilities for retrieving and disseminating political information, thus affording the internet user a variety of supplemental access points to political information and activity that come at little cost in terms of time, money, and effort. However, and to the disappointment of many a researcher in this field, the impact of digital media use on participation at the individual level in Western democracies has remained "underwhelming" (Bimber / Copeland 2011). A meta-analysis by Boulianne (2009) confirmed a positive but very modest impact of the Internet. Furthermore, these small positive effects appear to be further moderated by factors that have long been established as standard predictors of political participation, such as social capital (Gibson / Howard / Ward 2000), education (Krueger 2002; Tolbert / McNeal 2003), and political interest (Xenos / Moy 2007). Regarding the meso-level of social organization, there is a broad scholarly consensus that the Internet has expanded the collective action repertoire of organizational actors such as social movements and grassroots organizations (Breuer 2012; Geser 2001; McAdam / Tarrow / Tilly 2001; van Laer / van Aelst 2009). The strategic toolkit of these actors, which is predominantly composed of actions performed on the non-institutional side of politics and outside the realm of conventional political participation, has been complemented by the additional decentralized and informal procedures that the Internet offers for mobilization (Geser 2001; Krueger 2006).

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1 In addition, a substantial body of literature has accumulated regarding the impact of Internet use on the formation of social capital, which is considered an important predictor of political participation (Shah / Kwak / Holbert 2001; Shah / McLeod / Yoon 2001; Gibson / Howard / Ward 2000; Jennings / Zeitner 2003; Xenos / Moy 2007).

At the same time, and while there is a widespread popular belief that the Internet will undermine authoritarian rule, the political implications of the Internet in the context of authoritarian or democratizing political systems remain relatively under-researched. True, a few inroads have been made: for example, a case study series produced by the Berkman Centre for Internet & Society investigated the impact of ICT on civic engagement in authoritarian regimes (Chowdhury 2008; Goldstein 2007; Goldstein / Rotich 2008); and several publications have focused on the specific cases of Iran (Kelly / Etling; Rahimi 2003; Tezcür 2012; Weitz 2010) and China (Chen 2009; Dai 2000; Weber 2007; Yang 2003; Yu 2006). By and large, however, the literature on democratic transitions is still a long way from having established a clear understanding of the causal relationship between the new media and protest mobilization under authoritarian rule; and the rich empirical data needed to establish such causal influences remains to be gathered (Aday et al. 2010; Kalathil / Boas 2001; Lynch 1999).

The literature on contentious politics draws a sharp distinction between protests carried out under democracy and those carried out under authoritarianism. Democracy is generally viewed as a system in which the organization of (usually) non-violent protest on behalf of social movements constitutes a central element of mainstream politics for the purpose of voicing dissent from the political status quo (Meyer / Tarrow 1998). Under authoritarian rule, in contrast, the task of coordinating and orchestrating civil protest is significantly more difficult. From the resource view of mobilization, the main challenges consist in the fact that, in contrast to elites, ordinary citizens in authoritarian regimes do not control weapons, personnel, or other political resources. Their power resides exclusively in numbers. However, since autocrats use persecution, repression and propaganda to silence opposition,<sup>2</sup> citizens in such cases face incomplete information about their fellow citizens' attitudes toward the regime and their disposition to revolt.

In view of the above, and despite the historical precedents of the classical “social revolutions” (Skocpol 1979) it has been postulated that public protest under authoritarianism will be rare, spontaneous, politically and geographically isolated, and will largely occur without coordination through organized social movements (McAdam / Tarrow / Tilly 2001; Tilly 2004; Tullock 2005). In explaining the breakdown of authoritarian regimes, the political economy literature has consequently focused mainly on the role of elites and has argued that the most serious challenges to autocrats come from their own ruling coalitions, i.e. the military or security forces (Geddes 2003; Geddes 2006), the ruling party or coalition (Boix and Svobik 2008; Guriev and Sonin 2009; Magaloni 2008), or royal families (Fjelde 2010; Kricheli / Livne / Magaloni 2011).

Nevertheless, civilian-led anti-government protest does in fact occur under authoritarianism and may eventually even spread across state boundaries. The past three decades have seen four cross-national waves of anti-regime mobilization in different regions of the world: 1) popular opposition and regime change in Latin America in the 1970s and 1980s, 2) the spread of popular challenges to communist party rule that occurred in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe from 1989–1991, 3) the “colour” revolutions of post-communist Europe and Eurasia 1996–2005, and finally 4) the ongoing protests in the

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2 When citizens are credibly in a position to threaten social disorder and the costs of repression become high, however, authoritarian elites may also opt to offer democratization in order to counter the revolutionary threat (Acemoglu / Robinson 2006).

Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Further isolated cases of popular anti-authoritarian protest include the Chinese Tiananmen Protests in 1989, the Indonesian Student Revolt in 1999, the Saffron Revolution in Myanmar in 2007, and the Green Movement in Iran 2009 – 2010. McFaul (2002) emphasizes the occurrence of massive acts of civil protests as a distinctive feature of the “fourth wave of democratization” as opposed to previous more elite-driven waves of democratic transition.

Drawing on the case of the Tunisian uprising that led to the ouster of President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali in January 2011, this paper seeks to test the ability of existing theoretical frameworks to explain popular protest under authoritarian rule.

One of the hallmarks of the Tunisian protest movement that ousted President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali in January 2011 was its broad social base. Regime support from conservative, risk-averse middle classes had long been considered one of the major obstacles to democratization in the region. Continued support for authoritarian rule by the middle classes, especially state employees and small-to-medium business entrepreneurs from Morocco to Oman, was seen as related to high levels of regional conflict, a perceived potential for democracy to lead to increased civil strife deriving from ethnic or religious cleavages, as well as fears regarding the potential empowerment of Islamist parties seeking to reverse economic liberalization (Greenwood 2008). In this respect, the perception of the MENA region’s middle classes resembled the Marxist conception of the “*petite bourgeoisie*” – i.e. essentially a class averse to social change given a vested interest in protecting its financial assets and its standard of living (Solimano 2009). One observer of the Tunisian political scene pointedly summed-up Ben Ali’s tacit bargain with the middle class as: “*Shut up and consume!*”<sup>3</sup>

Contrary to this notion, however, and to the surprise of many MENA experts, the Tunisian revolution was borne by a broad coalition of social forces that united an alienated intellectual elite with the rural poor and urban middle classes in opposition to the regime. It is a widely shared assumption that this joining of forces would not have been possible without modern communication technologies and social media, both of which helped to bridge geographical and social distances. But it is less clear how exactly social media interacted with other contextual factors to bring about a national protest movement of sufficient size to topple an extremely entrenched authoritarian regime. To advance our understanding of this complex dynamical process, the remainder of this paper proceeds as follows:

Part 2 offers a brief overview of the major theoretical approaches to protest mobilization and discusses how the Internet and new Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) fit in with them.

Part 3 introduces the methodology used to collect data on the Tunisian case, including qualitative expert interviews with Tunisian Internet activists and a quantitative web survey of 600 Tunisian Internet users.

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3 Goldstein, Eric: A Middle-Class Revolution, in: Foreign Policy, 18 January 2011; online: [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/01/18/a\\_middle\\_class\\_revolution?hidecomments=yes](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/01/18/a_middle_class_revolution?hidecomments=yes) (accessed 29 Aug. 2012)

Part 4 provides an in-depth, descriptive account of the formation and activities of dissident networks of Tunisian Internet activists and combines this with individual data on Internet use and political protest behaviour gathered in the web survey.

In conclusion, Part 5 shows that ICT contributed to popular protest mobilization against the authoritarian regime of Ben Ali in three main ways: (1) by facilitating the **formation of networks** of digital activists who challenged the regime's control of the public sphere; (2) by **disseminating censored information** on human rights violations by the state on the one hand and the magnitude of anti-regime protests on the other. This information enabled Tunisians to mobilize collective action on the basis of shared grievances and to overcome the barrier of fear associated with protest under authoritarianism; and (3) by enabling the **formation of a national collective identity** that facilitated **intergroup collaboration** between socially and geographically distant segments of Tunisian society by providing elements of emotional mobilization.

## 2. Theoretical approaches to protest mobilization and the role of new ICT in authoritarian contexts

### 2.1 Psychological and attitudinal approaches

Traditional grievance or relative deprivation models of political activism, first proposed in the late 1960s and further developed in the 1970s, focused on psychological factors that lead people to engage in contentious politics (Block / Haan / Smith 1968; Braungart 1971; Fendrich / Krauss 1978; Gurr 1970; Lewis / Kraut 1972; Thomas 1971). As Muller and Jukam (1983) have written: "*People who take part in acts of civil disobedience or political violence are discontented about something.*" The underlying psychological mechanism at work is that unfulfilled material expectations cause anger, frustration and resentment which manifest themselves in an individual propensity to protest. The theory of relative deprivation also bears an analogy to modernization theory: According to Huntington (1968), political instability is unleashed by rapid social change, unfulfilled economic expectations, and the resulting political mobilization of previously disaffected groups of citizens. While the relative deprivation approach emphasized the primacy of material grievances, more recent studies have shifted the focus of attention towards emotional motives that relate to beliefs about society (Aminzade 2001; Goodwin / Jasper / Polletta 2001; Jasper / Poulsen 1995; Jasper 1998; Oliver / Johnston 2000). People may be motivated to engage in protest out of a sense of moral indignation provoked by an emotional response to an aggravating situation. Reactive emotions such as anger, moral outrage, or confusion in the face of injustice can trigger the decision to participate in protest events (van Laer 2011). Strong reactive emotions may even incline these citizens to participate in protests that do not have pre-existing affective ties to a protest movement or personal links to other protesters (Jasper / Poulsen 1995; van Laer 2011).

While material and moral grievances may provide an abundance of motives under authoritarian rule, the ability of civil society to funnel these motives into collective action is usually thwarted by the fact that the public sphere is sealed: the national narrative is controlled by a government which usually resorts to a mix of censorship, intimidation and

persecution to suppress information on economic malperformance, human rights violations, corruption or any other issue which may negatively reflect on itself.

By providing a space for free speech, on the other hand, the Internet poses an existential threat to the ability of authoritarian governments to control this national narrative (Kuebler 2011). Web-based communication technologies makes it possible to expose non-governmental narratives to a wide public. Once such information is leaked, it may unleash a dual effect: On the individual level it can act as a cognitive maximizer that pushes people into protest action, especially if it meets with and reinforces personal experiences of economic deprivation or abusive treatment at the hands of government agents. At the macro-level of collective outcomes, content that evokes negative emotions has a high potential to “go viral”. Berger and Milkman (2010) have shown that anger and anxiety as emotional states of heightened physiological arousal are key forces in driving social transmission and diffusion. In the context of an authoritarian state, this implies that information which is prone to produce negative emotions has a high potential to quickly diffuse on the Net and virtually spiral out of governmental control.

Following this line of theoretical reasoning, it can be hypothesized that the Internet provided an element of emotional mobilization in the Tunisian uprising by helping to break the grip of state censorship and by making information on corruption in the regime and its human rights violations available to a large segment of the population.

## 2.2 Rational choice approaches

The “grievance approach” has been seriously challenged by the “rational choice” approach. Tullock (1971) and Olson (1965) argued that grievances are essentially irrelevant to a self-interested individual’s decision regarding participation in collective political action such as protest or rebellion. Grievances typically represent a desire for outcomes that satisfy the definition of a public good, such as a reduction in inequality or a change in government policy. Tullock’s *Paradox of Revolution* (1971) consists in the fact that the actions of each ordinary member of a large group have no discernible impact on the group’s overall success. The result is a lack of incentive for the individual to endure the transaction costs of protest participation, since he will enjoy the public good in any case – if others provide it (the “free rider” view). However, the explanatory power of conventional Rational Choice Theory is limited because it predicts excessive abstention. The theoretical challenge hence consists in incorporating the demand for the public good into an individual utility calculus without violating the logic of free riding (Finkel / Muller / Opp 1989). The dynamics of personal beliefs and group efficacy offer a potential solution to this challenge. Individuals may believe that they are personally efficacious and that their participation will consequently contribute to ensuring the public good. Alternatively, ethical principles such as personal honour or patriotic duty may induce persons to participate in the provision of public goods. Where such individual convictions are coupled with the perception that the group is likely to succeed, they can produce an interactive effect of positive expected utility from protest participation.

Obviously, under authoritarianism the mobilization of protest faces a serious challenge: Given that the public sphere is sealed, citizens are incompletely informed about their fellow citizens’ attitudes toward the regime and their disposition to rebel. They can also ex-

pect to pay a high personal cost (arrest, incarceration, or death on streets) if they participate in unsuccessful protests. Therefore, they will turn out to do so only if they are convinced that the government's ability to crush the protest will be undermined by the magnitude of the protest (Hendrix / Haggard / Magaloni 2009).

The threshold model for participation in collective action in networks posits that the individual threshold of each person for taking risks depends on the perceived participation of others (Granovetter 1978). This information is primarily conveyed through social networks. On the other hand, in making a decision to accept the risks associated with protest, the individual is not making a merely personal decision. He joins a larger group of persons who have made the same decision before him, thus also setting a precedent for others (Hassanpour 2010). Such a precedent has informational value that increases with the degree of repressiveness of the regime at hand. As Kricheli / Livne / Magaloni (2011) demonstrate, a protest's information-revealing potential is maximized when it is very costly for citizens to oppose the regime. Under such circumstances, a protest event transmits a strong informative signal that is very likely to induce many more citizens to take to the streets and cascade into mass disobedience. Hence, while acts of civil resistance may be rarer in highly repressive autocracies, such acts are significantly more likely to spread and cause a regime breakdown than in less repressive systems.

In this context, the Internet can influence the individual's cost-benefit calculation regarding protest participation in two ways: First, online content that documents past protest events may trigger informational cascades that lead to mass civil uprisings. Second, the event management features offered by some social networking sites (e.g. "Facebook group events") inform users about the prospective turnout in upcoming events.

In this sense, we hypothesize that the Internet helped individual Tunisian citizens to overcome the rational choice dilemma of collective action by providing them with information about the magnitude of past and upcoming protest events.

### 2.3 Resource mobilization and social capital approaches

Resource Mobilization Theory (RMT) developed as a reaction to the rational choice approaches, i.e. to the latter's implicit premise of "irrationality" on the part of those who engage in collective action. In contrast to the 'grievance' approach, which emphasizes deprivation and dissatisfaction as the primary incentives for engaging in protest, RMT claims that open and affluent societies provide more favourable conditions for contention to thrive, thus making protest more common (Dalton / van Sickle 2005). According to RMT, the extensive existence of NGOs and other civil society groups provides the crucial variable which links dissatisfaction with political action; it allows citizens to engage freely in a variety of voluntary associations and to develop the social and organizational skills required for promoting their interests (Coleman 1988; Putnam 2000; Putnam / Feldstein 2003). At first sight, then, the occurrence of protest in closed authoritarian societies runs counter to RMT's basic premises. This phenomenon can only be explained by the broader assumption that even closed societies may create resources suited to the stimulation of collective action once they reach a certain degree of socio-economic development.

As nations progress economically, they produce denser communication infrastructures. The Internet may then prove to be a key factor in the orchestration of protest where institutional distrust looms large and civic activism is systematically suppressed. In such cases, Internet use can coincide with participatory dynamics that are characterized less by formal relationships in civil society than by spatially dispersed, loosely-knit personal networks that are heavily mediated by electronic communication (Wellman et al. 2003). The availability of Internet communication technologies enables activist groups to communicate with potential constituencies over large distances. Such technology thus constitutes an important resource for achieving intergroup collaboration and challenging the strategies of social isolation typically employed by authoritarian regimes.

Given the relatively high level of Tunisia's ICT-infrastructure development, it is reasonable to conjecture that the Internet provided an alternative communication realm which enabled political activists to create networks despite heavy state control over the public sphere and the media.

## 2.4 Structural or network account of activism

Critics of the rational choice approaches argue that they fail to embed the individual in relationships and group affiliations that are crucial in influencing human decision-making. Structural or network theories, by contrast, regard the causes of collective action as having their roots outside the individual and as being strongly influenced by structural proximity and network connections (Friedman / McAdam 1992). As Snow / Zurcher / Ekland-Olson (1980) point out: no matter how greatly persons may be inclined to participate in a movement, their recruitment cannot occur without prior contact with a recruitment agent. An essential element of the mobilization process will thus be that potential participants are informed about an upcoming protest event. Even the most infuriated and risk-inclined citizen will not participate in an anti-government demonstration if he or she is unaware that this demonstration is actually taking place. In other words: he or she needs to be targeted by a mobilization attempt.

Whereas some scholars define *being targeted* as being asked by someone to take part (Klandermans 1997), van Laer (2011) operationalizes mobilization attempts in terms of awareness of the upcoming event, leaving the question of a direct, interpersonal link open. In both cases, the likelihood of a person to become mobilized increases with their degree of embeddedness in social networks.

A frequently-cited factor in this respect is the number of memberships in multiple organizations. Overlapping memberships allow information about upcoming protest events to travel beyond the boundaries of a network of hard-core activists and spill over to networks of less engaged citizens (Carroll / Ratner 1996). Another important function of social networks in this context is that they build a collective identity supportive of protest action; this is achieved through interpersonal give-and-take with friends, family and other network members. Collective identities function as selective incentives that motivate protest participation by providing the potential participant with a sense of membership, in-group solidarity, and an oppositional sense of "us" versus "them" (Friedman / McAdam 1992; van Laer 2011).

There is broad scholarly consensus that political activists nowadays rely heavily on the Internet to maintain and reinforce multiple engagements and relationships across issues and organizational boundaries (Bennett / Breunig / Givens 2008; della Porta / Mosca 2005). ICT have significantly diminished the transaction costs of protest mobilization by changing the way in which information can be published, i.e. by increasing both the speed and scope of its circulation. It can thus be assumed that the Internet is conducive to an increased awareness about collective action events such as protests. We should also expect that an individual's likelihood of being targeted by an online mobilization movement increases with the number of that individual's memberships in different online networks and the number of social relations they maintain on these networks, regardless of whether he/she actively seeks protest-related information.

In the social sciences, in-depth single case studies are particularly valuable when it comes to testing established theories. Such studies enable the researcher to delve into complex systems in which outcomes are determined by the interaction of numerous factors and which can thus offer plausible causal explanations (Glennan 1996; Rueschemeyer 2003). Considering that the Tunisian uprising started from a local revolt in a marginalized provincial town and then very quickly expanded both geographically and socially, the country provides an interesting case for exploring the contribution of social online networks to the process of nationwide political mobilization across social and geographical boundaries.

### **3. Methodology of data collection**

In December 2010, violent clashes between police and local civilians in the provincial Tunisian town of Sidi Bouzid developed into a full scale national protest movement that led to the ouster of President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali in January 2011. This success prompted publics across Middle East Africa and North Africa to emulate the "Tunisian model" and triggered the regional protest wave that came to be known as the Arab Spring.

Despite its role-model status, however, the Tunisian case remains widely viewed as atypical, given that the protests occurred and succeeded under an authoritarian regime that held unusually tight control over the media and the organs used to form public opinion (Tucker 2012). It has come to be a generally accepted conclusion that the mobilization of large-scale protest in Tunisia would not have been possible without the contribution of new digital communication technologies; however, little is known about the precise nature of this contribution.

Previous scholarly work on the impact of ICT on collective action has focused largely on how the rise of new media has affected dynamics at the meso-level of social agency (Clark / Themudo 2003; McCaughey / Ayers 2003; Meikle 2002), while only a very small number of studies to date has focused on protest participants and how digital media affect participation at the micro-level of political protest in democratic contexts (van Laer 2011). The analysis of the latter within the context of autocratic rule thus remains to be undertaken and is hindered by a lack of empirical data at the individual level.

The Tunisian uprising of 2010–2011 provides an excellent opportunity to address this research lacuna and to test the theoretical propositions presented in the previous section. To examine the Internet's role in the coordination of the Tunisian protest movement and its

impact on the protest behaviour of individual citizens, we applied a two-step mixed methods design of data collection.

The first, qualitative, phase involved a field trip to Tunisia in October 2011 during which semi-structured expert interviews were conducted with 16 Tunisian bloggers and Internet activists. The interview partners were asked to provide information about their own online and offline protest activities prior to and during the uprising, to describe the nature of digital activist networks and their own position in these structures, to provide a personal assessment of the contribution of ICT to the protest movement, and to help identify online content which they regarded as having been particularly influential.

Based on the findings, a closed survey was developed in a second quantitative phase in order to learn about the patterns of Internet use and political behaviour of individual Tunisian citizens during the uprising. In the following we briefly explain the sampling method adopted in this survey and provide information on the socio-economic characteristics of the resulting sample population.

### 3.1 Sampling

The German Development Institute / Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE) conducted a web survey among Tunisian Facebook users between 1 March and 31 May 2012. The web software used to administer the survey was SurveyMonkey. The survey contained a total of 34 questions and took about 12 minutes to complete. It was conducted in Arabic and was pilot-tested for comprehensiveness and ease of use among native Tunisian-Arabic speakers prior to its launch. Participation in the survey was promoted using a respondent-driven, snowball sampling technique.<sup>4</sup>

To build the sample we founded an online group on Facebook<sup>5</sup> dedicated to a discussion of the role of social media in the Arab Spring and invited the activists interviewed during the field trip to join the group. The group was then systematically enlarged using the *Facebook friendship suggestion algorithm* whereby the network recommends new friends to its users on the basis of their existing friends (Daniyalzade / Lipus 2007; Howard 2011). Once the survey had been launched, members of this group were sent an invitation to participate using the *Facebook group event organizing function*. The invitation message contained the survey's URL, a brief description of its academic purpose, as well as the suggestion to circulate the survey URL among friends, relatives and colleagues. No monetary or other material incentive was offered to the respondents. Reminder messages were sent to the primary contacts three weeks and again six weeks after the launch of the survey. The survey resulted in 608 responses.

While Facebook is careful not to reveal the exact details of the friendship suggestion algorithm, we may assume that our sample population resembles a *fuzzy set* (Ragin 2000) with politically interested and highly motivated users at its core and less engaged users towards

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4 The method applied here is similar to the chain-referral sampling methods which have hitherto been used primarily in social science research to contact hidden or difficult-to-reach populations such as drug users or sex workers (Salganik / Heckathorn 2004).

5 Online: <http://www.facebook.com/groups/270562439633722/>.

the edges. When interpreting the survey results, it is therefore important to keep in mind that these refer to a population of more or less politically engaged Internet users and do not permit inferences about the behaviour of individuals who are fully outside this set, i.e. those who can be regarded as politically apathetic and/or were not connected to the Internet. Table 1 provides a basic illustration of the degree of political engagement of our sample population prior to and after the fall of the Ben Ali regime.

However, the results must be interpreted with care. For instance, while the high rate of electoral abstention (85.4 %) could safely be assumed to indicate general political disaffection in the context of a democracy, here it could be read as an indicator of outright ideological opposition to the regime on behalf of the respondents. The relatively high rate of respondents who participated in street protests once (8.7 %) or several times (31.8 %) seems to support this notion, as well as the fact that participation rates were practically reversed in the first post-autocratic elections in October 2011.

<b>Table 1: Conventional and unconventional political behaviour before and after the revolution</b>						
<b>Did you participate in the 2009 presidential and legislative elections?</b>						
				Response Percent	Response Count	
				Yes	14.6 %	77
				No	85.4 %	451
<b>Prior to the revolution did you ever undertake or consider undertaking one of the following actions to influence the government or its policies:</b>						
	I never considered this action	I thought about it but never did it	I engaged in such an action once	I engaged in such an action several times	Response Count	
Collecting signatures or signing petitions	58.8 % (322)	20.1 % (110)	4.6 % (25)	16.6 % (91)	548	
Writing a letter to a newspaper or government officials	55.5 % (303)	27.8 % (152)	5.1 % (28)	11.5 % (63)	546	
Working with or founding a citizen initiative	49.5 % (271)	29.8 % (163)	6.8 % (37)	13.9 % (76)	547	
Organizing or participating in a street protest	35.2 % (194)	24.3 % (134)	8.7 % (48)	31.8 % (175)	551	
<b>Did you participate in the elections to the Constituent Assembly in October 2011?</b>						
				Response Percent	Response Count	
				Yes	86.3 %	364
				No	13.7 %	58
Source: DIE online survey „Internet and Politics in Tunisia“, March–May 2012						

The majority of respondents in our sample are medium-to-high-frequency users of the Internet, with 28.3 % reporting daily internet use of 3–4 hours and 43.6 % reporting more than 5 hours use per day. Network embeddedness among our respondents is high: 98.5 % indicated Facebook as their most important online social network, and 65.4 % reported having more than 200 friends on their most important network - well above the worldwide

average.<sup>6</sup> A considerable number of respondents maintained profiles in more than one social network, with YouTube (46.3 %) and Twitter (44.0 %) coming second and third in terms of importance. The vast majority reported informational rather than recreational use of the Internet, with 93.0 % indicating “following the news” as their most important online activity (see Table 2).

### 3.2 Socio-demographic sample statistics

The sample is relatively young with 24.0 % of respondents born in the 1970s, 38.8 %, in the 1980s, and 10.1 % in the 1990s. With 77.8 % of male respondents it is clearly more male-dominated than Tunisia’s overall Facebook population (58 %).<sup>7</sup> The sample population is relatively highly educated, with 49.8 % of respondents holding a Bachelor's and 37.0 % a Master's degree. Compared to the population in general, 6.2 % held a university degree in 2010 (African Economic Outlook 2012) Only 12.5 % indicated secondary school as their highest completed educational level.

Regarding regime support, 55.4 % assessed the Ben Ali regime's ability to create jobs as very bad, and 57.5 % strongly agreed with the statement that it was impossible under his rule to get a job without family connections. Interestingly however, 48.8 % of the respondents were fully employed prior to the revolution, only 8.2 % were unemployed, and a relatively large proportion (27.1 %) were still studying. One possible interpretation for this apparent contradiction is that many of those still studying had a rather gloomy view of their future job prospects given the high rate of unemployment among educated youth in Tunisia. While 90 % indicated Islam as their religious affiliation, the respondents predominantly subscribed to secular views: 55.9 % strongly agreed with the statement that religious leaders should not influence government decisions.

In the following section we will first give a brief overview of government strategies regarding ICT infrastructures and online censorship in Tunisia, and then go on to trace the role of the Internet and social media in the Tunisian revolution by linking our interview and survey data to the chronology of protest events.

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6 The average number of “friends” in a Facebook network is 130. Interestingly, this is close to the famous “Number of Dunbar”, named after the anthropologist Robin Dunbar, who suggested that the size of the human brain permits stable networks of about 150 members (Dunbar 1998).

7 Online: <http://www.socialbakers.com>

<b>Table 2: Patterns of Internet use and social network embeddedness</b>					
<b>How frequently do you normally use the Internet per day?</b>					
				<b>Response Percent</b>	<b>Response Count</b>
Less than 1 hour				4.0 %	22
1–2 hours				24.1 %	131
3–4 hours				28.3 %	154
5 hours or more				<b>43.6 %</b>	<b>237</b>
<b>What are your most important everyday online activities? (Select a maximum of four)</b>					
				<b>Response Percent</b>	<b>Response Count</b>
Reading, writing, or forwarding e-mails				69.6 %	378
Following the news				<b>93.0 %</b>	<b>505</b>
Looking for information about personal interests (hobbies)				37.6 %	204
Blogging				22.8 %	124
Participating in discussion groups				58.7 %	319
Chatting with friends, relatives, and colleagues				54.9 %	298
Chatting with unknown people				14.9 %	81
Playing online games				9.6 %	52
Downloading music or movies				23.4 %	127
Purchasing or selling things				4.1 %	22
Dating				8.3 %	45
<b>On which of the following social networking sites do you keep a personal account?</b>					
				<b>Response Percent</b>	<b>Response Count</b>
<b>Facebook</b>				<b>98.5 %</b>	<b>517</b>
<b>YouTube</b>				46.3 %	243
<b>Twitter</b>				44.0 %	231
<b>LinkedIn</b>				21.0 %	110
<b>Vimeo</b>				7.2 %	38
<b>Dailymotion</b>				13.3 %	70
<b>Flickr</b>				6.7 %	35
Other				7.74 %	40
<b>Please indicate the approximate number of friends you have on your most frequently used social networking site</b>					
				<b>Response Percent</b>	<b>Response Count</b>
<b>Less than 50</b>				6.8 %	36
<b>50 to 100</b>				10.7 %	57
<b>100 to 200</b>				17.1 %	91
<b>More than 200</b>				<b>65.4 %</b>	<b>348</b>
Source: DIE online survey „Internet and Politics in Tunisia“, March–May 2012					

#### **4. The role of ICT and social media in protest mobilization during the Tunisian uprising**

##### 4.1 ICT infrastructure development in Tunisia

Policy makers across the Muslim world adopted widely varying strategies during the 1990s in reaction to the opportunities and risks of ICT use. While established democracies allowed free competition for ICT services, the pace of ICT development in most autocratic countries was set by state-owned telecommunication providers who held a monopoly over ICT services. At the same time, these bodies also monitored and regulated online content and reported directly to the government (Howard 2011).

Tunisia was in the middle of this spectrum. In line with President Ben Ali's oft-reiterated desire to develop the Internet in Tunisia, his government invested heavily in the telecom sector from the mid-1990s on. As a result, Tunisia had one of the most highly developed telecommunications infrastructures in Northern Africa by the mid-2000s, with eleven competing Internet service providers (Reporters Without Borders 2004). 1.7 million of its 10.2 million inhabitants were Internet users in 2008, and nine out of ten Tunisians owned a cell phone. 84 % of the Internet users had access to the Internet at home, 75.8 % used it at work, and 24 % used public Internet cafés. Tunisians for whom personal computers remained prohibitively expensive had access to the Internet from one of 300 public Internet centres (*publinets*) set up by the authorities throughout the country, and the education sector reported a connectivity of 100 % for universities, research labs, secondary schools and primary schools (OpenNet Initiative 2009).

Ben Ali's strategy of depicting himself as a democratizer of the Internet and a role model for the promotion of ICT in the developing world sold well internationally: In 2001, Tunisia was chosen to host the second stage of the 2005 UN World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS). The objective of the latter was to "*develop and foster a clear statement of political will and take concrete steps to establish the foundations for an Information Society for all, reflecting all the different interests at stake.*" (International Telecommunication Union 2001).

##### 4.2 ATI censorship activities

Retrospectively, it is difficult to understand why so much international approval was showered on a government which kept tight control over the public sphere and ruthlessly cracked down on free expression. The Ben Ali regime went to great lengths to dominate and protect the official political narrative, according to which the leader was the legitimate heir of Habib Bourguiba, the much-revered first president of independent Tunisia, whom Ben Ali removed in a palace coup in 1987. This narrative was complemented by a visual personality cult and was accompanied by political programmes intended to fashion regime-obedient citizens by proclaiming hypocritical messages about economic progress, liberty and plurality<sup>8</sup>. (Chomiak 2011; International Crisis Group 2011).

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8 A good example is the Pacte Jeunesse launched by the ruling RCD in 2008, which Ben Ali lauded as "*a celebration of young people's independence*" and an invitation for them to assume conscious responsi-

In 1996, the Tunisian Ministry of Communications established the Tunisian Internet Agency (ATI) to regulate the country's Internet activities. In 1998, a telecommunications law authorized the agency to intercept and check the content of email messages under the pretext of preventing access to material contrary to public order and morality. Since the ATI was the gateway from which all of Tunisia's ISPs leased their bandwidths, and all fixed-line Internet traffic passed through its facilities, the agency was able to load content control and filtering software onto the ISP servers. Furthermore, downloads and additions of email attachments had to go through a central server. (OpenNet Initiative 2009). In contrast to other Internet censors in the Arab World (e.g. Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates), who publish reports on their activities and alert users who try to access a blocked page, the ATI purposefully hid its censorship activities from Internet users. Websites blocked within Tunisia appeared with a fake 404 "File not found" error message – a practice which gained the agency the nickname "Ammar 404"<sup>9</sup> among Tunisian Internet users. In addition to technical surveillance, the ATI exercised control by obliging service providers such as Internet café owners and the *publinets* to register the ID numbers of Internet users and by holding them legally responsible for their customers' online activities.

All in all, the trajectory of online censorship in Tunisia exhibits the dynamics described by Howard (2011): government watchdogs initially monitor sexually explicit websites, then gradually expand their activities to cover political commentary online as officials become increasingly versed in the application of control software. While this mission creep sometimes occurs slowly, it can also take an exponential leap in times of crisis that threaten national security. This occurred in Tunisia in 2008 as a response to strikes and demonstrations against corruption and abysmal working conditions at the Phosphate Mining Company (*Compagnie Phosphate de Gafsa* – CPG) around the town of Gafsa. The protests turned violent when security forces opened fire against the protesters, killing one and injuring 26 (Pollock 2011; Schraeder / Redissi 2011). Following this escalation, the protests began to attract citizen support and developed into a loosely organized social movement across the Gafsa region, with weekly protests in the town of Reddeyef. While the state-controlled press remained silent, Internet activists began to cover the events on Facebook.

In order to prevent information about the protests from spreading, the ATI stepped up its censorship programme: Facebook was blocked on 18 August 2008 at the request of Ben Ali, who cited national security violations by terrorists as the reason (Chomiak 2011; International Crisis Group 2011). In reaction to a massive wave of online protest, the government lifted the blockade on 2 September and switched to a strategy of covert surveillance and manipulation of social networks. According to the U.S. State Department and the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), the government ordered Tunisian ISP providers to intercept log-ins by Tunisian Facebook users and to relay the details to the ATI, which then used them to block accounts entirely or remove undesired contents.<sup>10</sup>

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bility in shaping the country's future job market by entering into a dialogue with the government and "expressing their concerns in freedom".

9 Censor 404.

10 CNN World, 12 January 2011, online: [http://articles.cnn.com/2011-01-12/world/tunisia\\_1\\_protests-twitter-and-facebook-tunisian-government?\\_s=PM:WORLD](http://articles.cnn.com/2011-01-12/world/tunisia_1_protests-twitter-and-facebook-tunisian-government?_s=PM:WORLD) (accessed 29. Aug. 2012).

But the government's censorship efforts went even further: As cyber activist Yassine Ayari recalls:

*"In 2009, there was a wave of censorship never seen before. It was ridiculous. Everything was censored. Any website having the words human or rights in it would be blocked. YouTube, DailyMotion, WorldTV ...all the video sharing platforms were shut down. If you had more than 20 visitors on your blog, no matter what the subject - even if you were blogging on cooking recipes, it would be blocked automatically."*<sup>11</sup>

Although the government succeeded in 2008 in confining the protests regionally, its massive censorship strategy backlashed by prompting increased efforts by those who had long been campaigning for online free speech in Tunisia.

### 4.3 The preparation phase: 1998–2010

To understand the phenomenon of cyberactivism in the Tunisian revolution, it is important to keep in mind that it long predated the Arab Spring. As early as 1998, two activists with the pseudonyms "Foetus" and "Waterman" founded *Takriz*,<sup>12</sup> a group which they described as a "cyber-think and street resistance network". From the beginning, the group targeted the country's politically alienated youth as its core audience, and its combination of aggressive street slang, radical messages, and irreverent mockery of the authorities soon caught the regime's attention. *Takriz*'s website was blocked within Tunisia in August 2000, but others soon sprang up.

One of these was *TuneZine*, a satirical political web magazine. Under the pseudonym *Et-tounsi*,<sup>13</sup> its founder Zouhair Yahyaoui published numerous columns and essays criticizing government corruption and the lack of rule of law. In 2002, Yahyaoui was arrested at a Tunis *publinet*. In 2003, he launched a hunger strike to protest against the harsh conditions of his imprisonment and was awarded the Reporters Without Borders Cyber-Freedom Prize.

Another example is the collective blog *Nawaat*,<sup>14</sup> co-founded in 2004 from European exile by Riadh Guerfali, a constitutional lawyer, and Sami Ben Gharbia, a political science student. The purpose of *Nawaat* was to provide a public platform for Tunisian dissident voices and to collect and publish information about the regime's corruption and human rights violations. The innovative and often humorous way in which *Nawaat* bloggers combined citizen footage and data from other sources to get their message across soon became one of the group's most distinctive trademarks. In one of their most popular YouTube videos, produced in 2008, they combined pictures from plane spotter sites with a geo-tagging programme to document the flight paths of Tunisia's presidential jet. By reconstructing the plane's itinerary across Europe at times when the president was known to

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11 Yassine Ayari, interview conducted in Tunis, 18th October 2011.

12 Tunisian slang expression, roughly equivalent to „bollocks“ or „don't break my balls“.

13 The Tunisian.

14 Arabic for „core“.

be in-country, the bloggers demonstrated that its main purpose was apparently to transport Ben Ali's wife to exclusive shopping destinations.

While the above groups were political from the beginning, other activists started out with cultural or entertainment topics and became politicized along the way in reaction to the regime's increasing repression. Lina Ben Mhenni, a lecturer in linguistics at the University of Tunis, started out by reporting on the capital's club scene on her blog [www.nightclubbeuse.blogspot.com](http://www.nightclubbeuse.blogspot.com), but beginning in 2009 she reported more and more frequently on social and political issues. This led the authorities to block her site in early 2010. In the re-launched version of her blog, *A Tunisian Girl*, she adopted a decidedly political tone that won her several journalist awards as well as a Nobel Peace Prize nomination in 2011 for her courageous documentation of the regime's human rights violations.

Another example is that of Haythem El Mekki (@ByLasko on Twitter), now a popular political commentator on the Tunisian National TV channel *El Watanya*. A digital expert and student of communication sciences, El Mekki originally made a name for himself by commenting on Tunisia's independent music scene on Facebook and Twitter. By the late 2000s his fan community had grown to such an extent that any political comments posted on his website spread widely throughout the social networks, thus almost automatically turning him into a political cyber-activist.

Thus it is clear that a political culture of dissent existed prior to the events of December 2010. The Internet provided an alternative public sphere that was at least partially shielded from the government's unilateral oversight and control. Here, Tunisians were able to form solidarities through shared feelings of repression and humiliation and to formulate a collective alternative discourse comprised of street wisdom, political satire, and irreverent (Chomiak 2011; International Crisis Group 2011).

Notwithstanding, it is also obvious that Tunisia's cyber avant-garde, with some exceptions, was dominated by affluent, well educated, and polyglot individuals with a high degree of cultural capital – a social profile that has been described as characteristic of early ICT adopters throughout the developing world (Norris 2001). However, it would be inaccurate to regard their network as a socially exclusive club. Inasmuch as the cost of accessing the net was considerably reduced by the early opening of the Tunisian telecom market to competition among service providers, the economic argument did not effectively limit Internet use to a tiny minority anymore (Howard 2011). On the other hand, the efforts of bloggers to convey their political messages to a critical mass of citizens were thwarted by the tight controls of the Ben Ali regime over both traditional media and the Internet. According to Kuebler (2011), the limited impact of blogging in Tunisia from the late 1990s to 2010 can mainly be attributed to the fact that it lacked “*the bridge from an elitist medium to the general public sphere*”. As illustrated in Table 3, traffic on the websites of Tunisian blogger communities prior to the Revolution originated mainly from the host countries of sizeable Tunisian diaspora communities.

In response to this, digital activists in Tunisia stepped up their efforts to connect with both international and domestic constituencies. Over the late 2000s, several of the anti-censorship movement's core activists started to become active in international blogger communities, such as Global Voices, in order to increase their visibility abroad. Some of them received training in e-journalism and blog publication from programs sponsored by US em

**Table 3: Country-wise Internet traffic for Nawaat.org prior to January 2011**

Nawaat.org Country-wise Traffic		
Country	Pageviews	Users
 Canada	85.9 %	43.6 %
 France	2.8 %	11.3 %
 Morocco	2.0 %	7.7 %
Other	9.4 %	37.5 %

Source: <http://www.serverinsiders.com/traffic/nawaat-org.html>  
(accessed 29 Aug. 2012)

bassies and funded through the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), an organization which focused in the second half of the 2010s on training journalists throughout North Africa and the Middle East.<sup>15</sup>

The spring of 2010 saw a new wave of anti-censorship protests both online and offline. One illustrative example is the initiative *Tunisie en Blanc*, in Arabic *A'la A'mar*<sup>16</sup>: in May of 2010 the activists Slim Amamou and Yassine Ayari, joined later by Lina Ben Mhenni, called for a rally against Internet censorship in front of the Tunisian Ministry of Communication Technology on May 22nd. In preparation for the rally, the organizers announced that officially prescribed procedures for the organization of public demonstrations would be adhered to, and proceeded to request legal authorization which, unsurprisingly, was turned down. The bloggers accordingly documented each kafkaesk step of their subsequent bureaucratic negotiations in a series of videocasts published on Vimeo and on Facebook. When Amamou and Ayari were arrested for investigation and forced by the authorities to call the rally off, their online community called for Plan B: a May 22 turnout on the streets in white shirts in a symbolic protest against censorship. The initiative was only partly successful. While various online groups drew the support of roughly 19,000 protesters (Gharbia 2010), and hundreds of Tunisians living abroad assembled in front of their country's embassies and consulates in Bonn, Paris, Montreal, and New York to support the protest, only a few dozen young people dared to defy the security forces by participating in a flash mob in Tunis itself on the central Avenue Habib Bourghiba.

This episode shows that online activism alone was unable to provide sufficient impetus to mobilize a critical mass of regime challengers on the Tunisian streets. Notwithstanding this, 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 (Chomiak 2011; Howard / Hussain 2011). These preparations proved to be valuable assets in the subsequent phase that culminated in the ouster of Ben Ali.

15 Online: <http://mepi.state.gov/>.

16 Day against the censor.

#### 4.4 The ignition phase, 17th December – late December 2010

The event that unravelled the ability of Ben Ali's security apparatus to control the public sphere occurred in the provincial town of Sidi Bouzid 210 km southwest of Tunis. The remote sub-Saharan governorates of the interior, popularly labelled as "areas of darkness", had been systematically neglected by the regime and were characterized by profound social and political isolation, rampant economic deprivation, and a youth unemployment rate nine times that of the capital (International Crisis Group 2011; Saidani 2012).

On 17 December 2011, the distress triggered by these socioeconomic, generational and geographic disparities came to a head in the self-immolation of Mohammed Bouazizi, a 26-year-old fruit seller who set himself on fire after a female police officer had confiscated his wares because he did not have a vendor's permit and publicly humiliated him by slapping him in the face. By committing his desperate act in front of the office of the regional governor, Bouazizi forced the regime to assume political and moral responsibility for his situation, thus turning him into a symbolic representative of millions of young Tunisians who lacked opportunities for socio-economic advancement (Aday et al. 2010; Lynch 2012).

The same day, members of Bouazizi's family, accompanied by trade unionists, marched to the police headquarters to express their anger. The protests soon turned into violent clashes between the police forces and members of Bouazizi's extended family, along with neighbours and youths who identified with his plight. Within a week, the protests spilled over to the neighbouring cities of Menzel Bouzaiane, al-Maknasi, and al-Mazuna, then to Argab, Bin Aoun, Jilma, Souq al-Jadid, Bi'r al-Hafi, and, Sabala, all of which are dominated by the Hamama tribe to which Bouazizi's family belongs. In contrast to two years earlier in Gafsa, the regime failed to contain the uprising. By the time Bouazizi died in a hospital from his injuries on January 4, what had begun as a local, socio-economic and to some extent tribally motivated bread-and-butter protest had turned into a nationwide anti-regime movement with tens of thousands of Tunisians from all levels of society demanding Ben Ali's fall. Bouazizi's death clearly provided the spark which ignited the anti-regime movement and its spread beyond the boundaries of the Internet and onto Tunisian streets. But how did this information manage to filter through the state-controlled media and reach such a broad audience so quickly?

The answer apparently lies in the way that the previously developed online networks interacted with traditional international media outlets. The initial protests in Sidi Bouzid following Bouazizi's self-immolation were recorded by participants via cell phone videos and posted on personal Facebook profiles. On the eve of the revolution, Facebook penetration still hovered around a modest 17 % in Tunisia (Dubai School of Government 2011), and Tunisian users were wary of overtly accessing and sharing regime-critical content given the government's omnipresent surveillance. Thus it is unlikely that this information would have reached a mass audience had it not been for a small elite of digital activists, many of them operating from exile, who acted as information brokers.<sup>17</sup> Around the globe,

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17 See Ethan Zuckerman: Ben Ali and Bart: Understanding Participatory Media and Protest. Video Talk delivered at the International Online Conference "Facebook Revolutions? The Role of Social Media for Political Change in the Arab World", Friedrich Naumann Foundation (September 2011), online: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fzh1Trc-B70>.

these activists joined efforts to screen Facebook for protest-related posts, translate the material<sup>18</sup>, and structure it into a coherent, chronological narrative:

*When the revolution came I was in Belgium. At that time I was already known through the [Tunisia in white] demonstration and my blog. I had 2000 or 3000 friends on Facebook which gave me a little bit of influence. So I took a vacation from my job and sat with three other friends, PCs, pizzas, and a telephone. We tried to use all the information we could handle: status updates, pictures, videos. When we heard that something happened in Kasserine or somewhere else, we'd pick up the phone, we'd know someone who knows someone and we would find the information and post it (Yassine Ayari).<sup>19</sup>*

Networks like Global Voices and *Nawaat* began running special online features about the protests and spreading the word through their own social media channels on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube.<sup>20</sup> Once the information had been made available in publishable form, international broadcasters picked it up and re-imported it to the country, thus leap-frogging the blackout imposed by Tunisia's state media gatekeepers. Social media footage about the Sidi Bouzid protests first appeared on Al Jazeera on 20th December 2010.<sup>21</sup>

It was only through this complex threefold interaction between individual, non-elite protesters, motivated and strategically oriented digital activists, and international broadcasters that the information about the death of Bouazizi and the ensuing protests were able to reach a larger portion of Tunisian society. During the first ten days of protests, the regional administrative centres of the two Midwestern governorates on the Algerian border, Sidi Bouzid and Kasserine, became the focal points of popular action (Saidani 2012 ). During this first period, Twitter, a site that allows the communication of telegraphic information instantaneously over a wide network of internet users, began to play a significant role, with the emergence of the hashtag #sidibouzid.<sup>22</sup> An analysis by Lotan et al. (2011) of Twitter information flows during the Tunisian uprising has demonstrated that cyber activists served as key information brokers for the mainstream media, with journalists heavily retweeting the posts of activists.

#### 4.5 The escalation phase, late December 2010–12<sup>th</sup> January 2011

Over the second week of the conflict, the movement expanded geographically, socially and politically. Protests reached the neighbouring governorates, moving to Kef in the northwest, Kairouan in the centre, as well as Kebili, Tozeur, and Ben Guerdene in the

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18 Translation was essential given that many Tunisian users post in Derya, the Tunisian dialect. In addition, young Tunisian internet users, like elsewhere in the world, have developed their own particular argot and abbreviations. The resulting mixture is barely comprehensible to non-Tunisian Arabic speakers.

19 Yassine Ayari, blogger and cyber-activist, interview conducted in Tunis, 18th October 2011.

20 See for instance <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T9Kr5FQNeQ4&list=PLEA29C4B2813B9146&feature=plcp> or <http://globalvoicesonline.org/specialcoverage/2011-special-coverage/tunisia-uprising-201011/>.

21 Online: <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/africa/2010/12/2010122063745828931.html>.

22 When a Twitter user places the symbol “#” before a string of text, that string can then be clicked as a link to a global search of tweets using that string, a tagging feature meant to facilitate a global discussion on a topic beyond a user’s follower network. These tags are called hashtags.

south. Unemployed young people, who had so far been the socially dominant group among the protesters, were joined by employed professionals and occupational groups, most notably elements of the trade unions and law professionals. The National Bar Association and the regional branches of the UGTT (Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail) emerged as poles of protest, giving the movement both structure and sustainability (International Crisis Group 2011; Lynch 2012; Saidani 2012). Politically, the movement radicalized with socio-economic demands rapidly transforming into overt challenges to the regime, most clearly expressed by the slogan *Ben Ali dégage!*<sup>23</sup>

The regime responded with increased repression on the one hand, and an almost complete breakdown in public communication on the other hand. Ben Ali finally addressed the nation in a televised speech on 28<sup>th</sup> December, promising to respond to the protesters' demands. Thereafter, almost two weeks elapsed before he promised in a second speech on 10 January to create 300.000 jobs over the next two years while condemning the protests in the same breath as "terrorist acts" orchestrated by foreign interests. In the meantime, however, police violence increased between 8 and 10 January, particularly in Kasserine, Thala and Regueb, and resulted in the deaths of 21 protesters according to official sources and roughly 50 according to union and hospital sources (International Crisis Group 2011). These delayed and disconnected reactions on the part of the regime, in harsh contrast with a reality that had become visible for all to see thanks to social media, contributed significantly to the transformation of a spontaneous and locally rooted movement into a determined national revolution.

Towards the end of December 2010, web activists from the capital began to travel to remote regions of the country to cover the events and transmit them on Facebook in the form of real-time videos. Although Al-Jazeera's TV channel had only one correspondent based in the country and its Tunis office had been shut down (Lynch 2012), it could now draw on a wealth of footage from the web which it then broadcasted to Tunisian households, many of which had no Internet connection but were equipped with satellite dishes:

*"I remember a video taken at somebody's funeral in Thala. People were carrying him on their shoulders and suddenly the police started shooting at them. So they were obliged to put the body on the ground and run. This was shocking because a funeral is a very sacred thing in our culture. You cannot harm somebody attending a funeral [...] In another picture you could see a dead man lying on the street and beside him a packet of milk. He wasn't armed, he had just gone to buy milk. These pictures were important because until then the RCD had been saying that police were only shooting at armed people, people trying to burn and loot. But now everybody could see that the President and the RCD were lying"* (Yassine Ayari).

One particularly unforgettable video, recorded by a medical student at the emergency ward of the Kasserine municipal hospital showed the desperate attempts of medics to handle the flow of incoming injuries<sup>24</sup>

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23 Ben Ali get out!

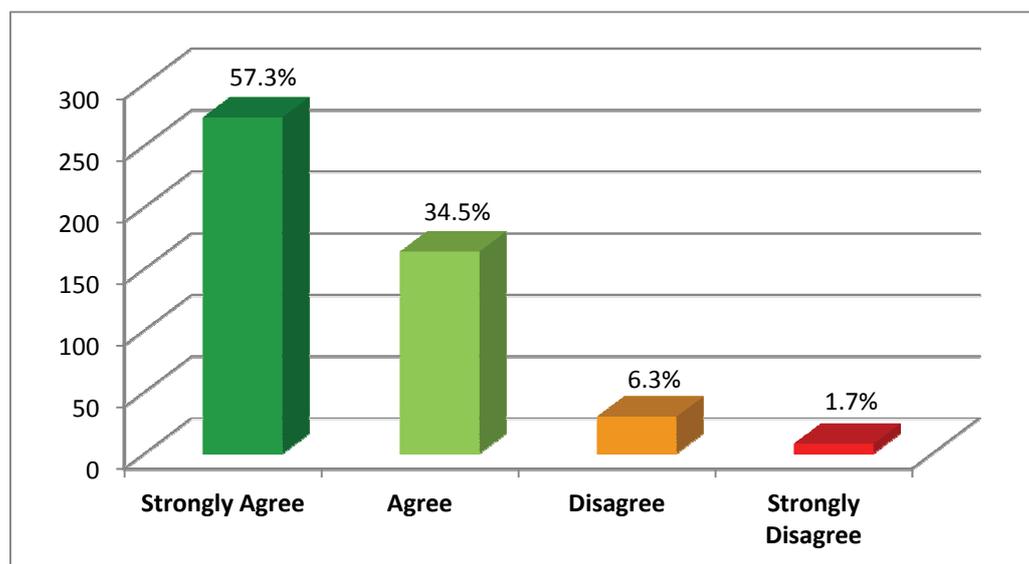
24 Online: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vPr8ENP-zeE>.

*“The Kasserine video was very graphic. You could see people had been killed, their heads blown up. There were also videos with mothers and women from Sidi Bouzid. One old woman had been beaten by the police, she was begging them: “you are our children, you have to protect us”, and they kept insulting her.<sup>25</sup> Videos like this are very shocking, but that’s what good about them. Because many Tunisians did not have a problem with Ben Ali. They said: “we’re ok, we are not poor we have food, we have hotels, we have beaches... it’s ok. Where is the problem!?” But when you show them stuff like this they radically change their point of view about the system” (Haythem El Mekki).<sup>26</sup>*

The results of our survey support the notion that the Internet contributed to the emotional mobilization of Tunisian citizens by providing information about the atrocities of the regime in response to the protests (Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Emotional response to regime repression between 19 December and 14 January**

Some of the pictures and videos circulating on the Internet during that time made me feel angry, frustrated or sad. They made me doubt the regime’s legitimacy



Source: DIE online survey „Internet and Politics in Tunisia“, March–May 2012

#### 4.6 The collapse of the regime, 12–14 January

During the last days of the uprising, an important function of the Internet was that it helped to overcome the inertia against collective action which is typical under authoritarian regimes. Reports about large-scale demonstrations spurred many Tunisians to overcome the fear that had previously prevented them from taking offline action. On 12 January the UGTT called for a street rally in Sfax, and some 30,000 people responded – the

25 Online: <https://www.facebook.com/video/video.php?v=1372680136630>.

26 Blogger and political commentator on TV channel El Watanayah, interview conducted in Tunis, 17th October 2011.

largest demonstration before Ben Ali's fall, regarded by many observers as the revolution's point of no return:

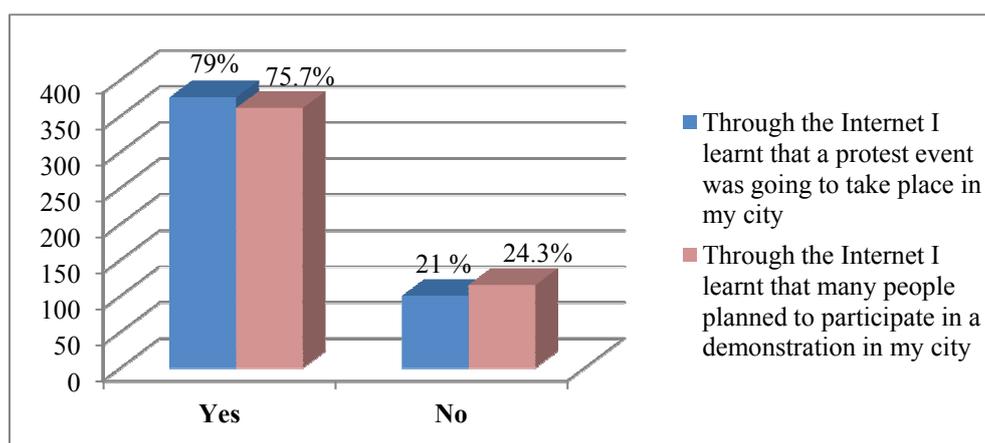
*“Everyone who saw the video about the demonstration in Sfax said: if this has happened in Sfax then it can happen in Tunis. And if it happens in Tunis then it will be a success”* (Sara Ben Hamadi).<sup>27</sup>

*“I think the demonstration in Sfax was the point of no return. Because all the cities wanted to be like Sfax. There were tens of thousands of people in the street and everyone, in every city who saw this would say: My city will not be less than Sfax!”* (Yassine Ayari).

Social media not only showed the extent of previous demonstrations but also helped users to calculate the turnout of forthcoming protest events. Towards the end of December, activists increasingly began to use social media to organize further demonstrations. The event-planning feature of Facebook which allows users to create an event online for which other users can then sign up proved to be a particularly helpful tool for this purpose.

Figures 2–7 suggest that social media helped to overcome the “free rider” problem of and to mobilize Internet users offline. To begin with, the majority of users in our sample (79.0 %) were mobilized via the Internet. Equally important, many respondents (75.7 %) reported having learned through the Internet that a protest event in their hometown would be attended by a large number of fellow citizens (Figure 2). 80.5 % of the respondents simply or strongly agreed that their belief that the protest movement would bring down the Ben Ali government came from what they had learned on the Internet. And although the majority simply or even strongly agreed that participation in a protest event was a risky endeavour in terms of their personal security (81.3 %), 72.4 % participated in street protests once or repeatedly (Figures 3 and 4).

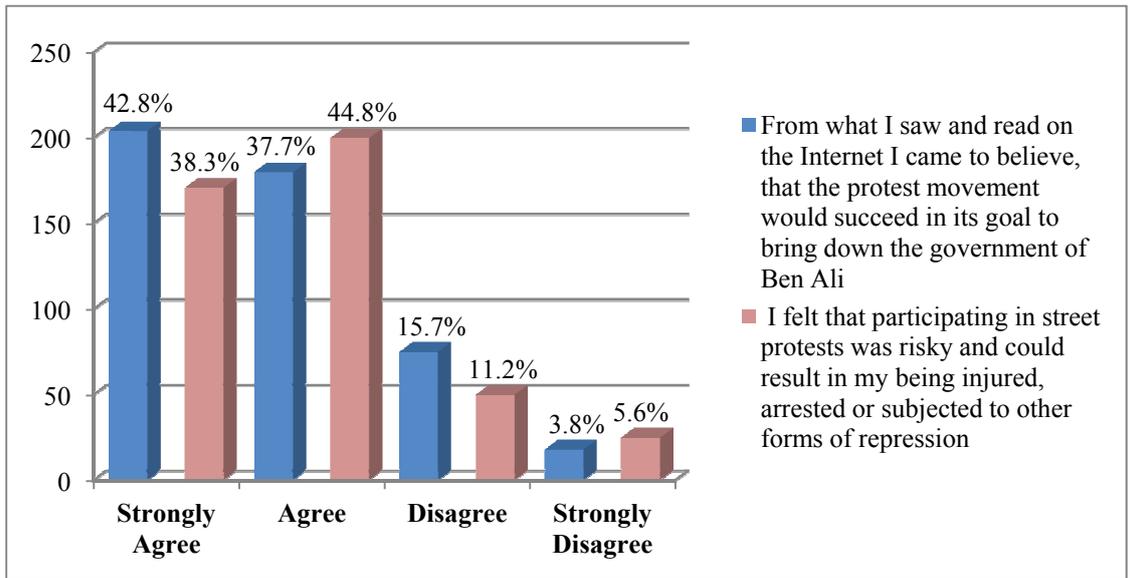
**Figure 2: Awareness of upcoming protest events and expected event turnouts**



Source: DIE online survey „Internet and Politics in Tunisia“, March–May 2012

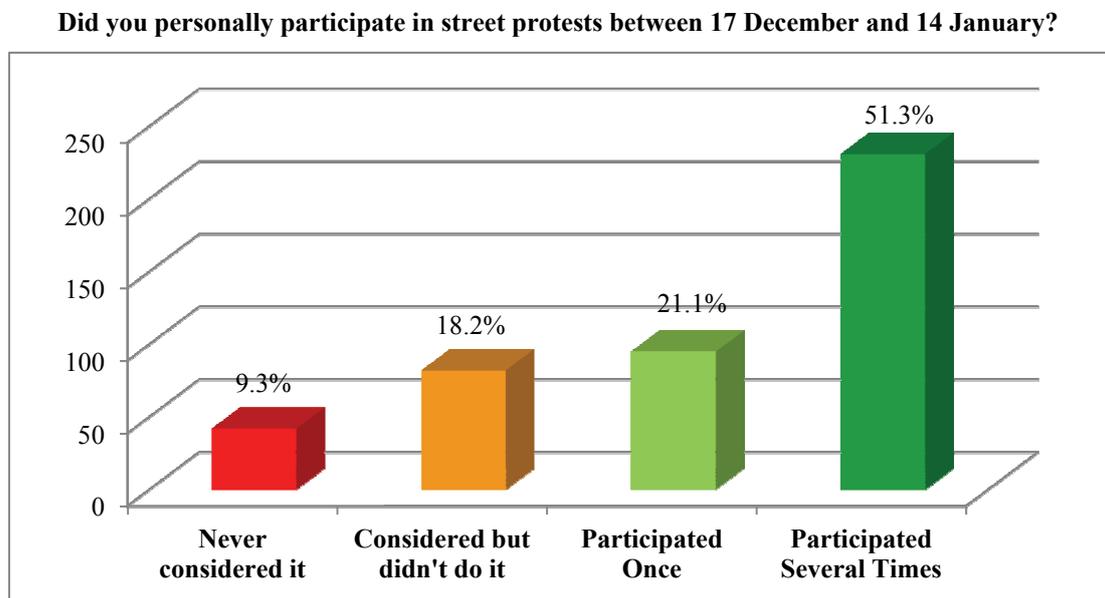
<sup>27</sup> Blogger for Arte TV, interview conducted in Tunis, 19th October 2011.

**Figure 3: Perception of personal risk and group efficacy in relation to protest**



Source: DIE online survey „Internet and Politics in Tunisia“, March–May 2012

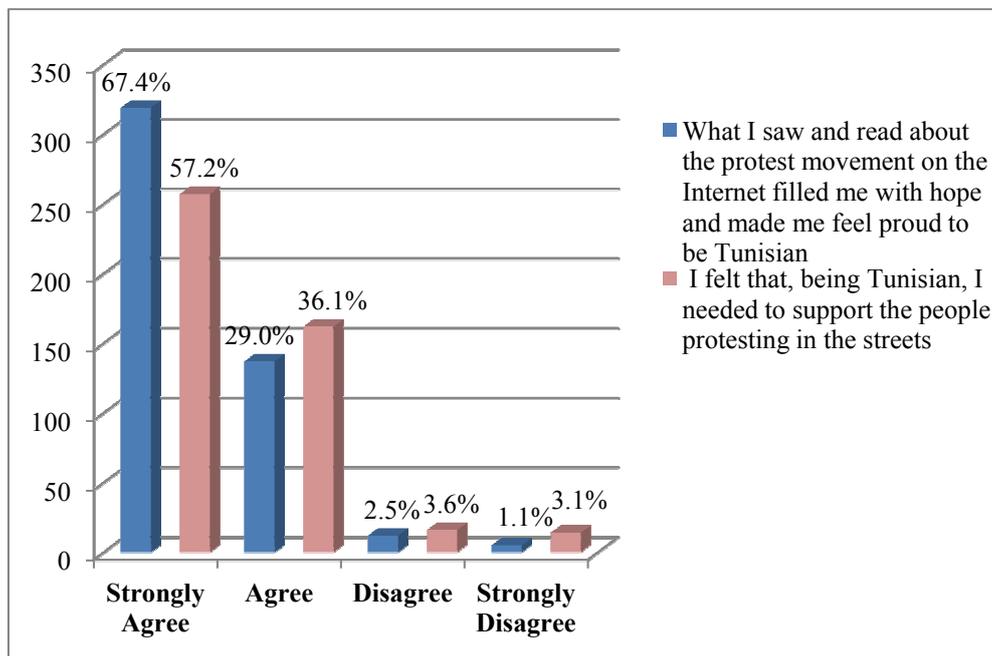
**Figure 4: Personal participation in street protests between 17 December and 14 January**



Source: DIE online survey „Internet and Politics in Tunisia“, March–May 2012

In his last televised speech on 13 January, Ben Ali announced that he would abstain from running as a presidential candidate in 2014 and offered to call for early parliamentary elections. It was too little too late. According to Schraeder and Redissi (2011), students and young people under 30 in particular were reluctant to grant the regime a four-year reprieve during which it might craft the conditions for a transition. Many of them understood the mass demonstrations scheduled for 14 January in the centre of Tunis as a unique opportunity for their generation to break with a tradition of quiescent obedience; they regarded participation in these protests as a patriotic duty. Our survey results reflect this notion (see Figure 5).

**Figure 5: Normative ethical views on protest movement and personal protest participation: patriotism**



Source: DIE online survey „Internet and Politics in Tunisia“, March–May 2012

It also appears that social media were a crucial element in the politicization and mobilization of the young urban middle class and elites. Nadia Zouari, a Tunis-based plastic artist and feuilleton writer,<sup>28</sup> remembers the final days leading up to the regime’s fall as follows:

*“During this period we spent white nights in front of the computer. Facebook connected us to the things that were going on and it felt like we were living in a different country. Because in Tunis you could lead a normal life. But in Sidi Bouzid, Kasserine and Kef it was totally different. And when we saw what was happening to people there we decided that we had to show solidarity with them.”*

28 For the Tunisian newspaper Le Temps. Interview conducted in Tunis, 17th October 2011.

Blogger Yassine Ayari argues similarly:

*“The first people to protest were the poor people in the street and the bloggers online. These are two groups that have nothing in common [...] But to put the middle class in the street you needed really strong things for them to see and feel what was happening. Because the middle class is selfish. They have their own concerns: they have their loans to pay and their consume problems. And there was no other way to touch them than through social media. [...] So as the revolution progressed, middle class people started to get interested. And in the end all of these groups overlapped. [...] I strongly believe that if the revolution succeeded and spread it was because for the first time the middle class had an interest in this.”*

Religious political actors seem to share this interpretation of the Internet’s role. In an interview by the International Crisis Group, a member of the moderate Islamist Ennahda party states: *“The internet caused the failure, to all of our surprise, of the regime’s project of creating a consumerist and apolitical middle class”*.<sup>29</sup> It thus appears that another important role of Facebook and the social media was to span a bridge between hitherto unrelated socio-economic groups, thus providing the basis for intergroup collaboration that facilitated a large cycle of protest to develop.

On 14 January, confronted with the largest anti-government demonstration that Tunis had ever seen, Ben Ali and his family fled the country on a plane to Dubai.

## 5. Conclusions

A surprising element of the Tunisian uprising was its broad, cross-class support. As has been demonstrated, the Internet and social media significantly contributed to transcend geographical and socio-economic boundaries and facilitated collaboration among the alienated intellectual elite, the rural poor, and the urban middle class. It thus helped to remove one of the central obstacles of collective action under authoritarianism, namely the lack of social interaction. The ways in which the Internet and social media contributed to intergroup collaboration confirm various aspects of the different theoretical views of protest mobilization and can be summarized in 3 main categories.

- (1) **Network Formation.** During the preparatory phase from 1998 to 2010 the Internet facilitated the formation of personal networks of digital activists who challenged the regime’s control of the public sphere and offered an alternative discourse to the official political narrative. In line with the arguments of Resource Mobilization Theory, the Internet thus provided the resource of a partially uncontrolled space that undermined the regime’s strategy of social isolation and fostered solidarity among Tunisians due to their shared feelings of repression. While the most proactive actors of this digital network typically came from the socio-economic and cultural elite, the relatively high degree of Tunisia’s ICT-infrastructure development made their dissident discourse accessible to a larger portion of Tunisian society.

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29 Crisis Group interview, Nouredine al-Beheiri, An-Nahda organiser, Tunis, 24 January 2011.

- (2) **Information Transmission.** During the ignition phase of the first two weeks following the self-immolation of Mohammed Bouazizi on 17 December 2011, social media allowed a digital elite of bloggers to circumvent the national media blackout by brokering information to the international mainstream media, most notably Al Jazeera. The breakdown of censorship barriers enabled Tunisians both with and without Internet access to mobilize collective action around the material and moral grievances symbolically represented by Bouazizi's fate. The nationwide availability of this information significantly contributed to the movement's geographical and social expansion. During the escalation phase from late December to early January, the Internet became increasingly important as a highway for information about the extent of the protests – which the state-controlled media tried desperately to conceal. By informing the public about the magnitude of past protest events and helping to calculate the extent of upcoming events, social media helped Tunisian citizens to overcome the “barrier of fear” associated with protest under authoritarianism. The function of the Internet as an information hub in the Tunisian case thus supports arguments of both Relative Deprivation Theory and Rational Choice Theory regarding protest mobilization.
- (3) **Collective Identity Formation.** Towards the final days of the revolution, social networking sites played an important role in politicising the urban middle class. This supports the arguments brought forward by structural and networking accounts of collective action according to which overlapping membership in several networks leads to a spill-over of information from activist networks to networks of less engaged citizens. It also illustrates the important function of social networks in building a collective identity supportive of protest action. By depicting the worst atrocities associated with the regime's response to the protests, social media led to the emotional mobilization of hitherto politically apathetic segments of Tunisian society. The Internet thus helped to connect impoverished rural street protesters, socio-economically and culturally privileged and highly motivated digital activists, and the young urban middle class in the large cycle of protest that led to the final collapse of the Ben Ali regime on 14 January 2011.

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