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More than a "Twitter Revolution"

Motivations of bloggers during the Tunisian revolution

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Abstract

The uses of Social Media are as diverse as the individuals using them. Yet, social networks, sites and blogs that were considered too personal and restricted to the social use, proved to constitute the platforms, where many social movements, political changes started by mobilizing, scheduling protests and sharing updates with the whole world in real time. As a matter of fact, this paper attempts to shed some light on the essential roles played by social media and more pre-cisely blogs during the Tunisian revolution in 2011. While mainstream media kept informing about the achievements of the regime, social media were spaces to provide 'second hand information'. Keeping in mind that when we discuss the role of social media we mainly refer to the use of users connected to the Inter-net, as they represent part of the Tunisian population, not all of it. By interviewing blog-gers and analyzing content, this paper aims to ascertain reasons for which bloggers would engage in producing a regular journalistic con-tent during the revolution. We suggest that users mainly posted content on a social media platform to express their point of view towards the events of the revolution, and to provide alternative infor-mation. This paper is indeed based on the results of our Master's thesis where all interviews with the selected Tunisian bloggers were detailed.

Introduction:

"I have a dream for the Web(…)and it has two parts: in the first part, the web becomes a much more powerful means for collaboration between people[1]."

The revolution 2.0, the Twitter Revolution[2], allareexpressions used to mention the role of Social Media in political upri-sings around the world and more specifically in the Middle East. The so-called 'Arab Spring' did not oust dictatorship only; it did also valuate the political role of social media that has been already discussed by many scholars.

The "revolutionary" uses of social media affected social relations, politics and even how individuals approach their daily life. The number of people joining social networks has grown tremendously. The communication or colla-boration on the web, as Burners-Lee calls it, al-tered from 'one-to-many' to 'many-to-many', every individual that joined social networks sites has the opportunity to contri-bute to the worldwide community: informing, commenting, expressing their views, posting photos and videos and interacting with the whole world.

The relationship between technology and society is not any longer considered as social relations deter-mining the techno-logy.This relationship, however, tends to be one of interaction, with technical communications infra-structure influencing the structures of

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[1] Tim Berners-Lee, Weaving *the Web: The Original Design and Ultimate Destiny of the World Wide Web by its inventors*, New York, Harper One, 1st edition, 1999, p.9

[2] According to Jan Hanrath, the phrase "Twitter Revolution" had been coined to describe the protests against the rigged elections in Iran back in 2009. The term was used also to describe the revolutions of the Arab Spring.

social organization and providing a format for political participation and activism[3].

This article attempts to highlight the motivations of ordinary citizens to engage in sharing news and information through social media platforms.

1. Social media and social networks:

"When a computer net-work connects people or organizations, it is a social network. Just as a computer network is a set of machines connected by a set of cables, a social network is a set of people (or organizations or other social entities) connected by a set of social relations.[4]"

A simple definition of social networks can be based on the fact that they are groups of people, orga-nizations or social entities which are connected through different types of relationships such as friendship, work, or in order to exchange infor-mation [5] . This definition summarizes the basic aspects of an offline social network.

These are the same aspects that we find online. Online social networks are groupsof people, organizations or social entities which are connected through differ-ent types of relationships,yet they are connected via technologies. For these networks to be formed they require a connecting device, an internet con-nection and a platform where they can gather virtually, which are the social networks sites.In the article '*The History of Social Media and its Impact on Business*', (online) social networks are '*an act of engagement, as people with common interests associate together and build relationships* '[6].

Onlinesocial networks can be both an already existing community offline that extended to the virtual space and a network that emerged in the cyberspace. Social networks sites provide different platforms where users can upload photos, videos, and any other type of content, they can express themselves diversely, and at the same time they have a certain amount of control of whether or not to share real or unreal information about themselves. Social Networks sites are different in terms of the services they offer: somehave photo-sharing or video-sharing capabilities; others have built-in blog-ging and instant messaging technology[7].

In his book, '*Social Media and small Businesses Marketing*' Stephen Wil-son indicates that social media can be defined as '*any of the many online tools that allow people with similar interests to share information, learn from others, or network in an open*

[3]Oliver Leistert, Theo Röhle, cited by Jan Hanrath, Claus Leggewie, "Revolution 2.0? The Role of Digital Media in Political Mobilisation and Protest " http://www.globale-trends.de/fileadmin/Redaktion/Globale-Trends_2013/gt_2013_hanrath_leggewie_en.pdf, accessed 06/08/2013, 10:57.

[4]Laura Garton, Caroline Haythornthwaite, Barry Wellman, « Studying Online Social Networks ," http://homes.chass.utoronto.ca/~wellman/publications/onlinesn/studyingonline.pdf, accessed 17/07/2010, 18:27.

[5]Ibid.

[6] Simeon Edosomwan, SitalaskshmiKalangotPrakasan, DorianeKouame, Jonelle Watson, Tom Seymour, "The History of Social Media and its Impact on Business", in *Journal of Applied Management and Entre-preneurship*, Vol. 16, No. 3.

[7]Nicole B. Ellison, Danah M. Boyd, "Social Network Sites: Definition, History, and Scholarship", in Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, Vol. 13, Iss. 1, pp. 210–230, Oct. 2007, http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1083-6101.2007.00393.x/full, accessed 09/07/2013, 11:30 .

process.[8]' He also adds that the information shared in these sites is known as a 'user-generated content'.

And based on those two definitions, social media refers to the whole process of networking and interacting with people while social networks sites are platforms where all of this can happen. With that being said, online social networks are those rela-tionships created offline or online.

There is a tremendous number of social networksites accessed by users worldwide, they are crea-ted, updates are madewhile new features and applications are added every day. However, the networks that stand on the top of the most visited sites worldwide are mainly '*Facebook*''*Twitter*', and '*Youtube*'.

2. Major Social network sites:

"We use Facebook to schedule the protests, Twitter to coordinate, and YouTube to tell the world[9]"

 Facebook:

In March 2013, the number of Facebook users reached 1.110 million, with a 1.67 point of monthly growth. In March 2010, more people visited Facebook than Google. In Tunisia, the number of users in March 2013 reached 3.5

million users[10]. In 2011, the number of users in Tunisia reached 1.97 mil-lion, the penetration of population was 18,61% and the penetration of online population was 54.73%[11]. The largest age groups of Tunisians on Facebook is those ranging from 18-24 year olds, while 58% of users in Tunisia are male and 42% are female (see figure 1).

Facebookis a social network site that was created in 2004, beat '*MySpace*' in 4 years and became the world'sbiggest social network. Facebook says that 28 million pieces of content are uploaded every month and 18 million users update their profile at least once a day[12].It is also the second most visited website in the world.

[8]Stephan Wilson, *Social Media and small Business Marketing, 2010, p.2.*

[9]A Cairo activist, quoted in Nadine KassemChebib and RabiaMinatullahSohail, "The Reasons Social Media Contributed to the 2011 Egyptian Revolution," *International Journal of Business Research and Management,* Vol.2, Iss. 3, 2011, p. 139.

[10]http://www.socialbakers.com/ Blog/1568-march-2013-social-media-Report-facebook-pages-in-tunisia, accessed 08/05/2013, 12:05.

[11]http://www.howwemadeitinafrica. com/ top-10-african-countries-on-facebook/6980/, published 19/01/2013, accessed 30/05/2013, 12:12.

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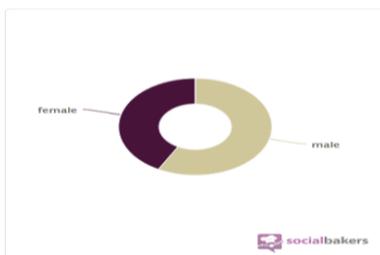
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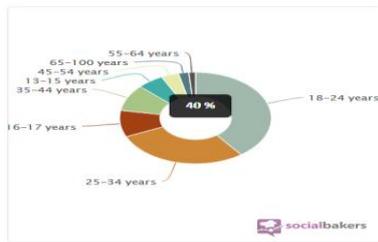
Tunisia Facebook demo-graphics as provided by *socialbakers*.

The largest age groups 18-24 followed by the users in the age of 25-34.

Figure 2

58% of users in Tunisia are male and 42% are female.

 Twitter:

Twitter defines itself as "*the fastest simplest way to stay close to everything you care about*[13]." It was launched in 2006. Unlike other platforms, there are some restrictions on Twitter: users are allowed only to write down 14 characters per tweet. Yet, this way it offers the possibility to share links to websites and articles. Even though it is a micro-blogging site, it offers other services such as hashtag #. "Hashtags" are in fact a group of posts (tweets) categorized by topic or type[14]. Therefore a hashtag is a tool that can reflect the popularity, the different opinions and all the content being shared concerning a single sub-ject. In January 2010, nearly 75 million people visited Twitter.

 Youtube:

YouTube was the first website dedicated solely to uploadvideos, however this leading social network has its own specificities. It does not feature commu-nity tagging. The videos uploaded do not require a level of professionalism, they could be "*just slideshows or videos shot with a static camera; others, however, are quite sophisticated in the use of lighting, captioning, camera angles, and transitions*"[15]. As an average there are 13 hours of video that are uploaded every minute on YouTube.

3. Blogs:

"*Especially when big news breaks, it's tough to beat a blog.*"[16]

Although they are tech-nically simple and easy to create, blogs are not easy to define. Nonetheless, blogs are generally known as a tool of publication. The first definition of a blog came in early 1999, by Brigette Eaton. She describes a blog as « *a site with dated entries*[17] ». Then, and as a result of the evolution of blogs, differ-ent details have been added to that short definition. These personal publishing systems have allowed indi-viduals to publish articles, brief information, links, news, photos, videos or any kind of data.

Doubtlessly, creating a blog does not require any specific or technical know-ledge; every Internet user can be guided to create a blog in a few steps.

Additionally, blogs are at the same time a tool of expression and a medium transmitting a

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[13]https://twitter.com/about, visited July 6, 2013, 13:24.
[14]Chebib&Sohail 2011, 141

[15]http://llt.msu.edu/vol11num1/ pdf/emerging.pdf
16Axel Bruns , « The practice of news blogging »*idem*.13.
[17] BrigetteEaton, cited by Biz Stone, *Blogging: genius strategies for instant web content*, Toronto, New Riders Publishing, 2002, p.6.

message to a group. Therefore, blogs are a medium; that is why it isalways about a transmitter (one or many bloggers), and basically an audience[18].

Neil Thurman and Susan Jones point out that blogs are used for more jour-nalistic activities in the early 2000s. This kind of activities could take the form of '*a broadcast from a live event*', for example publishing speech summaries, '*regular opinion columns*' which include publishing comments and opinions about events and thoughts.

For example Nawat.org used to be a many to many Tunisian blog which was blocked before January 14th and gathers a branch of Tunisian bloggers. There is also the example of the site Tnblogs gathering an important number of Tunisian blogs.

4. Methodology:

This paper aims at delineating and better understanding the reasons that triggered users to use social media during the Tunisian revolution to share a political content, but it will focus mainly on bloggers those who have a larger space to practice 'citizen journalism'. As such, and due to the nature and purposes of our research, we choose to operate qualitatively, since "*qualitative research is a research method that involves interpretive views of social realities, people's intentions, motivations and unique experiences.*" [19]

Accordingly, as we are interested in ascertaining the meaning and motives citizen journalists attribute to their produced content, indepth interviews are the chosen technique. In depth interviews were conducted with 20 Tunisian bloggers during the period October 2010 to February 2011. The main difficulty lies in the fact that there is no data basis of citizen journalists in Tunisia and blogs aren't organized by content as well. Hence, as a first step, we chose to select bloggers from one of the famous blogs aggregator in Tunisia, which is TN-blogs. Tunisieblogs gathers an important number of Tunisian blogs. Every new post published by a blog aggregated on TN-blogs appears on the site. As such we chose 20 bloggers: 10 males and 10 females.

5. Results:

Analyzing the conducted interviews, one finds two principles as the reason to motivate Tunisian users to produce (write, shoot, take pictures) and blog regu-larly about political, eco-nomic, social, etc. events in Tunisia. The first one is to express oneself, arguing that mainstream media do not reflect their opinions,especially under the dictatorship.The second main motivation is to provide other users with alternative media content with information differing from mainstream media.

5.1.Expressing oneself and getting one's voice heard

Self-expression is the most common explicit motive interviewees mentioned when they were asked why they produce their content. Through their contribution, they found an outlet for personal expression. Self-expression

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[18]   Benoît Desavoye, Christophe Ducamp, Xavier de Mazenod, Xavier Moisan, idem, p.22.

[19]KlaudiaDjajalie, *Citizen Journalist: A Case Study on Using Blogs for Self-Promotion*, Singapore, Solistice Publishing, 2011, p.40.

used to be limited and confined to household spacesspec-ially under a dictatorship. Many interviewed bloggers produce only opinion articles. They do discuss politics, cultural or other issues in order to express what they think or what their positions are. For them, blogs are tools for democratic and personal self-expression.

In this respect, 'HaykalFakhfakh' one of the interviewees explains that his blog turned into a medium between him and his readers, one enabling him to be an active individual rather than a passive one. As a matter of fact, Haykal argues that he produces his content in order "*to communicate his voice so that his thoughts don't keep being impri-soned in his head.*" Meanwhile, he argues that his blog represents a space of communication with the virtual world allowing him to communicate his thoughts to people.

Lina Ben Mheni who runs the blog 'A Tunisian Girl', for instance argues that she is blogging and writing for the simple reason of expressing positions and personal thoughts. She says:"*My blog is a way to express myself, where I write my thoughts and ideas and share them with people.*" Even though Lina produces a field-reporting content, her explicit motive remains self-expression as she is producing her con-tent mainly for voicing her viewpoints and thoughts. Accordingly, she was present at the demons-tration supporting SidiBouzid which took place 28/12/2010, a demonstration that did not figure on mainstream media,especially the National TV. She wrote under the title "*Demonstration to support SidiBouzid (2)*"[20] :

"*The second demonstra-tion to support SidiBouzid in Tunis took place today, Monday, December 27th, 2010. It started at 1:00 pm in Med Ali Place. Arriving there, again, I was not surprised to see that police officers outnumbered the demonstrators. Nevertheless, the number of demonstrators was bigger than that of the first demonstration. People were singing the Tunisian National Anthem in har-mony. Then they started shouting some slogans claiming the right of people to work, to dignity, to freedom. They evoked freedom of press, freedom of demonstrating.*"

5.2. Providing an alter-native content

Mainstream media came to answer people's need to know. Throughout history,media has developed and spread quickly. Even in Tunisia recent years havewitnessed the emergence of private media. Private radio stations and TV networks have helped modify the way Tunisians get informed or enter-tained. However, in the era of everyone's media, the standard and unidirectional position of media is continually changing. When readers, auditors and viewers are not satisfied with what they read, listen to, or watch, they can currently produce the con-tent they prefer according to their own 'agenda'. Online self-publication spaces allow them to produce media of their own.

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[20]http://atunisiangirl.blogspot.com/2010/12/demonstration-to-support-sidi-bouzid-2.html,
visited 20/01/2010, 14:20.

'Lina Ben Mheni' argues that she is the main source of her content: "*I move to places where events take place, I shot photos, I get informed, I capture videos and finally I add texts, then I publish.*" Linacan be considered as a typical engaged citizen in produ-cing an alternative journa-listic content. In some issues those citizens helped to fight media blackout during the revolution. Lina, in fact, underlines that her blog is "*a form of independent media,*" ad-ding that "*on [her blog], nobody tells [her] what to write; [she] follows what happens on the field, [she]moves, reports and tries to spread the message.*"

Hamza Belloumi who runs the blog 'islamiqua.canalblog.com' explains that he is passionate about religious topics and he argues that:"*One of the reasons that motivated [him] to create a blog is that discussing religious issues is absent in Tunisian media and even if it exists it concerns only attacking or criticizing extremism, moreover it is an event coverage very limited in time.*"

Perceiving Tunisian main-stream media as not even worth being called media as for her "they serve certain ideologies and agendas and are only useful to knowabout the weather," Abir,who owns the blog 'abinote.blogpost.com' indicates that"*[she is] interested in publishing all the news and information mainstream media do not generally cover.*" Answering the question *"How is your content different from mainstream media?",*Abir answers:

"*At least I am concre-tizing the freedom of speech as I convey as objectively as possible what I judge useful and important for people to know (keeping in mind that my blog has been censured). Precisely, I try to deal with all topics the way Tunisian mainstream media deal with football.*"

Apparently, Abir is moti-vated by the failure of mainstream media in covering news and infor-mation she judges relevant. She is aware of the fact that some topics and subjects are not well conveyed by Tunisian media. She affirms expli-citly that she is producing her content in order to talk about what mainstream media, according to her, do not cover or discuss.

Conclusion

In order to answer this main question about the motivations of ordinary citizens to engage in producing a journalistic-like content, we used a qualitative method. Indeed, this consists on conducting 20 interviews with Tuni-sian bloggers.

After analysing the 20 interviews, we find that there is no single motivation for every blogger to participate in the news process. Due to the subjective nature of motivations, the inter-viewed bloggers vowed different possible answers for our research question. However, the primary motivation bloggers sought to gratify is self-expression.

Obviously, the majority of the interviewed bloggers are motivated by their need of self-expression. In order to answer this need, they are regularly publishing their opinions and posi-tions. Meanwhile, what could be more important than having or writing this opinion, sharing it with others and getting heard? It is in order to breathe, to get one's voices heard, to say loudly what one wants to say and what one

believes in. Most of the interviewed bloggers are producing an alternative content. Many interviewed bloggers showed a very high interest in respecting journalism standards. Interviewees do not feel or believe that the content published by the media reflects them. They do not trust mainstream media and look for alternative spaces where they can voice their thoughts.

Even if dissatisfaction with Tunisian mainstream me-dia is not the main motive behind citizen journalism activities, it remains one of the indirect reasons. The lack of media spaces where citizens can share their thoughts and attitudes urged many of them to search for alternative spaces and create their own alternative media. Al-though many of the interviewed bloggers re-cognize that they created their blogs and produced their content in order to express dissatisfaction with mainstream media cover-age, and want to discuss subjects and issues not covered by the Tunisian media, such reasons are not the most common motivations among them. The bloggers express a disapproval of mainstream media coverage and agree that mainstream media coverage is insufficient and erroneous. They underline the uniqueness of a blog and they argue that they are not funda-mentally concerned with informing and helping peo-ple to understand, or with revealing the truth. They seek self-expression in-stead.

Moreover, one of the theoretical assumptions of the study was that citizen journalism is interactive and collaborative, but it seems that this was not the case. Interaction within online communities is al-most a marginalized con-cern for interviewees except for one interviewee (Kais Elgoul), who is engaged in promoting himself online and also a few tendencies to comment on others' content. There-fore, despite their convic-tions that a blogging com-munity is very essential, the interviewed bloggers are not basically concerned with interacting within online communities or building new connections. They are rather motivated by other reasons such as to engage in citizen jour-nalism activities, to ex-press themselves, or to create an alternative agen-da of their own based on what topics they are interested in.

Still, their produced content helped some of them to build connections online and to discuss issues with people offline. This is, essentially, beneficial, as some of them argue, to learn from others' exper-iences, to inform and to be informed, and to improve their content.

Furthermore, we did not register a strong impor-tance or an enthusiasm in answering the questions that concern this motive. Generally speaking, while answering those questions, they usually tend to answer firmly and sometimes logi-cally more than sponta-neously. Even if some bloggers underline the importance of a blogging community, they usually prefer to stick to the community they already know and to people they are conformable with.

Most interviewed bloggers attribute a personal conno-tation to their blogs and do not perceive what they are publishing as a journalism-like content. The bloggers try to respect some basics and journalistic standards, and many of them declare spending time enhancing their

writing styles and double checking facts. Many bloggers have no idea about citizen journalism. The word is not clear for them.

Regarding the informative nature of citizen journa-lism content, the inter-viewed bloggers were very conscious that this is not their job and they are not present online to inform but to express themselves.

It is important to mention that the four bloggers interviewed after the revolution hold a negative perception for Tunisian mainstream media. Even though the media landscape has changed, they still have reservations and argue that the Tunisian media is unprofessional.

However, there a number of issues related to producing a journalistic-like content by ordinary citizens which is related to the lack of respecting.

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