Framing Bouazizi: 'White lies', hybrid network, and collective/connective action in the 2010–11 Tunisian uprising

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Abstract

By delving into the detailed account of the Tunisian uprising, this article offers an explanation that sets the 2010 uprising apart from its precursors. The 2010 uprising was successful because activists successfully managed to bridge geographical and class divides as well as to converge offline and online activisms. Such connection and convergence were made possible, first, through the availability of dramatic visual evidence that turned a local incident into a spectacle. Second, by successful *frame alignment* with a master narrative that culturally and politically resonated with the entire population. Third, by activating a *hybrid network* made of the *connective structures* to facilitate *collective action* – among Tunisians who shared collective identities and collective frames – and *connective action* – among individuals who sought more personalized paths to contribute to the movement through digital media.

On 17 December 2010, Mohamed Bouazizi, a fruit vendor in Sidi Bouzid, set himself on fire in front of a municipal building. Images and stories of his desperate act spread like wildfire across Tunisia, throughout the Middle East and North Africa, and around the globe, and ignited the 2010–11 Tunisian uprising. Bouazizi was hailed a martyr and became a symbol of the struggle for justice, dignity and freedom throughout the Arab

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triangulated data – verifying with two or more sources – all information that made up an account of the Tunisian uprising to reveal key mechanisms and processes in the dissemination of information. By so doing, I also uncovered some distinct features of media use that set Bouazizi's immolation and the ensuing protests apart from its precursors.

A great disconnect: Online activism vs. working-class struggles

The 2010–11 Tunisian revolt has at least two historical origins, namely the enduring struggles of working-class and labor activists and the long-established online activism. On the ground, offline protests generally involved blue-collar workers and labor and trade unions, and revolved around unemployment and poverty issues. Meanwhile, digital activism was predominantly urban centered and focused on immaterial issues such as freedom of expression (censorship), democracy, and human rights. These two clusters shared common concerns; both were critical of the issues of corruption and the government's use of violence and torture. They were rarely united on mobilizing issues, however, as will be elaborated shortly.

Sami Ben Gharbia, a Tunisian blogger activist, describes it this way: 'The role of the internet in the Tunisian revolution and [in] building the spirit of protest and change is the work of at least a decade' (Randeree, 2011). Digital activism in Tunisia was indeed built upon years of online campaigns against the internet censorship. In 1991, Tunisia became the first country in the Arab world to connect to the internet. The technology became available to the public by 1996 and in the same year the Tunisian Internet Agency or ATI (L'Agence Tunisienne d'Internet) was established. ATI quickly became the chief institution that oversaw the most severe internet censorship in the world, with a long list of blocked websites, including those related to human rights and oppositional parties, politics, and news portals.

Such restrictive censorship, however, did not stop activists from using the internet for political purposes. On the contrary, digital activism was lively, as exemplified by Takriz, a Tunisian cyber think-tank established in 1998, and early prominent activist websites such as the Perspectives Tunisiennes established in 2000 and TuneZine in 2001. Year 2004 saw the emergence of political blogs and the birth of Nawaat.org, an independent collective blog serving as a platform for Tunisian dissident voices and debates. The harsh online environment was the main challenge for online activists, making 'the fight against censorship online and in the real world' the main occupation of Tunisian political bloggers (Kuebler, 2011). Many political blogs were censored, prompting a popular saying 'you are not a real blogger if your blog is not censored'. The repressive measures also extended offline with the arrest of bloggers and cyber dissidents.

While vibrant, Tunisian online activism had only limited ability to connect with regular Tunisians. As described by veteran digital activist Ben Gharbia (2010), 'despite its technical and tactical advantages, [Tunisian online activism] has never managed to go offline and reach out to the average masses of Tunisian citizens'. The first attempt to establish the online–offline linkage was a 2010 street-rally against internet censorship involving Facebook groups with thousands of members like *Le '404 Not Found' nuit gravement à l'image de Mon Pays*, and *Aridha li 'ashar alaaf tonisi dhid al- riqaba*

al- Eliktroniyya wa al-hajb.[2] On the protest day, 22 May, hundreds participated in the rallies held in front of Tunisian embassies in Paris, Bonn, and New York. In the Tunisian capital of Tunis, however, only a few dozen showed up to protest (Ben Gharbia, 2010). This low participation reflected the limit of online activism in a repressive society where there was a highly cultivated culture of fear and the media environment was heavily controlled. Ironically, the rally was mobilized around the issue of internet censorship, which did not resonate with the 70 percent of the population who lacked internet access.

Tunisian digital activists are predominantly affluent, highly educated urbanites. They are more closely connected to global activisms such as Reporters without Borders and WikiLeaks than to local struggles. On 28 November 2010, Nawaat.org launched TuniLeaks – a new website dedicated to republishing and discussing the revelations related to Tunisia – only one hour after WikiLeaks' release of 17 cables that contained information that undermined the Tunisian authorities (Ben Mhenni, 2010). Whilst vital to political reform, Tunisian digital activists rarely touched on issues of common interest to Tunisians and, as illustrated next in the case of Gafsa, seldom raised issues that resonated with working-class activists.

A series of strikes centered around the issue of unemployment took place in the mining area of Gafsa from January to June 2008. The slogan of the Sidi Bouzid protests, 'Employment is a right, you band of thieves!', was a direct echo of this revolt, prompting labor activists to credit the Gafsa protest as the genesis of the 2010–11 Tunisian uprising. At the local level, mobilization of the protest was successful. Before the 2010 Sidi Bouzid protests, this mining revolt represented the most important uprising seen in Tunisia since the Bread Riots in 1984. However, it was unable to grow 'due to the limited support it enjoyed within Tunisian society … [and] the coercive policy of Ben Ali's regime' (Gobe, 2011: 1). In addition to violent crackdowns, the government physically blocked any journalists from accessing the region and successfully controlled media reporting of the event. In the mainstream media the protesters were framed as rioters, uneducated thugs, who were hijacked by terrorism and extremism. Activists worked around media control using independent guerilla channels, such as homemade video CDs (VCDs), to broadcast the revolt. They posted these homemade videos on Facebook and a few of the videos eventually made their way to DailyMotion and YouTube with the help of a number of Tunisians abroad. Yet these videos did not become popular, not even among digital activists. The digital activism around the Gafsa revolt was very limited, even in the blogosphere (Figure 1), with only four related postings in April and five in June of 2008. This number is very low especially if compared to the number of postings devoted to the topics of censorship and Ben Ali – 148 and 153 postings, respectively, just in June alone.[3]

The lack of coverage from digital activists and mainstream media meant the protests did not echo elsewhere. The only western media that recognized the revolt was a leftist online magazine *In Defence of Marxism* (Riposte, 2008) that has a limited readership. Coverage of Gafsa was absent from Al Jazeera because the channel was banned from Tunisia and thus could not send its journalists to the region (Harb, 2011) and at the time they had not yet integrated citizen-generated images and reporting into their coverage.

In Tunisia, Ben Ali was politically unassailable as long as he controlled the army and the media. In the Gafsa revolt, the role of state media was to offer a counter-narrative to the protesters' story. In the absence of alternative discourse in international media and
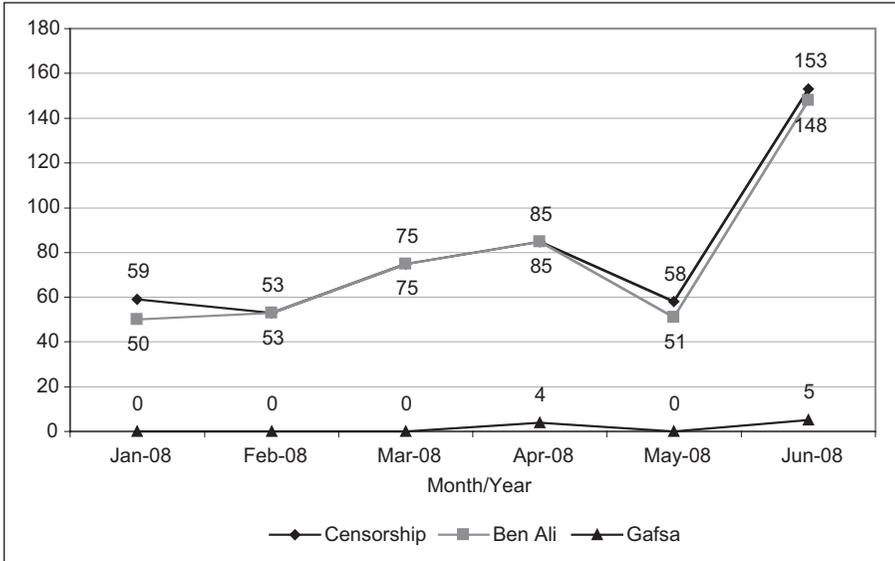
Figure 1. 'Censorship', 'Ben Ali', and 'Gafsa' related blog posts in top 56 Tunisian political blogs (January–June 2008). Source: author.

social media, the state was successful in containing local protests from becoming nationwide uprisings. The isolation of protest was also helped by social and economic disparities between interior regions (such as Gafsa and Sidi Bouzid) and coastal regions. Economic development has long been concentrated in coastal regions, leaving the interior regions isolated from economic activities, 'not only by distance but, more significantly, by a lack of transportation and information networks' (Brisson and Kontiris, 2012). Such disparities made it difficult to build national solidarity, as local grievances tended to be contained and rarely became diffused nationally. From the story of Gafsa we learn that what prevented a nationwide populist movement from emerging was not a lack of activism. Online and on-the-ground activist movements were vibrant and, yet, disconnected from one another. Geographical and class divides within society made this disconnect even greater. Even when the society as a whole shared some grievances, this disconnect, in addition to the state's repression and control of media, made the transformation of local activism to mass movement extremely difficult.

Social movements aim to replace the dominant belief system that serves to validate the status quo with an alternative belief system that supports political mobilization and collective action (Gamson et al., 1982: 15). Rather than centering solely on economic or materially driven grievances, new movement theory associates actions or movements with belief systems that revolve around a set of values and symbols that are specific to the group (Snow et al., 1986). Symbolic politics, however, is paradoxical in that it extends familiar codes that are rooted in people's cultures in order to construct alternative identities that lead to change (Tarrow, 1998: 106). The Gafsa uprising was framed by activists as a familiar symbolic politics, the struggle of the poor, which did not resonate with middle-class

Table 1. (Continued)

Date	Events	Media events
26/12/10		Massive use of **mobile phones** (without internet connection) for voice and video recording of protests. **Laptops with internet** as hubs.
27/12/210	1000 attended the first solidarity protest in Tunis. The Tunisian Federation of Labor Unions (UGTT) rallied in Gafsa. 300 lawyers rallied in Tunis.	**Angola Press'** first coverage (in French).
28/12/10	Ben Ali visited Bouazizi in a hospital in Ben Arous.	The picture of the President, standing next to Bouazizi's unrecognizable body, became viral on **Facebook** and **Twitter**. The President's first remark in national television, condemning the protestors. **Le Monde's** first coverage (in French). **The Guardian's** first coverage (in English). **Boston Globe's** first coverage (in English).
29/12/10	Protests in Tunis. Protests proliferated to Monastir, Sbikha, and Chebba.	**Nessma TV's** (national TV) first coverage. **Express FM's** and **Shams FM's** (commercial radios) first coverage. **El Nuevo Empresario's** first reportage (in Spanish). Swiss **Neue Zürcher Zeitung's** first reportage (in German).
30/12/10	An injured protester, El-Hadri, died.	
31/12/10	Protests broke out in most regions. Lawyers showed solidarity in Sousse, Monastir, Mahdia, Gafsa, Jendouba, and Grombalia. Internet and power outage in Sidi Bouzid and neighboring towns.	Videos of security forces' brutality were disseminated through **Facebook**, reposted on **DailyMotion** and **YouTube**.
1/1/11		
2/1/11		'Anonymous' launched Operation Tunisia, hacking Tunisian government websites.
3/1/11	Students' protest in Thala turned violent.	Government hacked activists' **emails** and **Facebook** accounts.
4/1/11	Tunisian Bar Association announced a general strike. Bouazizi died.	**Al Jazeera** deployed a massive number of **smart-phones** to the people of Sidi Bouzid.

(Continued)

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Date	Events	Media events
5/1/11	Bouazizi's funeral in Sidi Bouzid town, attended by 5000 mourners. Government sanctioned the region with physical and information blockages.	**Videos** of the funeral and subsequent marches went **online** and were broadcast by **Al Jazeera.**
6/1/11	95% of Tunisia's 8000 lawyers went on strike. Sidi Bouzid secondary and high schools on strike. El General, a political rapper, was arrested.	El General's rap song criticizing the President became viral on **YouTube.**
7/1/11	Thousands of teachers went on strike. Government arrested bloggers and online activists. Police opened fire in Saida and Regueb.	
8/1/11	Massacres and press black out in Thala, Regueb, and Kasserine. Government isolated these towns and blocked the roads.	Brutality videos uploaded to **memory cards,** put in **sneakers** and thrown over the border to Algeria, transported to Tunis, uploaded **online.**
9/1/11		Italian **TV RAI** reported Tunis police beat a reporter and his cameraman.
10/1/11		First government's acknowledgement in **media** that protesters got killed.
11/1/11		
10/1/11		***New York Times'*** first reportage. Ben Ali's second **televised** address, promising job creation, called protestors 'terrorists'.
11/1/11	Protests in the suburbs of Tunis.	
12/1/11	Protests in central Tunis followed by a curfew.	
13/1/11	A top-ranked army commander was fired for refusing to shoot protestors. The army sided with the people.	Ben Ali's third **televised** address, promising changes.
14/1/11	Ben Ali imposed a state of emergency. Large protests in Tunis. Ben Ali fled the country.	The Prime Minister Ghannouchi's appearance on **state TV,** announcing that he was assuming the role of interim president. First reportage by many **global western media.**

With the Sidi Bouzid incident, reporters at Al Jazeera trawled the internet looking for relevant material and found Ali Bouazizi's video of the Sidi Bouzid protests posted at 6:47 pm (*29 Days*, 2012; *The Death of Fear*, 2011). The video was immediately picked up and aired on Al Jazeera Mubasher with an interview with Ali Bouazizi (*Evening News*, 2010). Later that evening, an unauthorized copy of the Al Jazeera report emerged on Facebook. Just hours after they happened, the self-immolation of Bouazizi and the protest in Sidi Bouzid were broadcast for the first time to the Arab world. Following the coverage, Al Jazeera stayed connected to citizen journalists on the ground, including Ali Bouazizi and his friend Mehdi Horchani, who both became frequent contributors (*29 Days*, 2012).

From the day of Bouazizi's self-immolation, the 2010–11 Tunisian revolt involved multiple forms of media where mobile phones played a significant role in disseminating the news. But, unlike what was reported by western media, mobile phones were mostly not connected to social media. In 2010, more than 95 percent of mobiles did not carry internet service due to the prohibitive cost. Smart-phones accounted for only 2 percent of all mobile sales in Tunisia (Reed, 2012). The mobile enabled ordinary people in Sidi Bouzid to communicate and record what was happening, to connect with individuals and groups who had better access to online and traditional media, and to pass the Sidi Bouzid story to other Tunisians.

We can see from Figure 2 that the diffusion of information on 17 December took place in the hybrid network of mobile phone users (ordinary people, activists, and independent
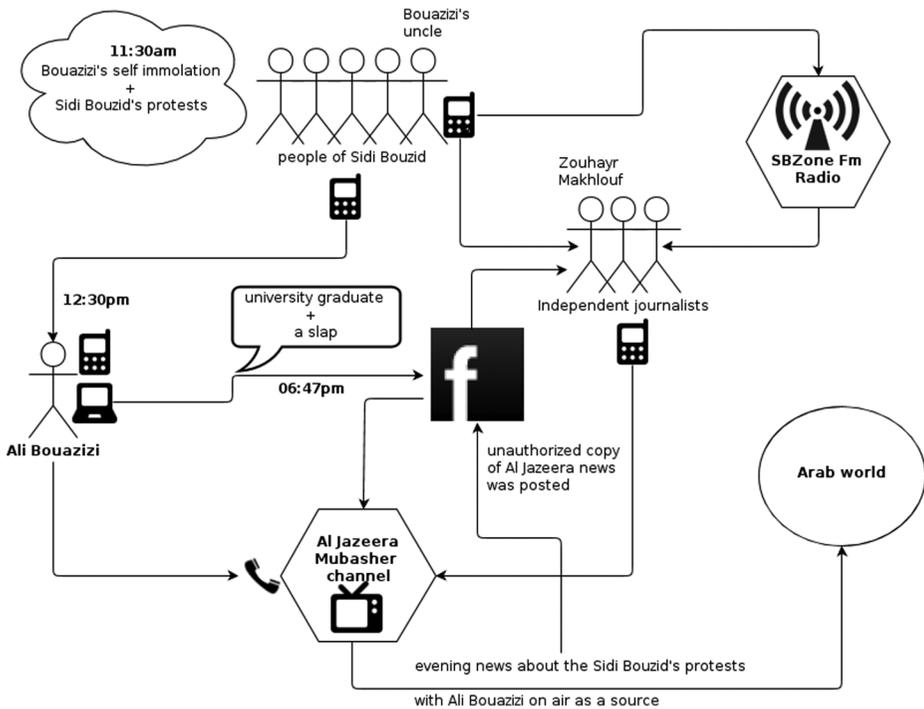

Figure 2. Flow of information on 17 December 2010. Source: author.

journalists), social media users, local radio, and satellite television. The making of this network reflects the logic of *media convergence* which embodies not only a technological process where different types of media forms – old and new – collide, but also a cultural process with blurring lines between production and consumption, between makers and users, between formal and informal memberships, and between active or passive spectators (Deuze, 2006: 19; Jenkins, 2004: 37).

From here, the hybrid network continued growing and expanding to facilitate the diffusion of contention beyond Sidi Bouzid. In the Gafsa scenario, the authority was successful in containing not only the protests but also the news about the protests. The Sidi Bouzid case took a different scenario. As we can see from Table 1, the protests were still contained in Sidi Bouzid but within five days of Bouazizi's immolation the news had traveled far (see Figure 3) and been told and retold by television reporters, news writers in the Arab and western worlds, bloggers, and among regular Tunisians. Images and videos of Sidi Bouzid were uploaded on YouTube, shared and re-shared on Facebook, tweeted and re-tweeted on Twitter.

At this point, an alternative channel of information had been created and it would have been impossible to shut this hybrid network down. Beyond the fifth day, the network just grew larger and denser. In the event that one media channel was blocked, information could and would find its way through other available channels. Because the hybrid network is multi-tiered, information flows through the path of least resistance. It is redundant and resilient, ensuring that no information could be blocked, even where there is a technological blackout. Unlike in Egypt, where the Mubarak regime cut off virtually all internet access to contain the protests, in Tunisia there was never a complete shutdown of the internet. Nevertheless, some places in Tunisia experienced internet and power outage, such as Sidi Bouzid and neighboring towns from 31 December to 2 January (see Table 1). During this dark period, the people of Sidi Bouzid reportedly used mobile phones to relay news to families and friends in other places. Mobile phones were used not only to record images and videos and to send texts, but also to broadcast. Mobile phones were used as one-way radios where the listener could hear in real time what was going on. Young people carried a cell phone in one hand and a rock in the other (Ryan, 2011). Some of these texts and sound-bytes arrived at activists' mobile phones and laptops to be converted to electronic files and uploaded online (Abdallah, 2011). This way, the citizen-generated newsbytes found their way to the homes of middle-class Tunisians in the more affluent regions such as Sousse and Tunis.

Other evidence of the resilience of the hybrid network comes from places that had no reliable internet connection – Thala and Kasserine. When massive protests broke out in these two border towns near Algeria, police blocked the roads, isolated the towns and squashed the protests with brutal massacres (Ryan, 2011). And yet, the police could not prevent the information from going out. People took videos with their mobile phones and pocket cameras documenting police brutality and passed them to activists who transferred them to memory cards. Activists put memory cards inside sneakers and threw the sneakers over the border to Algeria. From here, these cards were transported to Tunis to be uploaded online by activists in the capital and some eventually got to Al Jazeera's news desks (Ammar, 2011). The massacres in out-of-the-way towns, which in 2008 would have remained a local account, shocked Tunisians across the country and laid 'the seeds for the uprising to become a genuinely nationwide phenomenon' (Rifai, 2011).

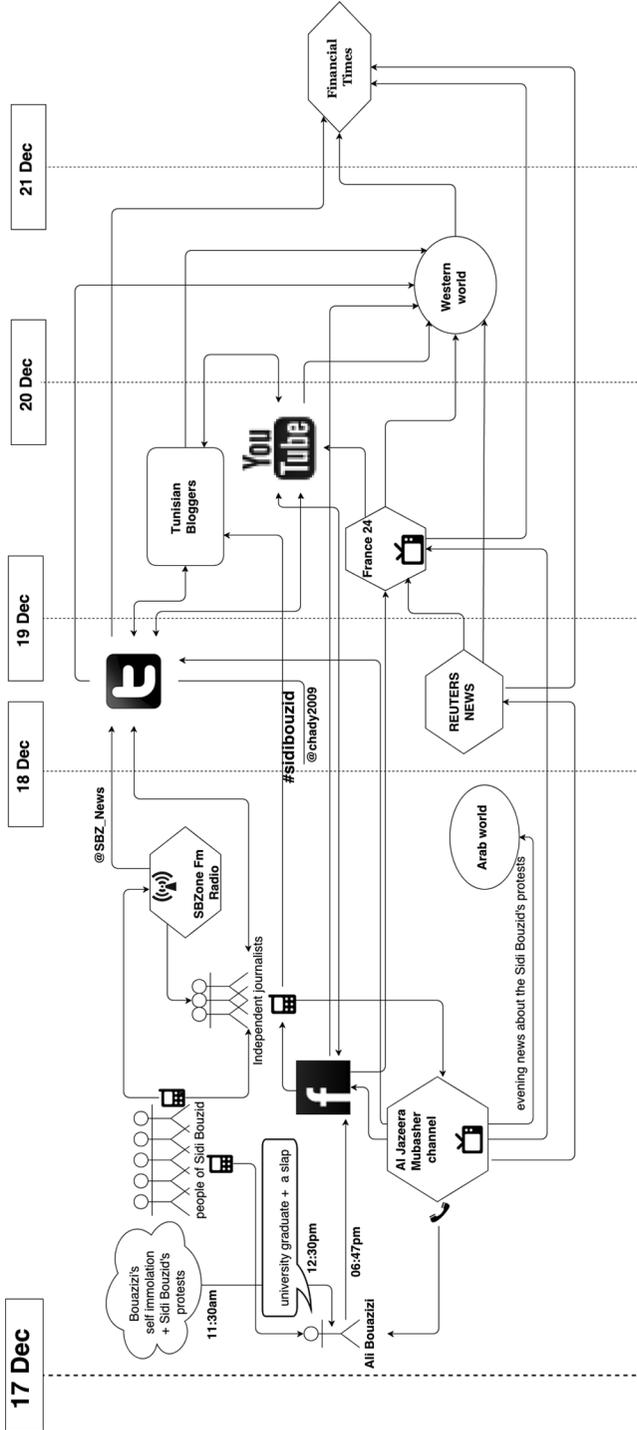**Figure 3.** Flow of information in Tunisian revolt from 17 to 21 December 2010. Source: author.