





# 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.

## Keywords

Activism, Arab Spring, Bouazizi, collective action, framing, networks, social media, social movement, Tunisia

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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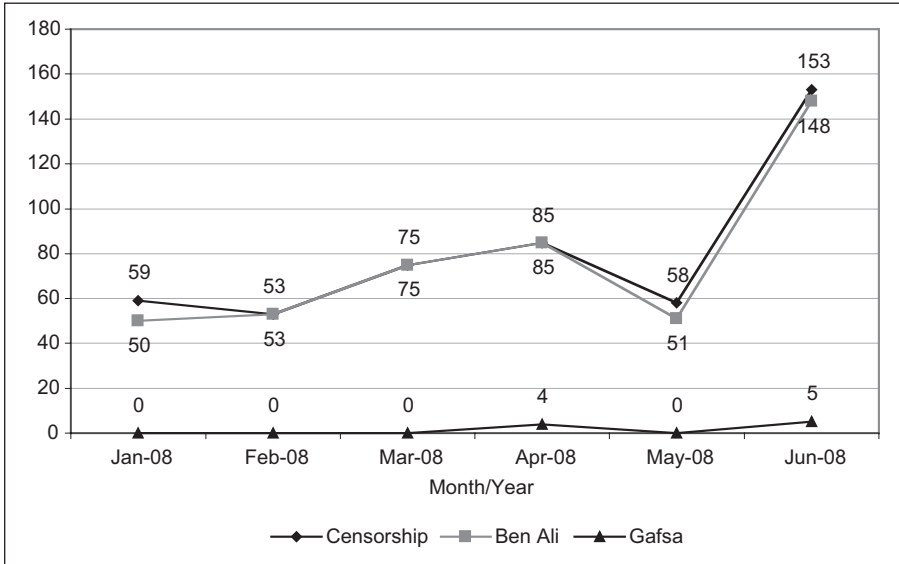
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**Figure 1.** 'Censorship', 'Ben Ali', and 'Gafsa' related blog posts in top 56 Tunisian political blogs (January–June 2008). Source: author.

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 <b>mobile phones</b> (without internet connection) for voice and video recording of protests. <b>Laptops with internet</b> 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.                                        | <b>Angola Press'</b> 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 <b>Facebook</b> and <b>Twitter</b> . The President's first remark in national television, condemning the protestors. <b>Le Monde's</b> first coverage (in French). <b>The Guardian's</b> first coverage (in English). <b>Boston Globe's</b> first coverage (in English). |
| 29/12/10  | Protests in Tunis.<br>Protests proliferated to Monastir, Sbikha, and Chebba.                                                                                                               | <b>Nessma TV's</b> (national TV) first coverage.<br><b>Express FM's</b> and <b>Shams FM's</b> (commercial radios) first coverage.<br><b>El Nuevo Empresario's</b> first reportage (in Spanish).<br>Swiss <b>Neue Zürcher Zeitung's</b> 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 <b>Facebook</b> , reposted on <b>DailyMotion</b> and <b>YouTube</b> .                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| 1/1/11    |                                                                                                                                                                                            |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| 2/1/11    |                                                                                                                                                                                            | ' <b>Anonymous</b> ' launched Operation Tunisia, hacking Tunisian government websites.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| 3/1/11    | Students' protest in Thala turned violent.                                                                                                                                                 | Government hacked activists' <b>emails</b> and <b>Facebook</b> accounts.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| 4/1/11    | Tunisian Bar Association announced a general strike. Bouazizi died.                                                                                                                        | <b>Al Jazeera</b> deployed a massive number of <b>smart-phones</b> to the people of Sidi Bouzid.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued)

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

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

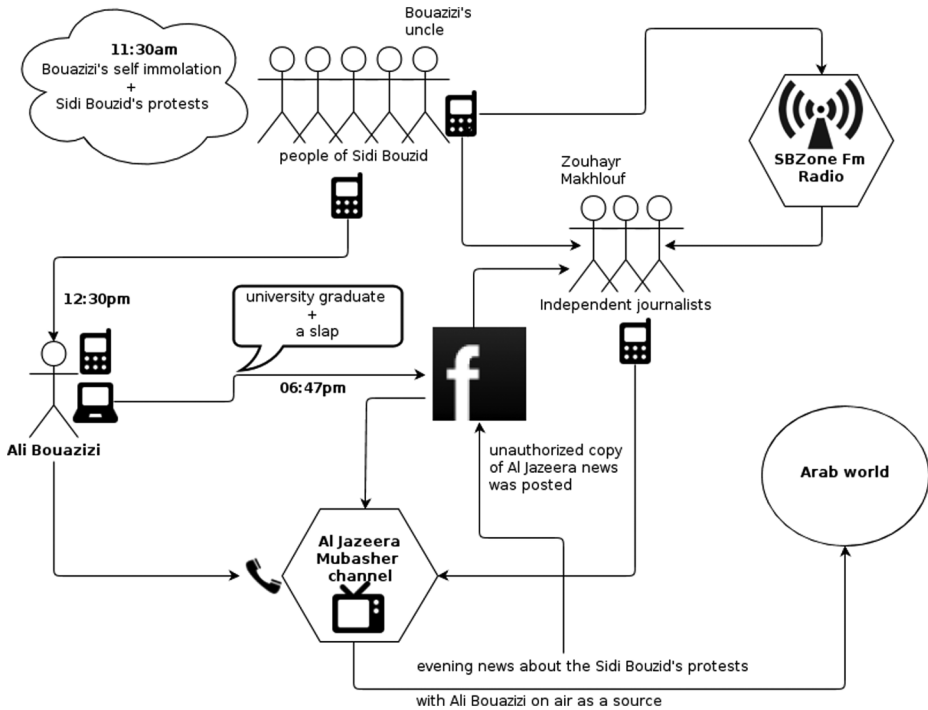


Figure 2. Flow of information on 17 December 2010. Source: author.

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).

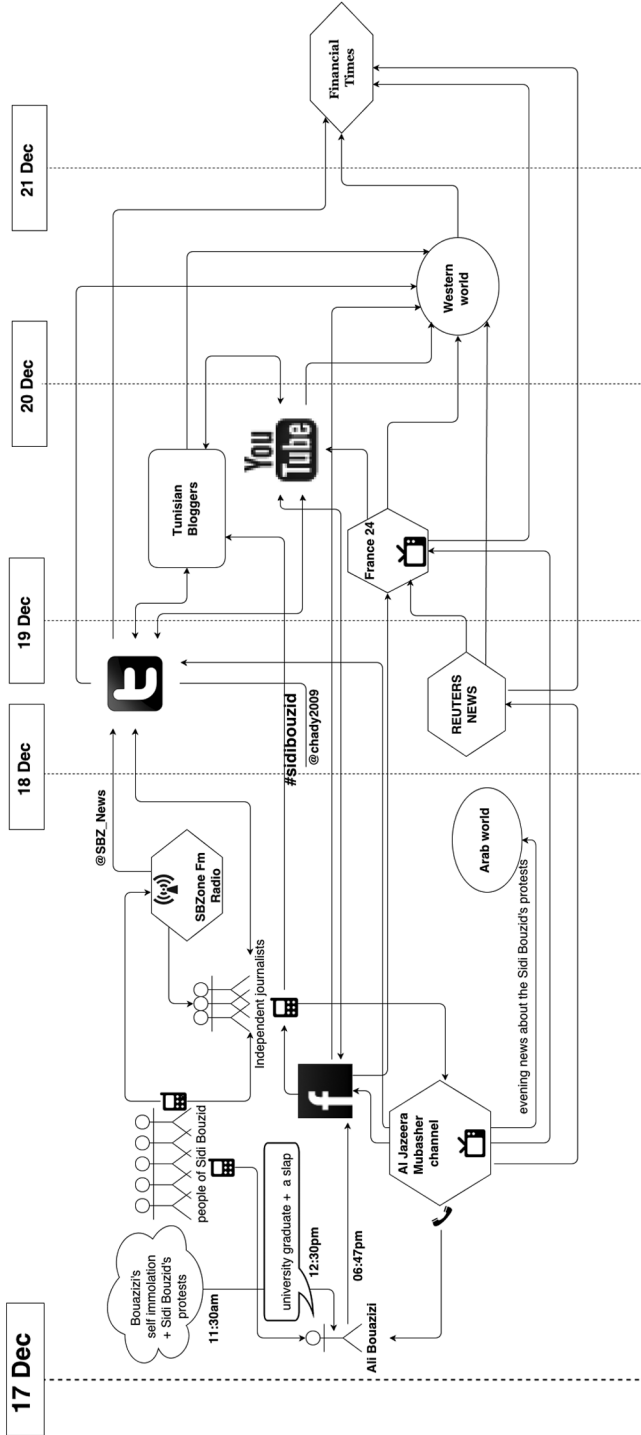


Figure 3. Flow of information in Tunisian revolt from 17 to 21 December 2010. Source: author.













