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Social Media and Uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt

By

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Dedication

To my loving mother who has supported me every step of the way from Kindergarten to Graduate School,

To my amazing father who made sure I received the best education,

To my one of a kind sister who has managed to be there for me despite being millions of miles away.

To my love, my rock, who has encouraged me and helped me all along.

To the brother I never had, my brother in law, who is my best friend and supporter.
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The year 2010 witnessed a major breakthrough in the Arab world, demonstrations unexpectedly filled the streets of Tunisia followed by Egypt, Bahrain, Yemen, Libya and Syria. In fact, many other countries of the Middle East and North Africa were also affected by this domino effect. Citizens of the Arab world were no longer afraid to speak up and stand up for their rights which had long been taken away from them by their rulers. This thesis seeks to examine a new paradigm of information and sourcing which introduced new actors and tools to the political arena. The main goal of this study is to examine the role of social media in the Arab Spring specifically in the revolutions of Tunisia and Egypt. Two case studies will be analyzed in depth: Tunisia and Egypt, which were the first two countries to have started a revolution and have succeeded in overthrowing their rulers. The main findings this thesis seeks to demonstrate are that social media did not cause the Arab spring, however it provided accelerating and limitless tools that helped the people plan the revolutions, connect and share the truth with the outside world, and it also allowed normal citizens to become journalists.
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Chapter One

Introduction

1.1 Introduction to the topic

In the last months of the year 2010, the world witnessed major upheavals in the Arab world. Arab revolutions were suddenly launched by citizens who could no longer endure the strict authoritarian rule; a cry for change was unexpectedly released by normal citizens who finally decided to speak up out loud with no indication of any kind of fear that had long been felt deep down.

The Arab revolutions were not the first revolutions witnessed in the region and in the world, but they surely were distinct in their type. The term “Arab Spring” was created as a connotation for an Arab bloom emphasizing a sort of Arab birth never seen before. People of the Arab world started speaking of democracy and freedom and were no longer afraid to fight in order to achieve their goals.

This thesis will focus specifically on the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt which started in late 2010 and ended in early 2011. The major objectives of the revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia were to initiate and force a change in regime and condemn the authoritarian rulers. Both revolutions happened almost simultaneously and share a number of similarities regarding the significance and impact of social networking platforms’ role in shaping the outcome and the coverage of the uprisings.

The revolutions of Tunisia and Egypt provide interesting case studies since they succeeded in their quest despite the strict authoritarian rules. In fact, most Arab
countries have been known for their strict monitoring and censorship of all forms of media, political freedom and most importantly the basic right of freedom of expression. Thus, what was written on newspapers and aired on radio and television, was crafted and manipulated by heads of states in order to convey distorted information to brainwash the people (Fandy, 2000). The censorship strategies made sure citizens were kept ignorant and consequently powerless.

The breakthroughs that shook and surprised the world in 2010 had been escalating even before the millennium. As new technologies started presenting themselves to Arab societies, citizens started to receive information that had been fully blocked before. Additionally, the majority of the population was generally young, thus they started opening up and discovering new technologies and trends that gave them access to more information uncensored by their governments. In fact, around 60% of the Arab population is younger than 25 years old, which means that the majority of the Arabs have lived their entire life under the rule of the same leader (Filiu, 2011). Arab citizens and especially the youth started to find out truths about their own countries which had been intentionally kept from them in order for their rulers to control them. The internet was the main tool that paved the way for such openness since it allowed citizens to access global websites. Consequently, censoring information was not an easy task to do anymore since the governments could only fully control newspapers and television channels. However, the countless websites that were accessed by Arab citizens could not be completely blocked and easily controlled. Thus, the flow of information was taking on a new virtual form that could not be grasped by the authorities. Furthermore, online downloadable radio started to play a big role in countries where national radio channels
were controlled by the government. People shifted from mainstream national radio channels to online radio channels looking for the truth by other well informed citizens. In this sense, thoughts of liberalism and freedom found their way through multiple innovative gateways into Arab countries and into young Arab dreams (Kuttab, 2007).

Also, new forms of communication technologies and media were constantly developed and finally made their way into Arab states despite the strict censorship of Arab rulers. Examples of these new forms of technologies were satellite television joined with mobile phones and internet accessibility, these tools not only changed the content of information received by Arab citizens but also changed the way they received it and viewed it. These newly introduced informative technologies clearly influenced Arab societies (Samin, 2012).

Moreover, the internet was not the final online innovation, new platforms of information and communication emerged on the internet which allowed citizens not only to receive information but also to communicate interactively with each other by discussing and sharing important news. Facebook, which will be mentioned throughout this thesis, as a prominent social platform in the revolutions of Tunisia and Egypt, was first created in 2004 for the exclusivity of Harvard students; it was then released to the public in 2006. It is described as the king of social media for its easy access and use ('The History of Social Networking', 2014). In fact, the Middle East and North African region had around twenty million Facebook users in 2011, the number of active users increased by 78% around the time of the launch of the Arab uprisings (Rane & Salem, 2012). The increase in the number of Facebook users around the time of the revolutions
suggest an important relationship between Facebook and the Arab uprisings which deserves to be analyzed in this thesis.

Another important social media platform is Twitter which was also launched in 2006, it is a social platform that allows people to share ideas and pictures with a limit of 140 characters with simple steps “Snap. Tweet. Done” The official Twitter website explains its product with the following statement “Twitter lets you share photos, in real time, with everyone or with the people you choose. So you can join the bigger conversation — and tell your story in pictures.”\(^1\) Twitter will also be discussed as a main tool in the revolutions of Tunisia and Egypt. This platform allowed citizens to tell and share their own stories openly and freely with the entire world. Along with Facebook and Twitter, many other social platforms such as YouTube and various blogs, paved the way for an organized citizen communication and coordination (Cottle, 2011).

In late 2010, citizens of Tunisia followed by Egypt started using new media and technologies strategically to achieve their goal and plan a revolution. These new strategies paved the way for an entirely new paradigm of sourcing. The networking revolutionaries emerged as contemporary journalists with a trusted source. With social media, people started to validate, confirm and interpret information that the regime could not so easily control. This thesis seeks to understand the role of social media in the midst of the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions first by setting out the context of the political rule and how these digital tools helped citizens in fighting government censorship and succeeding in toppling their dictators.

\(^1\) https://twitter.com/
1.2 Research Question

The overall aim of this thesis is to investigate the role of social media and modern information technologies during the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions. What role did social media play during the initial revolutionary mobilization in Tunisia and Egypt?

In this sense the focus will be on the multiple roles that social media has played in the initial stages of the revolutions to assess clearly the results it should be credited for. Consequently many questions arise: Was social media a tool that caused the initiation of the revolution? Would the revolutions have happened without social media?

The aim is to answer important questions that revolve around social media and its role in the Arab uprisings. Thus, the creative and striking titles given for the revolutions such as: the “Facebook revolution” and the “Twitter revolution” will be objectively debated in order to carefully conclude the roots of the revolutions and the relationship with modern information technologies and new media.

The measured variables will be social media use and technology during the Tunisian and Egyptian revolution. The main findings this thesis seeks to demonstrate are that social media did not cause the Arab spring, however it provided an accelerating tool that helped the people plan the revolutions, connect and share the truth with the outside world, and it also allowed normal citizens to become journalists.
It is important to note that this research is of great significance given that the digital field is relatively new in the Arab world. The people of Tunisia and Egypt finally spoke up through various social channels which allowed them to coordinate and move forward. Empowered by the digital realm, the activists used the tools in hand tactically and did not give up until they forced their dictators to step down. However, this paper will determine that many factors and tools, other than social media, interplayed ensuing the success of the revolutions.

1.3 Methodology

The methodology of this paper will focus mainly on secondary sources by modern day journalists, writers and bloggers who have analyzed the role of social media and its infusion into politics. The time-frame will be from the year 2010 until 2011, from the initial stages of the revolutions until the fall of both the Tunisian and Egyptian regimes.

A comparative study will be done on two different revolutions that share a number of similarities: the Tunisian and Egyptians revolutions. Each case will be analyzed in order to determine the manifestation of social media and its role. Although many other countries in the Middle East and North African Region have been shaken by massive revolutions, such as Libya and Syria, Morocco and Bahrain, it is very important to note that Tunisia followed by Egypt were the first countries to start such upheavals with a high use of social media channels and thus are the most interesting cases to be studied.
The challenge posed by this research question is mainly the reliance on resources that are not strictly academic, various Facebook pages, Twitter profiles, blogs and websites have been mentioned throughout the thesis in order to show the importance citizen-based journalism made possible by social media channels. In some cases, and as will be shown in the following chapters, people looked for updates from normal citizens and activists instead of mainstream media channels, which increased the importance of social networks as the go-to websites for actual information.

Although it has been four years since the revolutions of Tunisia and Egypt, social media’s role in political revolutions is still considered a recent and controversial issue that deserves to be studied extensively. However, this also gives this thesis an advantage which is to study and conclude about a new digital and social phenomenon that played a very big role in making history by introducing a new interactive way of community political mobilization.

This thesis is built on a framework which assumes that political change could take place and could be influenced by many inter-playing factors. The theoretical frameworks include modernization and globalization theories and their influence on Arab societies. If social media’s role is directly linked to the fall of the regimes, then globalization and new media can be considered as drivers of political and social changes. However, this thesis argues that new media and technology are not the drivers of political change, these tools paved the way for the creation of a new paradigm that changed the way information was created and received. However, social media’s role cannot be ignored as latent or passive throughout the revolutions, since it allowed the revolutions to go viral and to progress in this unexpected speed.
This thesis will examine how social media, as a versatile and powerful tool-box, played a crucial role in the ousting of two powerful authoritarian rulers: Zein El Abidin Ben Ali and Husni Mubarak, a peaceful weapon that helped millions of citizens finally speak up, unite and stand up for their rights.

In addition, the term “digital revolution” will be carefully analyzed with regards to domino effect that revolutionized a series of countries. Can the new digital wave be credited for the speed of the Tunisian uprising that was directly tailed by a major upheaval in Cairo?

1.4 Map of Thesis

The thesis will consist of five chapters. The first chapter will be a general introduction of the topic it will also introduce the research question as well as describe the methodology of the thesis. The second chapter will include a literature review covering the literature that has been published around the topic in question. Also, this chapter will provide a historical overview of media in the Arab world as well as the new social media. The third chapter will focus on the Tunisian revolution in detail analyzing its beginning, its development and end result with a crucial emphasis on the role of social media. The fourth chapter will tackle the Egyptian revolution as a second case study with its establishment and progress by highlighting the roles of social media channels. The fifth chapter will compare both case studies and determine the similarities and differences with regards to social media and socio-political activism. It will conclude that social media is indeed a very important factor that helped citizens finally reach their freedom. However, as will be discussed in the conclusion, social media is not
the only factor that has led to the success of the revolutions. It is to note that while social media tools intensified and diffused the revolutions on a global scale, these newly introduced tools cannot be credited for the emergence of the revolutions.
Chapter Two

Literature Review

2.1 Historical Overview of Media in the Arab world

In the years preceding 1990, media in most Arab countries was a sector owned and controlled by governments (Zhuo, Wellman & Yu, 2011). This was a tactic to keep citizens misinformed and ignorant. This lack of information and local censorship was a brain-washing method that many people in the Arab world suffered from; many still do until the present day.

The Arab world had always been known for its strict censorship over media, political freedom and the universally advocated belief in freedom of expression. Media was controlled by governments and was used for their own benefits to communicate views that merely and simply endorse the governments’ interests. This hardship over media made sure people did not have the chance to speak up in public and thus it was impossible to form opposition coalitions against governments due to the lack of coordination and discussion. Hocheimer and El Emad (2013) call this phenomenon: the “Spiral of Silence”, where people were afraid to express their individual views thinking and fearing they would not be supported by others, and then be punished for their dissent and rebellion.

Edmund Ghareeb (2000) gives a historical overview and analysis about the role of media in the Arab world. Ghareeb describes the transformational impact of
information technologies on various levels: social, economic and political. Starting with pan-Arab magazines, followed by satellite television then by the internet, there was an incremental creation of new prospects whilst changing Arab public opinion and interaction (Ghareeb, 2000).

In fact, there had long been various tools that helped in shaping revolutions and spreading information and news, Ghareeb lists some such as the expert use of radio by Gamal Abdel Nasser to reach a wider audience, and another example is the recorded tapes used during the Iranian revolution to replay revolutionary messages across borders (Ghareeb, 2000). The idea that revolutions are shaped by the existing communication tools at hand, is clearly portrayed by Monshipouri (2014) in his statement: “All revolutions have involved the media of their time”.

Back in 2000, the mere use of pan Arab magazines, satellite television and fax machines by revolutionaries, was a threat to authoritarian regimes that could no longer control the flow of information and exercise optimal censorship. These tools were the only means available which allowed citizens of the Arab world to be able to be constantly updated and receive information across borders. Thus, the power of these media tools was mostly informative in nature.

Jihad Khazen (1999) explains the problematic nature of media in the Arab world. First, he describes what starts of as self-censorship when writing an article; he explains that journalists could not afford to write the entire truth when dealing with wealthy and powerful governments, since this would automatically mean losing big sums of money as well as risking the paper being banned from the country. This is the first example that
shows that journalists had to be careful about what was written and shared with the public, meaning it was clearly not objective.

The second type of censorship according to Khazen was state-censorship; each state had its own restrictions as to what was allowed to be spoken and what was not. Journalists feared that their written article might be banned, which therefore rendered one to lose his job and even his life. Thus, the final articles or news shared with readers were a result of censorship on many levels and the deletion of countless facts that the people should have known about the world. In this sense, people all over the world became readers of what governments and superpowers wanted them to know, their minds and thoughts were shaped by entirely shielded and manipulated truths.

As previously explained, magazines, television, e-mail and fax machines had an explosive effect on information flow. Zooming out of the historical view, newer media, referred to as the new social media, will also be analyzed in order to assess its influence and effects.

2.2 The New Social Media

Ghareeb’s anticipation back in 2000, turned out to be entirely true, “Over the coming decades, the continuing transformation of technology is likely to have continuing and profound political implications for the Middle East and the world” (Ghareeb, 2000).

Internet accessibility and digital media evolved in the Middle East and became the drivers of globalization and mainstream media. Moreover, Hofheinz (2005) asserts that the internet was the medium that broke all sorts of limitations and restrictions
imposed in the Arab world. The availability of the internet: electronic mailing, websites and blogs empowered citizens to become more active and informed.

In fact, in 2009, around 40 to 45 million internet users were estimated to be located in sixteen Arab countries. In addition to that, in 2010, numbers have shown the activism of 40,000 Arab bloggers present online. More importantly, according to the 2009 Arab knowledge report, the number of Arabic-speaking internet users across the globe was said to be around sixty million (Ghannam, 2011). Furthermore, the report provides analysis and comparison regarding online media versus offline media. Ghannam concludes that with the increasing use of internet, readers were progressively but surely preferring reading the news online rather than offline. Out of 3,348 Egyptians surveyed, 50% said they were online readers whilst 38% said they remained attached to offline media. In addition to that, people no longer looked for articles written by well-known political analysts or editors; in fact they preferred to turn into the average citizens who shared their views online. The online realm provided a space for all citizens to exercise their right of freedom of expression that would be forbidden anywhere else.

The Oxford dictionary describes the social media realm as “Websites and applications that enable users to create and share content or to participate in social networking” (Social media, 2015). Communication through social channels became the easiest, fastest and most cost-efficient way for would-be-revolutionaries to reach the local and international community on an online interactive platform that opens channels of communication with individuals and communities around the world. In addition, social media channels have paved the way for rapid and effective diffusion of world news.
Interestingly, some argue that social and digital media tools were used spontaneously and not strategically, it was the effective result of viral content and communication that made the difference. This new technology became the primary source of citizen empowerment. It is also important to note that protestors were not limited by age, as both the young and the old actively participated in the revolutions. The youngsters communicated with each other and reached out through social channels, and the older generation received the news through main-stream media, television and radio stations, which kept them in-line (Allagui & Kuebler, 2011).

The new Social Media is an innovative gateway that consists of multiple social platforms. The content of these platforms are various and creative in nature, they include words, photos, visuals, videos and audio recordings (Safko & Brake, 2009). The Social Media Bible describes the role of social media on many levels. It is very important to note that social media roles in this case are explained in business perspective; however it will be discussed at a later stage how social media’s use was shifted for political and organizational purposes (Safko & Brake, 2009).

The first and most basic level of engagement provided by social media is communication, the multiple platforms foster communication and conversation between millions of people around the globe through various types.

With communication comes collaboration, which is the second important level of engagement, people with similar interests get to know each other and collaborate on the same goals, which can vary from doing business together or standing up for an issue together.
The third level of engagement is Education; these social channels are the gates for knowledgeable people with information to share, sharing a status on Facebook or Twitter means spreading personal thoughts and sometimes general facts which can raise awareness.

The fourth type of engagement offered by social media is entertainment. Entertainment can seem less important in the topic under discussion, however, when the use of these social channels will be discussed as strategic in a revolution, the importance of entertainment will be highlighted as a main tool for connecting young activists together who enjoyed feeding their thoughts online rather than offline.

Another aspect of social media is social-networking, these are separate and numerous sites each targeted for specific groups of people, it builds networks by connecting people around the globe who share the same interests, example of social-networking sites are LinkedIn and YouTube. Another popular type of social media channel is micro-blogging; an example of this is Twitter. It is a social tool that allows users to send instant messages or tweets. Twitter’s influential power lies in its ability to transform mainstream journalism into a co-creation of substance by political activists, bloggers and journalists by spreading updates and news as a conversation between thousands of users (Skinner, 2011). Twitter also allows people to be creative and share their thoughts with a limit of 140 characters, which means the tweet has to be straight to the point, short, concise and should convey a significant message.

Facebook and Twitter feeds spread instantaneous news which allows social media users to be informed and updated at all times. The “re-tweet”, “like”, “comment”
and “share” buttons are the essential tools for diffusion around the globe (Ghannam, 2011). This also adds to the entertainment aspect described by Safko and Brake (2009), meaning that when people share an opinion on any social channel, they sit eager on their screens, waiting for public support from their friends, families and most of the time total strangers from all over the world.

Furthermore, receiving support and praise for opinions well written in a post pushes people to write more often and to convey their opinions. In addition to receiving support such as likes and shares, appalling and controversial posts open as series of discussions with the comments option. Thus, a virtual open dialogue is instantly created.

Sakfo and Brake (2009) assert that "With social media, everyone is a publisher” in fact Zhuo and Wellman (2011) argue that social media channels bring a new paradigm for news-reporting called citizen journalism. Furthermore, they re-define ordinary journalism turning each individual that has witnessed an event into a journalist. This innovative citizen-sourced news gives the people a voice to be heard and empowers them to share and spread their own views. This factor plays a big role in introducing freedom of expression and new liberal political thought to an authoritarian regime which previously controlled media, journalism and individuals by default. This is according to the authors, the first step towards political participation (Khamis & Vaughn, 2011).

2.3 The Debate: Social Media’s role in the Arab Spring

Just like any other study, the topic under research in this thesis seems to be very controversial among scholars. Some argue in favor of social media and its causal effect on the Arab spring revolutions while others argued that social media was a tool used
throughout the revolutions, however there were various underlying factors that caused the revolutions. There is general consensus however, that social media did indeed play a role in the revolutions and thus cannot be disregarded. Monshipouri clearly explains that the internet and social media are “intervening” variables and not causal variables.

Wael Ghonim, who is considered the hero of the Egyptian revolution and whose prominent role will be discussed at length in the Egyptian case, explains bluntly that the revolution of Egypt was a success due to Facebook. Although Wael Ghonim gives the credit to social networks and especially Facebook, he affirms that “History is made on the streets, not on the internet” this means that Ghonim acknowledges the importance of offline mobilization which followed online coordination. In this sense, Ghonim argues that the mobilization of Jan25 would not have happened without prior planning and coordination on social networks (Ghonim, 2012).

Ghonim was not the only one to express his deep gratitude to Facebook when asked about the success of the Egyptian revolution, Al Ahram newspaper reported that Jamal Ibrahim, an Egyptian citizen named his daughter born on February 18, 2011: ‘Facebook Ibrahim’ as an act of commemoration and gratitude to Facebook in the ousting of Mubarak (Eko, 2012).

William Saletan (2011) explains that the online realm was very similar to the offline realm at first. People were afraid to express their dissent in the beginning, but when they were exposed to the countless tweets, Facebook posts and YouTube videos, they felt safe. In this regard, social tools made it easier for people to start speaking out without being afraid of getting caught. In addition to mobilizing and informing the masses, the achievement of the revolutions through communication technologies was
also a result of the relationship formed between the protestors. In fact, in 2009, surveys have shown that there were around 17 million Facebook users in the Arab world out of which five million Egyptians. Ghannam (2011) argues that the number of Facebook users in the Arab world has increased since the introduction of the website in Arabic language.

Through social media, people were able to communicate their individual experiences and consequently this virtual space created an emotional bond. By using the social networks’ tools: pages, groups, tweets, hashtags and websites, the protestors expressed their opinions, shared their views with each other and most importantly they learned valuable information from each other (Skinner, 2011). In addition, social media’s role has been emphasized in shaping the introduction of democratic thoughts and freedoms through communication and sharing ideas right before the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt.

Furthermore, digital researchers analyzing the revolution have found that before any major uprising took place, there was a high increase in the number of users in the Twitter-sphere as well as a rise in the number of tweets that were recorded around that time. In this sense, Twitter and Facebook became the space and tools for coordination, planning and the mobilization of masses (Segerberg & Bennett, 2011).

Eltantawy & Wiest (2011) assert that social media can be considered as a resource for mobilization since it played a crucial role in the Arab revolutions, the authors call for further analysis of social media as an important factor in socio-political mobilization.
On another hand, Comunello and Anzera (2012) explain that one should not limit the entire framework on one variable: technology. Technology left alone is useless, thus, it is the human interaction with technology and the contextual politics that should be analyzed to grasp the whole picture. They add that social media tools are not powerful enough to create a revolution: social media tools set the stages for the revolutions; however it was the people that carried out the demonstrations on the streets. Even though, and as will be discussed in the next chapters, social media tools have indeed posed challenges to governments, these tools did not cause the Arab Spring.

Kellner (2012) explains that the Arab Spring has progressed and evolved globally through the manifestation of social networking and new media, however, new media and information technologies did not cause the birth of the revolutions.

Jamishdi (2014) argues that the Arab revolutions were a result of offline planning which is considered to be more effective than online planning on social networks. Filiu (2011) adds to that the revolution of Jan 25 was not a “Facebook magic stroke” but the result of three years of continuous coordination and planning online and offline.

It is important to note that social media platforms and the high use of internet were directly noticed by governments as playing a crucial role in the sudden uprisings. This has led to major counter reactions by governments resulting in internet shutdown and cutbacks to forbid online coordination and planning between citizens. An example of these reactions was the creation of a Facebook monitoring team by the Egyptian government to report all Egyptians against Mubarak. Nevertheless, these restrictions and shutdowns of internet were only a minor setback to the citizens who still found solutions
to stay connected online (Ghannam, 2011). Eko (2012) states that the internet was a tool used by both activists and the government on a global scale. Though the Arab Spring was, strictly speaking, a regional political, social, economic and cultural phenomenon of the Arab Islamic countries of North Africa and the Middle East, instrumentalization of the internet and its associated networked social media as weapons of resistance by information activists, on the one hand, and technologies of repression by authoritarian rulers on the other, transformed upheavals into a global phenomenon. In the end, the activists won the virtual war with the help of the international community especially Facebook, Google and Twitter (Eko, 2012).

Faris (2013) affirms that digital media played a role in advertising protests and movements however it did not cause the revolution “Social media networks are neither necessary nor sufficient to explain mobilizing outcomes” – this does not render them useless.

Fandy (2000) argues that many scholars have supported the argument of the new communication tools as well as social media trends and their ability to reshape Arab civil societies. He adds that these arguments are rooted from the Medium theory by McLuhan who asserts that the development of communication can lead to social changes. However, Fandy denies giving the entire credit of social evolution to technology, since this would automatically mean the abandonment of historical contexts, civilizations and the role of humans. Fandy argues in favor of studying the use of these modern information and communication technologies by different societies and analyzing their reception with human participation and interaction. An example of this human participation is in the introduction of the radio, television and satellite channels,
Arab citizens accessed these new tools collectively in local cafes. Thus, Fandy argues that one should not only study technological advancements in the Arab world, but also the basic social interactions and human behaviors when accessing these tools.

In fact, Arab countries were known for their strict internet and media laws. These strict rules did not however succeed in diminishing the role of new media in the revolutions of Tunisia and Egypt. In Tunisia the regime owned most if not all newspapers and television channels, thus blogs and Facebook pages were the only platforms for anti-government support and encouragement (Brynen, Moore, Salloukh & Zahar, 2012). Thus, the authors argue that social media did not cause the revolutions but it played a “connective muscle”. Consequently, left alone new media cannot fully explain the causes of uprisings of Tunisia and Egypt. Monshipouri (2014) adds to that social media tools and new information technologies determine the manifestation and timing of Arab Spring but fail to determine causal factors for the emergence of the uprisings.

In fact, Nathan Jurgenson (2012) argues against what is being called the Social Media, Facebook, Twitter or YouTube revolutions. He believes that the credit should not be given to technology only; society plays an equally crucial role. He introduces the concepts of ‘digital dualism” by asserting that it is the assimilation and merge of both the online and offline spheres that produced the successful revolutions. The main concept introduced in his article is “augmented revolution” which is the ability to be physically and virtually at the same place at the same time. An example of this can be an Egyptian student standing in Tahrir square in 2011 and posting a tweet online with the hashtags #Egypt #Jan25.
Facebook and Twitter according to Jurgenson (2012) cannot be categorized as just virtual online platforms, since they are fueled by offline physical opinions, thoughts, emotions and experiences. He goes even further by affirming that these social tools have no meaning if not properly construed as physical in essence: activists are protesting live on the streets and at the same time onto the online networks. Individuals from all around the globe can follow all updates by just typing the hashtags which centralize all information regarding a common theme. Thus, the reality of protests is “augmented” or amplified by the virtual sphere.

Jurgenson’s article is very important and is a reference to understanding the equal role that the physical and digital worlds played during the revolutions. This argument can be taken even further by suggesting that social media’s strength can be clearly highlighted by the fact that information and content cannot be censored by the state anymore. It is very important to note again, that social media tools allowed all individuals to be journalists. When referring to such tools for information, people around the globe were listening and watching individual opinions rather than deep constructed information of what the governments and elites wanted people to know. In this sense, social media becomes a gateway to freedom of speech, of press and also a gateway for receiving information from just about anybody.

2.4 Summary

This chapter focused mainly on media in the Arab world and the introduction of new media. The literature covering social media and the uprisings was also included. It is to note that most scholars argue that social media is a very powerful tool that helped
the youth communicate and organize their actions before taking it on the streets. However, as stated, these tools cannot be credited for the emergence of the uprisings since there are many underlying socio-economic and political factors that should be taken into account when determining the causal effects of the revolutions.

The technological and digital advancements witnessed in today’s revolutions represent the awareness of the people and their refusal of being controlled, suppressed and kept ignorant (Zhuo, Wellman & Yu, 2011). Throughout this thesis, the role of social media channels and internet accessibility tools will be discussed thoroughly and it will be concluded that these modern information technologies paved the way for the liberation from censorship, brain-washing and ignorance that had been endured for so long. The next chapter will provide a contextual basis for the Tunisian revolution and the role of social media and modern information technologies.
Chapter Three  
The Case of Tunisia

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter, Tunisia’s rule will be analyzed with its type and practices. Then citizens’ rights and freedoms in the country will be reviewed before tackling the main subject of study: the role of social media in the Tunisian revolution. This chapter will also cover the initiation of the revolution in the small village that turned out to be one of the most famous hashtags to follow news on the extensively used social media platform: Twitter, #SidiBouzid.

3.2 Political background and authoritarian rule:

In 1987, Zein El Abidine Ben Ali, Tunisia’s Minister of Interior staged a coup d’état that overthrew the ruling President back then: Habib Bourguiba. Ben Ali presented himself to the people of his country as an introducer of change, an advocate of political pluralism and citizens’ rights (Halliday, 1990). Ben Ali declared Bourguiba’s rule as incompetent and inept while declaring his future plans for a democratic peaceful rule; in practice, it turned out to be an authoritarian rule (Prince, 2010).

Tunisia was under French colony rule from the late 1800 until 1956, the year the Tunisians gained their independence. In fact, there have been only two rulers in the post-independence Tunisia, Habib Bourguiba and Ben Ali. Both their rules kept the
foundations and practices of French politics. Both preached openness with the West, development of economic and social institutions and democratic plural rule. However, as argued by Prince (2010) all these aspirations of change, fairness and equality directly disappeared after they succeeded in the elections and came to power.

After its independence, Tunisia was considered a democracy with a legally binding constitution. However, the fact that the elected President had unconditional powers made democracy very hard to be applied. Ben Ali’s reign was immersed in corruption and all types of abuse. Ben Ali even extended his abuse of power to his wife Leila Trabulsi and her entire family. The Trabulsis were known for getting hold of most government resources and assets (Rogan, 2011). They also gained wealth by robbery and corruption, they benefited from the privatized radio station in Tunisia, airlines, hotel chains, and schools (Gelvin, 2012). In addition to his wife, Ben Ali’s favors extended to his son in law Mohamed Sakher El Matri, who was considered as his possible successor, Mohamed was also known for his corruption and abuse of state possessions (Whitaker, 2011).

Additionally, the system in Tunisia was quite confusing, for example, opposition parties were allowed to be formed, but the moment the parties gained power or spoke up more than expected, they were instantly oppressed and shut down. The same applied to media channels (Rogan, 2011). A crucial and fundamental problem in Tunisia and especially during Ben Ali’s rule was the distribution of wealth. Tunisia is ranked the fifth country in the world to produce phosphate gas and other minerals. But the sad truth when analyzing the country’s economy was an uneven wealth distribution in the North by Ben Ali and his extended family.
Additionally, employment opportunities decreased with time to become available only to those related to Ben Ali and supported by his entourage. Consequently, with fewer and fewer job opportunities, poverty prevailed and took over the majority of households while wealth was allocated for building palaces and restricted to the elite Tunisians and foreigners who had high positions in the Tunisian government (Prince, 2010). In fact, the unemployment rate in Tunisia was 38% and the majority of the unemployed citizens were aged between 15 and 29 (Goldstone, 2011).

Moreover, Jack Goldstone (2011) called the regimes in Tunisia, Egypt even in Oman, Morocco, Libya and Syria: “Sultanistic” regimes or dictatorships where the ruler abuses his given power and increases his wealth by shifting institutions to his own benefit. These types of regimes are usually closed and do not allow any form of political reform or civil society participation. Although parliamentary members are elected by the people, they do not hold any power in front of the ruler. That is why, as will be explained later on, when the people decided to revolt, their only option was to go on the streets and call for the end of the regime headed by rulers, and not the end of the elected government (Gelvin, 2012).

On the international arena, Tunisia was referred to as one of the most economically stable countries in the Middle East and North African region, due to its economic and social stability as well as its educated populace; it was portrayed as having a big middle class living in good conditions and well remunerated. However, this was only what was being depicted by Ben Ali and his state owned media which camouflaged and hid the weary condition of his country (Salmon, 2012). Surprisingly,
France one of the most liberal countries of the world, was one of Ben Ali’s biggest supporters especially during the rules of Chirac and Sarkozy (Spencer, 2011).

The disparity of wealth across Tunisia, the lack of job opportunities for the young and educated as well as the government corruption, were the main factors behind the mass uprisings that changed the course of history of Tunisia and led to the domino effect in the Arab world. The people could no longer endure their ruler’s abuse of power, hypocrisy and brutality. The firm oppressive rule of Ben Ali on his citizens will be discussed in the following part.

3.3 Citizen rights and freedoms

Rob Prince’s article “Tunisia–The Imprisonment of Fahem Boukadous”, cited in this part of the chapter was actually censored in Tunisia because of the honest and transparent facts conveyed about the truth behind the Tunisian government. This gives us a quick and initial idea of freedom of speech, freedom of press, and the Tunisian government’s strict censorship during Ben Ali’s term.

Rob Prince (2010) portrays the real story of the young journalist Fahem Boukadous and highlights the utmost levels of corruption, censorship and terror exercised by the Tunisian government led by Ben Ali. Fahem Boukadous was a young reporter covering the Gafsa protests in 2010 on satellite television. Boukadous was doing his job as a reporter and being honest and professional in his documentation of the events taking place in the town of Gafsa. His report showed the police attacking the peaceful protesters. The Tunisian government accused Boukadous of giving out false information that disturbed the country and public opinion. He was sentenced to four
years in prison despite his severe asthma. Other than being wrongly imprisoned, it had been reported that he had several asthma attacks and had not been given proper care or medical attention. Boukadous’ imprisonment clearly portrays that the government did not allow the truth to be told in public, the satellite television owned by the state should only transmit events as told by the state. In order to keep the citizens misinformed and brainwashed, Ben Ali ordered strict censorship on all kinds of media.

Prince (2010) argues that Bourguiba’s and Ben Ali’s unlawful practices were fundamentally inherited from the French rule. The first example given is about freedom of expression. During the colonial rule, it was forbidden to form protests to call for independence. Similarly, during Bourguiba and Ben Ali’s periods in office, the same terror remained; it was forbidden and even illegal for any citizen to criticize the ruling President in any way. Citizens were also afraid to call for political reforms fearing the attack of police and surveillance agencies if they went on the streets.

The second example is the formation of a police and intelligence system very similar to the French system whereas all communication channels were closely monitored. In Tunisia, and as will be seen later on in Egypt, the rulers formed a state that constantly watched its citizens. Their main goal was to keep their citizens afraid of torture and death while they carried on with their abusive rule. As terrible as this tactic seemed, it succeeded in keeping Ben Ali in power for twenty three years (Gelvin, 2012).

The last example given by Prince is the oppressive punishment for all those who did not obey the state laws, during the French rule as well as the post-independence rules, Tunisia was considered to have the strictest and most punitive forms of physical
abuse and torture. Again, the fear of being punished kept the people of Tunisia restrained.

Rob Prince (2010) also analyzes the events in the Tunisian town of Redeyf to depict Ben Ali’s strict and harsh rule. On April 10, 2010, around thirty women took the streets to call for the release of their husbands, fathers, brothers and other family members who were imprisoned after forming a peaceful movement asking for job opportunities. As explained above, the government directly shut down the opposition formed by the men, accusing it of being an initial phase of an anti-government rebellion. Surprisingly, the day after the protest of the women, the men were released and greeted by 20,000 people more than half of the town’s population. After the Redeyf peaceful women protest, many other protests were formed on a weekly basis to call for changing the current system. The Tunisian police did not tolerate these recurrences and Ben Ali, threatened by these new insurgences, decided then to condemn any type of protest by opening fire, imprisonment and torture.

It is important to note that Boukadous’ imprisonment and many other acts of oppression on behalf of the government, did not cause a major commotion neither for the Tunisian people nor on the international arena. On the same note, one would ask: why wasn’t the upheaval in the town Redeyf as big as in the town of Sidi Bouzid?

This thesis seeks to demonstrate that the censorship of televised media was highly challenged by the new media during the revolution. In this sense, innovative media automatically suspended the fabrications conveyed by the government throughout the revolutions which led eventually to the success of the revolution.
3.4 Media laws under Ben Ali

The press and journalism sectors in Tunisia were controlled by Ben Ali’s strict government. Even though some individuals, groups and parties independent from the governments were allowed to publish newspapers, they were subject to financial restrictions from the government and thus under its continuous control. The government also blocked foreign newspapers from entry to the country to keep the citizens misinformed (Rugh, 2004).

Also, “L’Agence Tunisienne D’Internet” was created in 2000 in order to fully control the internet penetration in the entire country. This agency made sure the government was the only internet source, thus banning all prohibited websites such as Human rights websites and NGOs as well as e-mailing portals such as Hotmail and Gmail to further control and block communication (Eko, 2012). It is important to note that the Tunisian press is much stricter than the Egyptian press. Although The Tunisian uprising, kick-started in Tunisia by Bouazizi, was mainly calling for basic freedoms and economic stability, it was also a result of a call for freedom of speech and press which the youth strived for (Allagui & Kuebler, 2011).

The next section will explore the Jasmine Revolution: its birth, actors and mechanisms in details in order to clearly understand and assess the role social media has played.
3.5 Citizen mobilization and the Jasmine Revolution

On December 17, 2010, Tunisia was shaken by the outrageous self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi, a deprived 26 years old street vendor, who lives off by selling fruit and vegetables on a small cart to support his family. The Tunisians revolution was dubbed: the Jasmine revolution, a title that brought about feelings of freedom, self-expression and democracy (Hanley, 2011).

This part will explore the details, triggers and consequences of the disastrous event which turned out to be a wakeup call for the entire Tunisian population.

Mohamed Bouazizi had been suffering from government corruption all his life, just like all other illegal street vendors who could not afford to buy a legal working permit. These vendors were especially harassed by the municipality officers who forced them to pay random fines without any legal reason. Gelvin (2012) asserts that due to the very low salary scale adopted across Tunisia, bribery was in fact immersed as a requisite act in the overall system. Thus, small vendors had to bribe the municipality officers in order to be able to sell on the streets and generate their small daily income.

Bouazizi was the wage earner of his family, ever since his father passed away at a young age (De Soto, 2011). It was highly attested that Bouazizi was a college graduate; however this statement was highly challenged and could not be completely confirmed. Gelvin (2012) argues that Bouazizi’s family stated in an interview that he had left school when he was just 18 years old.

On the unfortunate morning of December 17, Bouazizi was standing next to his cart in his usual spot for which he had to pay a daily rent fee to the governorate officers.
A policewoman detained his fruits and vegetables along with his weighing scale and forced Bouazizi to pay ten Dinars, the young man refused to pay the money, he was then subject to physical and emotional abuse by the policewoman who hit him in the face and offended him in public. Mohammad Bouazizi felt so humiliated and desperate after losing his entire fortune which was around two hundred dollars, he hoped that he could get some support from the local municipality of Sidi Bouzid, nobody agreed neither to talk to him nor to listen to his complaints and appeals (Abouzeid, 2011). Bouazizi with nothing left to do, decided to kill himself in front of the governorate building to express the acute pain he was feeling. He poured gas on his body and set himself on fire at around noon. Mohammad Bouazizi was deeply injured but did not die instantly; he suffered for weeks in the hospital.

What Bouazizi did not know was that his act of desperation turned out to be a very important trigger that changed the history of Tunisia and was considered the act that commenced the Jasmine Revolution. The protests were launched right after Bouazizi’s self-immolation in his home town Sidi Bouzid and the government started brutally fighting the peaceful protesters. Images of the government security forces beating up protesters as well as videos showing the violent repercussions started to appear online and reached bigger audiences.

Bouazizi instantly became the face and spirit of the revolution (Chomiak, 2011). In order to follow Bouazizi’s news and his town of Sidi Bouzid that started an upheaval, activists started following hashtags, where the information was centralized, which made their search easier. The most popular hashtags of the Tunisian revolution were #SidiBouzid #Tunisia and of course around the hero himself #Bouazizi (Delany, 2011).
In fact, hashtags gave a common theme to a number of tweets and thus made the search for a theme easier and faster (Dakhli, 2011). This is why the use of revolutionary hashtags was so important during the Tunisian revolution, since it allowed citizen to be rapidly informed and to obtain a complete picture after going through all the posts, videos and images posted on the same theme thread.

Demonstrations progressed from Sidi Bouzid through the entire country and ultimately arrived to the capital Tunis; Bouazizi became an icon to all Tunisians who could relate, he represented the refusal for corruption and a wakeup call for change (Watson & Kardsheh, 2011). The people of Tunisia filled the streets day after day in spite of being attacked by the police, they refused to stay silent and were determined to convey Bouazizi’s message: “We are fed up!” “The people want the fall of the regime”

On December 27, 2010, Ben Ali addressed his people on national television in a seven minutes speech; he expressed his sympathy to the horrific event that happened in Sidi Bouzid, without naming Bouazizi or articulating any wishes to his family. Ben Ali explained that he understood perfectly well the problem of unemployment in Tunisia, and promised that the state and government would make more efforts in this regard. Nevertheless, Ben Ali blamed the recent unrest in the country on extremists who were trying to ruin Tunisia. He affirmed that there have been false claims being shared on television which were fabrications to damage the country. He warned that while the government would be trying to enhance the social issues and programs, any party wishing to disrupt Tunisia would be subject to law enforcement and thus punished (Ben Ali’s speech, 2010). Ben Ali’s speech proved again his strategic brain-washing attempt, although he was aware that the protests were being done against him, he did not mention
any of this in his speech. During his speech, posts were shared between thousands of people on Facebook and Twitter. One of the most shared posts was the following “Your youth has risen up and it will be difficult to shut them up now: they set themselves on fire, electrocute themselves so I don't think that getting beaten up with sticks or long nights at the police station will scare them either” (Tunisia : “We Are Not Afraid Anymore!”’, 2010)

Mohammad Bouazizi suffered for two weeks from his painful burns and injuries, during which President Ben Ali came to visit him in his hospital bed. On January 4, 2011, Mohammad Bouazizi passed away.

On January 6, 2011, two days after Bouazizi’s death, people of Tunisia from different groups, sectors, ages, unions and parties all gathered for one big strike on the streets of Tunisia (Hanley, 2011). Consequently, the poor street vendor of fruits of vegetables that usually went unnoticed on a daily basis became a representation of anger and frustration, an icon of striving for freedom. Everybody felt responsible for carrying Bouazizi’s message (Watson & Kardsheh, 2011). The protests shifted from asking for socio-political reforms to a clear message and one goal only which became the slogan of the revolution “Dégages” (“Get out!” in French) (Marzouki, Skandarani, Marzouki-Berjaoui, Hamoudi, & Bellaj, 2012).

It is important to note that Bouazizi was not the first to express dissent and despair through this dramatic act in Tunisia. In fact the self-immolation pattern was not very rare in the world. Many citizens of the world have expressed their anger and helplessness through this daring act (Fraser, 1967). In fact, almost a year before
Bouazizi’s incident, on March 3, 2010, a 30 year old Tunisian citizen called Abdesslem Trimech from the town of Monastir also set himself on fire because of municipality and government corruption. On his funeral day around 50,000 people from his hometown attended the condolences. The funeral mass gathering turned out to be a protest against Ben Ali’s government. Further to that, only a month before Bouazizi’s unfortunate act, Chams Eddine Heni also lit his body on fire in the West town of Mettaoui. The events following his immolation were shared on social media platforms (Gelvin, 2012).

The question that poses itself in this case is the following: Why did Trimech’s and Heni’s self-immolation stop there? Whilst Bouazizi’s immolation lead to a massive historical change? In addition to that, around seven other men across Tunisia have committed this dreadful act of helplessness in 2010 (Gelvin, 2012). Gelvin (2012) explains the different answers that were stated by scholars, some said that Sidi Bouzid exploded this series of protests because it was poorer than other areas, some believed that previous acts were not driven by socio-political factors like Bouazizi’s. Some alleged that it was all due to old media such as television, specifically Al Jazeera, because it broadcasted the videos and images retrieved from Facebook which in turn created the buzz. One can argue that Trimech, Heni and Bouazizi were all an equally tragic loss to the Tunisian people. The difference was only because they have had enough, the people could not stand the corruption anymore, they couldn’t uphold Ben Ali’s cruel rule and thus they refused to stay silent any longer. Proof was the creation of a Facebook page in Arabic language titled: “Mr. President, Tunisians are setting themselves on fire” this page had more than 12,000 members and was used to spread news and information related to the revolution (‘Internet Censors move Into Top Gear in
Response to Widespread Unrest', 2011). The creation of the page was triggered by Bouazizi but was dedicated to all those who had killed themselves in all sorts of ways because of their hopelessness.

In fact, Ben Ali’s government was extremely strict from the moment he gained power, there was no room for citizen freedoms or rights. To the extent that Ben Ali was called the Pinochet of the Mediterranean (Chomiak, 2011). Markouzi (2011) explains that the Tunisian people had only two choices, the first was to obey silently and blindly without asking any questions or expressing discontent; the latter was considered collective resistance which was deemed illegal and subject to severe punishment. Up until December 2010, the people of Tunisia chose to obey and stay silent in order to stay alive. Following Bouazizi’s self-immolation, Tunisians shifted to the second choice: collective action and resistance.

Bouazizi’s self-immolation triggered a fundamental change. In this sense, Bouazizi’s self-immolation encouraged his fellow friends and even strangers who related to him, to finally reveal the real truth behind Ben Ali and the way he treated his people. Their quest started on December 27th and they were not willing to give up until their goal was reached: toppling down Ben Ali’s regime.

The next section will deal with the different roles that social media has played, in addition to how and who were the actors that actually used these platforms.

3.6 Use of social media channels

After giving a brief overview of the political rule in Tunisia as well citizens’ rights and freedoms allowed by the state, the reasons behind the formation of the
Jasmine revolution were stated. Although Bouazizi’s self-immolation was the direct reason for sparking the revolution, there were many underlying factors explained in the previous section such as high unemployment for the young and educated and mostly government corruption, nepotism and kleptocracy. In this section the viral effect of the revolution will be assessed along with the various roles social media channels played.

Initially, the protests started in Sidi Bouzid and spread throughout Tunisia and into its center Tunis and Sfax. When the awakening reached the wealthier part of the country, it gained even broader coverage. The main engine that gathered the entire population and organized the movement was Facebook. Through pictures, videos and words, Tunisians on the streets shared instantly their struggles which made people feel with each other and inspired them to make a difference collectively. Delany (2011) explained how the expatriates played a big role from the outside, Tunisians shared visuals and imageries of the revolutions during the day, and at night Tunisians living abroad shared the pictures and called for action from all the countries of the world. Nawaat.org ² was a centralized Netherland based website that played a very important role in gathering pictures and important videos from Facebook, online activists referred to this website to get hold of all the pictures found in one click, this made it easier and faster for them to view and share pictures and videos. The Facebook website had more than two million Tunisians registered and active at the time of the revolution.

It is important to note that many important pages and events were formed on Facebook in order to invite people all over the world to raise awareness and gather for

² http://Nawaat.org
the same cause: Tunisian’s people’s freedom. Examples of the pages are the following: Tunisia _ تونس_ Tunisie and Free Tunisia.

Moreover, social media was also a tool for Tunisians to organize their movement and to protect each other. It paved the way for activists to divide themselves into teams to deal with different necessary tasks: some took the responsibility of cleaning up the streets after the protests, some formed protection groups to spread information about government militias and possible attacks (Delany, 2011). Social media also ensured that the truth was being said. Pictures and videos shared online made sure people instantly knew that Ben Ali’s claims were false.

In fact even before the Jasmine revolution, during the end of May 2010, six social activists created an event on Facebook called “Ce Samedi, je m’habille en blanc et je vais prendre un café sur l’Avenue”, (“This Saturday I will dress in white and have a coffee on the avenue”). The goal was to organize a nonviolent march and demonstration against all types of censorship in Tunisia especially internet control. The entire movement “Tunisia in white” was posted on all social media channels and called for Tunisians to unite for their rights. Ben Ali ordered police and intelligence investigation and imprisoned some of the young organizers, they even jailed the people caught wearing white on Avenue Bourguiba (Chomiak, 2011). Even though this protest was prevented and shut down before the people went on the streets, Chomiak argues that this event and many other small civil society peaceful protests helped in allowing and shaping the future success of the Jasmine revolution.
During all these events, Ben Ali’s government made sure national television did not portray any alarming news. However, information moved very fast thanks to bloggers and online activities. Howard and Hussain (2011) explain the concept of “cognitive liberation” introduced by Doug McAdam who studied the sociology behind the uprisings. “Cognitive liberation” as described by the authors is the feeling of common grief shared after Bouazizi’s death. As explained before, the educated youngsters of Tunisia all faced the same problems of unemployment and the inability to practice what they had learned or what they were good at because of lack of opportunities. In this sense, the youngsters saw themselves in Bouazizi and thus were inspired to continue what he had painfully started. The authors also add that there was also a shared sympathy on behalf of the Tunisian people; this was a trigger that made them all united for one quest which was to topple down the regime and to finally live in a corrupt free country (Howard & Hussain, 2011). This cognitive liberation formed online quickly progressed into a collective action which became the sustainable factor of the revolution.

YouTube videos also provided a crucial breakthrough in this revolution because they clearly showed the government corruption and offensive practices towards its people. Viewing these videos over and over made Tunisian citizens live and feel their pain from a distance.

Furthermore, Bouazizi’s death seems to have been a trigger and an instant wake up call for Tunisians that this was their last chance to speak out and revolt against their corrupt President. The long discussions and criticism that were exchanged online finally found their way into the public sphere where they could be seen by the whole world.
This is where the “spiral of silence” explained earlier, was ended, and people were not afraid to stand up for their rights any longer. Pictures of the burned Bouazizi in his hospital bed were shared online and those painful images prompted civil and social action on the streets.

However, once cannot disregard the role of traditional media which still played an important role in the Tunisian revolution. Even though the national television channels censored by the government omitted the truth behind the revolution, satellite television channels such as Al Jazeera played a major role in disseminating information. Yet, all its content, imagery and videos were retrieved from social media sources: Facebook, YouTube and Twitter. It is important to note that an exceptional association was formed between Al Jazeera channel and Tunisians protesters on the streets, Al Jazeera was conveying the citizens’ messages to the entire world; for once the world heard the people and not Ben Ali speak. This is why in each protests, many signs read “Thank you Al Jazeera” (Markouzi, 2011).

The Tunisian people were very much aware that their anger was misunderstood, given the illusory rule of Ben Ali who always portrayed the best image of Tunisia to the world. The people wanted to make sure that those watching them understood that their frustration was not only because of poverty represented by “bread” but it was more for justice and self-dignity which had been taken away from them all their lives (Markouzi, 2011).
3.7 Government counter-reaction

As the people gained advantages from the use of social media channels for different purposes, the government kept looking for ways to silence the voices that were speaking up. First, the revolts that generated quickly after Bouazizi’s self-immolation were viciously attacked by the police. However, this turned out to be even worse for Ben Ali, since outrageous images and videos showing police brutality on peaceful protesters were shared on all social media platforms (Delany, 2011).

In fact, Ben Ali’s regime was known as one of the toughest internal systems in the Middle East and North African region, for its massive police deployment in the cities of Tunisia as well as widespread surveillance teams to monitor the citizens and deal with any suspicion of opposition parties or civil society formation (Spencer, 2011).

Ben Ali felt threatened by the Tunisian people as they just would not stop! They were clearly benefiting from these social channels in order to organize and plan their next steps. Thus, the President decided to block their access to YouTube, Twitter and Facebook, thinking that this upheaval would come to an end. However, the social activists did not stop there, while these websites and platforms were blocked, the people resorted to SMS texting that broadcasted the same information to various recipients which still resulted in organized protests.

A huge buzz was created around the imprisonment of a young Tunisian rapper in his twenties in the city of Sfax, the police tracked him down after his song “President, your people are dying” went viral on all social media channels. In his song, Hamad Ben Amor also known as The General, criticized Ben Ali and tackled all the problems
Tunisians had been facing their whole lives such as unemployment, corruption, poverty and most importantly humiliation (Thomson Reuters, 2011).

It is very important to note that the outside online community helped the Tunisian people by creating proxies and firewalls for them to be able to access their favorite sites and continue their quest (Howard & Hussain, 2011). This initiative offered by the international community was called “Operation Tunisia”. Ben Ali could no longer endure the speed of information travel, thus he resorted early January to the punishment of bloggers who dared to criticize him online (Howard, Duffy, Freelon, et al., 2011).

Ben Ali’s government resorted to the state owned media which only transmitted information approved by the government. Such channels showed vast protests by pro-Ben Ali people defending their President and showing discontent with what was happening. When in reality, social activists would post pictures and videos showing that the mass protests were actually gatherings of very few people. In this sense, Ben Ali was trying to show that he still had many supporters in his country; however, social media channels did not let him get away with that (Delany, 2011).

3.8 Downfall of Zein El Abidin Ben Ali

The situation in Tunisia deteriorated very fast for the government, which was a rapid miracle for the Tunisian population. After the semi-national protest of January 4, 2011, following Bouazizi’s death, Ben Ali ordered attacks on protesters and activists. On January 11, as a state of alert was announced, all schools, universities and public spaces were forced to close until further notice. On January 12, Ben Ali in his quest to gain his people back fired his minister of Interior: Rafik Kacem. Kacem was held
accountable for all the previous attacks against the peaceful marchers. However, discontent kept culminating and people had their mind set on getting rid of their dictator (Parker, 2011).

On January 13, faced with constant unrest, Ben Ali decided to address his people for the second time in a period of less than a month. The fact that Ben Ali chose to talk to the citizens’ meant that he felt threatened by the way things were evolving. Although he felt highly vulnerable, Ben Ali did not know that this speech was going to be his last ever as President of Tunisia. He started off by affirming that he understood his people “I got you”, most bloggers and social media posts replied instantly with the statement “Too late”. Ben Ali reassured his mission to create job opportunities and to end corruption in Tunisia, he also asserted that he will not be running for re-election at the end of his term in 2014 (Haddad, 2011).

On January 14, 2011, protests heated up and spread throughout the region, Ben Ali with no other option left, enforced a state of emergency in the entire country, he then suspended his government.

Only ten days after Mohammad Bouazizi’s death, on January 14, 2011, Ben Ali left Tunisia in search of exile. He first flew to Malta, and then to France, both countries refused to welcome him. He then sought refuge in Saudi Arabia (Hanley, 2011).

The same evening, posts about Tunisia’s successful revolution invaded all social media platforms. One video posted on Facebook, Daily Motion and YouTube, then broadcasted by Al Jazeera channel, genuinely inspired Tunisians all over the world. It was about a Tunisian citizen on Bourguiba Avenue shouting alone in Arabic after the
curfew “Ben Ali fled, the Tunisian people is free, the Tunisian people will not die, the Tunisian people is sacred, Tunisia is free, long live Tunisians” (Markouzi, 2011).

On this celebratory day, the total tweets mentioning #Tunisia had exceeded 190,000 tweets, also #sidibouzid was tweeted more than 100,000 times as an homage to this small town that started this successful uprising (Tsotsis, 2011). Throughout the revolution, Tunisia was mentioned over three hundred and twenty nine million times engaging around twenty six million Tweets.

Mohammad Ghannouch, Tunisia’s Prime Minster, took over under article 56 of the state constitution. On January 15, Fouad Mebazaa was elected as the provisional President ('Tunisia Revolution 2011', 2012).

3.9 Conclusion

Social media helped in planning, arranging and managing the peaceful demonstrations, it provided a safe gateway for people to condemn their corrupt government and a platform for raising awareness about human rights values such as democracy, liberty, and freedom of expression.

It is important to note that modern technologies and social media channels were not the triggers for freedom and democracy however these were the main tools that allowed their voices to spread so fast and be heard loudly (Howard, Duffy, Freelon, et al., 2011).

The period: 17 December 2010 to 14 January 2011 passed as a revolutionary moment for the Tunisian people. Tunisia was then free! It developed from a history of silence and fear to a present of loud voices and freedom. One of the main actors in this
revolution was the Tunisian blogosphere which included the activists in Tunisia as well as in its Diaspora. Social media had succeeded in surpassing social classes, age groups and nationality. It was a matter of sympathy, all the people around the world who saw the pictures, felt with the Tunisians and were determined to help spread the word. Youngsters, who were previously afraid to talk to each other about the corruption of the government, were then speaking out loud to the entire world in front of cameras with their heads held high. This sense of worth and confidence was a true mobilizing effect that encouraged people to stand united against their ruler as one people, one voice (Dakhli, 2012).

It is very important to note that there are many factors that contributed to the success of the revolution. Facebook was actually considered a medium that accelerated the progress of the Tunisian revolution. It was the first time an Arab country witnessed a substantial online collaboration that further progressed into the streets. Social media was thus a pathway for communication among Tunisians before the uprisings.

Another factor was the introduction of new actors on the political arena, which were the youth who played a dominant role. The social media channels were first used intuitively by these youngsters who then turned to using them for a purpose of spreading information and raising awareness. Since state owned media did not portray what was going on during the uprisings, people turned to blogs and posts online. In this sense, cyber activity played a very important role in informing the world, finally spreading the truth and thus had a big impact on public opinion. In a survey done five days after the fall of the regime, Tunisian activists were asked to assess the importance of Facebook in
achieving their goal, 80% of the sample in question considered that Facebook played a major role (Marzouki, Skandarani, et al., 2012).

Consequently, a “collective consciousness” was created by the rapid dissemination of true information all around the world. Videos of government abuse and deceased Tunisians citizens murdered by police, led to the development of a shared rage which evolved into a collective shared mission. Dakhli (2011) and Markouzi (2011) attest that it was due to the firm solidarity and harmony of the Tunisians people as one people “Al Shaib” that led to the success of their revolution. Further to that, it succeeded because it was a leaderless revolution with no dominant political party, social class or pressure groups; it was indeed a bottom up citizens led revolution.

This chapter was fully dedicated to the initiation, development and results of Tunisia’s Jasmine revolution. Referring back to the main research question with a focus on the case studied in this section: What role has social media played during the Arab Spring in Tunisia? In brief, the Tunisian revolution stemmed from economic and social problems that citizens had been dealing with ever since Ben Ali became President.

Hence, social media platforms and internet availability did not trigger the revolution; it was the numerous grievances and thirst for justice and freedom that provoked it. However, as just discussed, social media did play a crucial role in spreading information easily and rapidly; it was also an organizational tool for citizens to plan their marches and strategies across borders. Accordingly, social media’s role in the Tunisian revolution was a powerful organizer and accelerator that succeeded in making
a collective action possible and allowed the citizens to reach their goal of deposing their dictator in a matter of twenty nine days.
Chapter Four

The Case of Egypt

Egypt has shown a surprising revolutionary speed, after the fall of Ben Ali, which was led by the same young generation encouraged and supported by the Tunisian citizens. This chapter will start off with a general political background summarizing the three presidential rules of Gamal Abdel Nassar, Anwar Sadat and the main actor in the Egyptian revolution: Husni Mubarak. The corrupt authoritarian rule of Mubarak would provide a basis for the underlying factors of the mass revolution of January 2011 in Tahrir square. Who initiated the revolution? Who were the main actors? What were the main reasons for their dissent? What was the goal of the people? What were the main tools used to achieve their goal? The Egyptian revolution will be explored in depth while highlighting the main issue under study: the role of social media.

4.1 Political background and authoritarian rule

The Egyptian politics are one of a kind since Egypt has had only 3 presidents from 1952 until 2011; none of those presidents was actually elected or selected by choice (Ghonim, 2012). In 1952, the charismatic Egyptian leader Gamal Abdel Nasser founded an authoritarian regime. Nasser was known for his crucial role in placing Egypt at the heart of Arab unity; he called for Pan-Arabism and a complete separation from Western powers (Davidson, 2000). The Arab Socialist Union was the dominant party; in 1953 Nasser passed a law forbidding the establishment of political parties. Even though Nasser’s regime was very strict and did not give the people their citizenship freedoms,
his charisma and overall improvements done for the country made his people trust him and gave them feelings of unity and hope (Hassan, 2010).

After Nasser’s death in 1970, Anwar Sadat became Egypt’s president. Unlike Nasser, Sadat reconnected with the West and reformed international alliances. Sadat was also known for his pivotal role in the Arab-Israeli conflict, his visit to Jerusalem paved the way for the Camp David Accord. Due to this initiative, Sadat won a Nobel Peace prize; however this caused him high unpopularity and dissent from the Egyptian people and the Arab world (Davisdon, 2000). Sadat’s rule was characterized in theory by three pillars: rule by law, government by legal institutions as well as political rights and freedom. However, these pillars were contradicted by the fact the president had unconditional powers over all government institutions and thus was the sole deciding entity. In this sense, Egypt under Sadat was a presidential monarchy that prohibited the formation of opposition parties or social protests and responded to such cases with oppression and imprisonment. Sadat was assassinated by a group of Islamist militants in a parade in Cairo on October 6, 1981 (Asser, 2006).

Following Sadat’s assassination, Prime Minister Husni Mubarak, who had very little popularity in Egypt, took oath eight days later and became the ruling president. Mubarak’s rule began with an introductory note on democracy and citizen rights; he conveyed his wishes of keeping Sadat’s policies while allowing political participation and enhancing social and economic issues. The following statement by Mubarak summed up his mission and goal for the country “Nasser liberated Egypt, Sadat gave it peace, I wish to rebuild it” (Davidson, 2000).
In the beginning of his rule, Mubarak tried to keep these promises, but as the years in office went by corruption prevailed. Just like Sadat, Mubarak enjoyed full powers over Egypt; he was thus criticized for abusing these powers at his own benefit. Opposition parties were allowed to be formed in theory, whereas in reality, the only prevailing party was the National Democratic Party which was controlled by the president as well. Mubarak highly relied on military institutions in governing Egypt since he had little public support. He ensured the implementation of his strict rule by associating the police and security forces and monitoring his people at all times (Hassan, 2010). The Egyptian people suffered from terror and could not speak up fearing Mubarak and his powerful entourage. The people were frustrated and angry over the increasing corruption that had become embedded in Egyptian system and had extended to all institutions included nongovernmental.

Mubarak’s rule was characterized as a Pharaonic rule with a binding constitution that gave all powers to the president which made Mubarak similar to a pharaoh just like his predecessors Nasser and Sadat (Hassan, 2010). Even though political participation was allowed and encouraged, Mubarak never had to actually fight an electoral battle, the National Democratic Party made sure Mubarak always received majority of votes regardless of the actual counts (Asser, 2006).

Saikal (2011) and Davidson (2000) argue that Mubarak had become an arrogant autocrat who thought he could run the country by himself, being the holder of all executive and legal powers; he dismissed most of his advisors by asserting that he knew best. His arrogant and egotistical personality affected his political decisions, to the
extent that he decided he did not need a vice-president to assist him in ruling his country.

It is evident that the problem started at the beginning when Mubarak did not take into account the importance of citizen participation throughout his rule. His isolation from the people and public opinion angered the Egyptians. Moreover, the fact that Mubarak had all legislative and executive powers made his people lose trust in his role and his rule. However, they had to remain silent fearing strict punishment.

This section covered a brief a history of Egypt’s presidential rules after its independence from Britain, and a focus on Husni Mubarak’s rule in order to understand the issue in question. This chapter of the thesis will examine how the Egyptian situation changed drastically twenty nine years later and how the Egyptian people finally stood up against their corrupt ruler demanding his immediate departure.

4.2 Citizen rights and freedoms

As stated in the previous section, the three presidents that had ruled Egypt from 1952 until 2011 were known for their very different personalities, but had a common implemented rule of the one man show. The presidents were given unrestricted and absolute powers over the entire country which paved the way for incremental corruption and abuse of power. It is important to note that this section will portray the violations under Mubarak’s rule in particular in order to understand the people’s growing frustration that led to the 2011 mass revolution.

Mubarak’s rule was legitimized by law 162 in the constitution as a state emergency rule. Whereby the state of emergency forced the suspension of constitutional
rights to its citizens and allowed strict censorship, and extensive police and intelligence units monitoring. As part of his system, Mubarak made sure to punish his citizens in case his laws were disobeyed; such punishments included harsh torture, random arrest and many other basic human rights violations (Saikal, 2011).

Mubarak did in fact introduce a period of economic growth as a result of his alliance with the United States. In the early 1990’s he approved the International Monetary Fund reform which enhanced the country’s economy overall. In 2010, the country’s GDP had reached 217 Billion Dollars. However, this major growth only benefited Mubarak and his elite entourage. The wealth development was not distributed evenly in the country and did not provide its people with any sort of socio-economic change (Saikal, 2011). On the socio-economic level, the Egyptians were thus also suffering from corrupt and unlawful reign by their President acting as an Autocrat in reality.

Mubarak’s statement at the beginning of his appointment as president of Egypt in 1981 “Egypt is one society for all” turned out to be the extreme opposite. Mubarak not only reserved the country’s wealth and social benefits to his extended family and elite groups, he also made sure the state of emergency prevailed at all times, thus citizens were never able to exercise their political rights and to actually participate in the overall decision-making.

The fast population growth coupled with disparity of wealth distribution and very little employment opportunities, resulted in high poverty and extreme citizen frustration. Instead of being close to his people and listening to their concerns and
providing them with their basic rights and freedoms, Mubarak chose to distance himself from his people and to exercise coercion whenever he was opposed or threatened by any individual or group (Saikal, 2011).

Facing growing criticism throughout his fifth re-election campaign in 2005, Mubarak promised that he would finally suspend the state of emergency rule that governed Egypt if he was to be re-elected. This rule legitimized arresting individuals without proof of violation, it also forbid the formation of meetings and gatherings and it also allowed police and intelligence units to monitor all forms of communication.

In this sense, the emergency rule took away all citizen rights for all Egyptians and most importantly it took away all their basic human rights and freedoms. However, when Mubarak’s term was renewed for another six years, he announced that the state of emergency will be extended to another two years under the excuse that the constitution should be amended before the rule of emergency could be suspended (Brown, Dunne & Hamzawy, 2007).

Amr Adly (2011) explains how corruption and cronyism worked and developed in Egypt. He asserts that cronyism was applied in four forms by Husni Mubarak. The first was the allocation of state and public assets to his personal gain as well as his entourage and few selected elites. The second was the state control of the economy which was also abused and used for personal enrichment. The third form is the practice of oligarchy whereby wealthy relatives and friends of Mubarak used their monetary power and assumed high positions in his government. The fourth form was the illegal
use of state classified information by key persons to develop and run private businesses and produce high profit.

In conclusion, one can imagine the state of distress and despair felt and lived daily by the Egyptian citizen who had no political rights, no freedom of expression, nor could he find a decent job to enhance his standard of living.

4.3 Media laws under Mubarak

Egypt was known for its strict control over press ever since the rule of Gamal Abdel Nasser. It is important to note that the government allowed the creation of state opposition press; however, this type of press was under the strict government control. The government controlled the information on the independent newspapers and the distribution of these newspapers across Egypt (Amin, 2002). In reality, the ruling party headed by the president was not to be contested in any way. In addition to the president, his family and elite surrounding were also restricted from being criticized. Also, the telecommunications and internet sectors were fully owned and controlled by the Egyptian government. All operators were obliged under legal jurisdiction to provide access to the government (Eko, 2012).

Ironically, the Egyptian constitution grants the press sector management to the Supreme Press Council which should in turn ensure freedom of press to all Egyptians (Hamdy, 2009).

As Wael Ghonim (2012) explains media was controlled by the state, national and satellite televisions and newspapers: Al-Ahram, Al-Akhbar, Al-Gomhouriya. Fear was implanted as a common feeling and was a pre-requisite to stay safe in Egypt. Important
changes in media pattern have been observed since 2000 (Ghonim, 2012). Hamdy (2009) argues that Egypt has witnessed a less strict press sector with the advent of new media.

### 4.4 Citizen mobilization and Revolution

Before tackling Egypt’s mass revolution that evolved to a day of rage, it is important to look back over the period 2005 to 2010 in order to properly understand the mechanisms and preparations that made the revolution of January 2011 a success.

In December 2004, a new movement called Kefaya (Enough!) was initiated to stop Mubarak’s corruption. Its slogan was “No to extension, no to inheritance and corruption”. The second type of protests was based on Egypt’s economic issue, the movement did not tackle political rights, and the main request was enhancing living standards in the country. The last type of protest and the most important in this case, was the April 6 2008 movement. Youngsters formed the “April 6 Youth Movement Facebook group” that exceeded seventy thousand members. The Facebook group was the first of its kind since it was a common platform where Egyptians could discuss and share thoughts that mattered to them. This virtual dialogue strengthened the bond of the Egyptian people whilst making it hard for the government to control them (Hassan, 2010). It is important to note that the April 6 Facebook page created in 2008 played a major role in marketing the revolution of 2011 since it gathered most activists.

Egypt witnessed a sudden change between the ruler and his people, the non-stop protests in the period of January 25 and 28 exclusively proved that the power was shifting towards the people who were not afraid anymore. Furthermore, El Ghabashy
(2011) asserts that on January 25, 2011, a thirty year old powerful regime faced a newly formed strong society that had been struggling for so long.

It is obvious that the success of the Tunisians people in toppling Ben Ali played a crucial trigger in encouraging Egyptians and giving them realistic hopes that they could do it as well. However, Egyptians had long been struggling with Mubarak and they had been trying for many years to form various protests that were instantly oppressed by the regime. The slow progress of these attempts according to Khamis and Vaughn (2011) were caused by the failure of these protests to move from a virtual cyber-movement into a realistic mass movement on the streets. In fact, the protests gathered a couple of hundred Egyptians and thus it was very easy for the police forces to shut them down instantly.

Ghonim (2012) explains that he was determined that just like Tunisia, Egypt will be able to topple its ruler. In fact Egypt’s economy, social stability and politics were much worse than Tunisia’s. The reason for Tunisia’s success before Egypt was because the people were still afraid and needed more support and confidence. In addition, Egypt’s revolution is different than all previous revolutions since it was spontaneous and not premeditated. The people of Egypt were fueled by anger however; they were not ready to take their anger from online to offline until they saw their fellow Tunisians doing so. “The impossible quickly became possible” (Ghonim, 2012).

It is important to mention another fundamental pre-revolution movement that played a critical role in the preparation for the January 25, 2011 mass protest which was the creation of the Facebook page “We are all Khaled Said” by an Egyptian marketing
executive in Google offices of the Middle East and North African region, Wael Ghonim. Khaled Said was a young Egyptian man who was killed by the government intelligence and police forces for posting a video online that showed visible police corruption; police were seen getting hold of drugs after their seizure from the dealer (Teague, 2011).

Wael Ghonim (2012) explains that he created the Facebook page “Kulluna Khaled Said” because he saw himself in the martyr: Khaled Said, who was killed by the Egyptian intelligence, and thought that it could have been him or anybody else. He was determined to do something about it and could not just ignore this atrocity. However, as the page gained more and more supporters and followers he set a plan with the following goals to reach: the first goal was to advertise the page and encourage Egyptians to join the cause for Khaled Said, the second goal was sharing content that would generate interaction on the page by likes and comments. The third goal was to inspire followers to share and create content themselves by participating actively in online campaigns. The last phase was to mobilize the cause and take it from online to offline meaning on the streets. He asserts “The image was impossible to forget, and thanks to social media, it was proliferating like crazy” (Ghonim, 2012). This quote can also be used in the context of Mouhamad Bouazizi, the Tunisian vendor who set himself on fire, as will be seen in the Tunisian case, online public support was generated through the viral proliferation of a picture of a burned Bouazizi.

The shocking photographs of the tortured dead young man were shared on the Facebook page created by Ghonim, which had more than five hundred thousand likes, as well as many other social media channels. These horrific pictures shook Egyptians and the world and re-fueled the people’s anger against their dictator. What was even more
appalling was that Wael Ghonim was arrested for around ten days by Mubarak’s police forces under the accusation of generating and spreading anti-government thoughts. Upon his release, Wael Ghonim tweeted: “Freedom is a blessing that deserves fighting for #jan25” (Bhuiyan, 2011). With his Facebook page and countless encouraging tweets, Ghonim became the introducer of democracy and one of the main faces of Egypt’s revolution. Ghonim actually refuses to be called a hero since he considered that all Egyptians were heroes and without their unity and solidarity, the revolution would not have succeeded “There was no hero because everyone was a hero” (Ghonim, 2012).

Up until January 25, 2011, almost every anti-government protest was attacked by the police; however the people did not give up and kept organizing and planning online before they went on the streets. Egyptians were planning simultaneously for January 25, 2011. On this day Ghonim invited all Facebook users on Khaled Said’s Facebook page to attend a mass protest and around fifty thousand people clicked “attending” on the event page. On January 25, 2011, thousands of Egyptians invaded the streets of Cairo, Alexandria and many other cities. However, the most important location highlighting a space of liberty and freedom was Cairo’s main Tahrir Square. This was the biggest protest Egypt had witnessed since the 1970 bread riots (Carpenter & Schenker, 2011).

In this sense Egyptian activists supported by the international community tweeted the updates of the events on the central hashtag #Jan25 which gathered all important information and visuals. The protests were kick started on January 25 and did not stop for several weeks, even though the peaceful protesters were attacked by Mubarak’s police forces on a daily basis, they did not give up. The protests started in
Cairo and Alexandria then spread throughout the entire country (Lotan, Graeff & Ananny, 2011).

In fact, it is worth noting that not all the Egyptians on the streets were tech-savvy activists. Some protesters had never heard of Facebook, but as activists organized demonstrations online, news traveled fast both online and offline (Khamis & Vaughn, 2011). In fact, Teague (2011) claims after discussing this issue with a young Egyptian activist, that the Egyptian society was very similar to a social media channel whereby news traveled very fast through friends, relatives and social gatherings. Thus, citizen activism was not only relevant online but it also played an important role offline (Khamis & Vaughn, 2011).

4.5 Use of Social Media channels

As explained previously, Mubarak’s long term abuse of human rights and dignities of the people of Egypt was one of the biggest factors that led to the mass revolutions of 2011 (El Fegiery & Saad, 2013). It is also important to note that Tunisia was the trigger that assured Egyptians that they could succeed if they united as one people.

This part of the chapter will examine how online activists and citizens used social media tools throughout the revolution explained in the previous section. The most important initiatives will be highlighted below with no historical sequence.

On January 18, 2011 a young Egyptian woman called Asmaa Mahfouz posted a video on Facebook and Twitter calling all Egyptians to head to the streets and start protesting, affirming that if nobody joined her she would protest in Tahrir square alone.
As soon as Asmaa and a couple more people went to the streets on that day, they were instantly faced by the police who forced them to leave. A second video was then posted online; Asmaa encouraged her fellow citizens to take part in the revolution of #Jan25 scheduled on a national holiday (Dewey, et al., 2012).

Moreover, the “We are all Khaled Said” Facebook page became the common platform for uploading and sharing all proof of government brutality against peaceful protesters which aggravated the people’s anger. Wael Ghonim became a citizen journalist with his Twitter account followed by more than two hundred thousand people; his account provided all the updates of the revolution with all important information.

Each social media platform was used as a special tool and had a specific role in the revolution. Facebook helped in planning and organizing the protests as well as spreading pictures and videos. Whereas Twitter, was a gateway to the outside world and was a special platform that created a virtual conversation between millions of people around the globe (Howard, et al., 2011).

Gitlin (2011) tells the story of a famous blogger during the Egyptian revolution: Mohammad Salem who was the anonymous creator of “Rantings of a Sandmonkey” blog and had more than thirty five thousand followers on Twitter. In an interview with Salem, he explains that he started blogging after noticing that the national media did not report anything that involved citizen social activism. Since national media was controlled and owned by the government, the information conveyed to the people was very far from the truth. Ghonim also adds that national media, under pressure from
Mubarak’s regime did not air anything related to Khaled Said’s awful murder or any protest that followed his death (Ghonim, 2012)

Salem’s blog content was mainly in English, making it more difficult for the government to constrain him. When explaining the importance of social media in the Egyptian revolution, Salem refers to the “cute cat” theory, he explains that any new social channel that succeeds in sharing a picture of a cute cat, will succeed in sharing government criticism eventually leading to the end of the authoritarian rule. This explains the importance of the viral effect social media can produce instantly and rapidly.

Furthermore, social media platforms play various roles on many levels. Sereghy, Bunk, and Preiss (2012) assert that these platforms play five central roles. The first is what they call *individual transformation*, the idea that new media brings new actors to the political arena, an example of this role is the new generation of young citizens and activists whose main accounts have been followed by thousands of people around the globe: Such as Mohammad Salem, Wael Ghonim and many others. The second role is *intergroup relations* which is the ability to unite groups together under a common cause. This idea is illustrated by the fact that the Egyptian population gathered as one people on the streets with the same needs and requests. Social media channels provided them the ability to discuss negotiate and share their opinions which led to the common thought that reforms will not make any difference, and that Mubarak’s departure was the only solution. A third and prominent role social media has played is the generation of *collective action*, Facebook and Twitter were used mainly to create protests events with time and locations and then shared with millions of people in an instant. In fact,
Facebook events show how many people are attending a certain event, thus Egyptians felt encouraged to attend when they saw that thousands have clicked on “attending”, an example of these Facebook events was the January 25 protest advertised on “We are All Khaled Said” Facebook page”. The fourth role of social media is attracting external attention, it is very important to note in the Egyptian revolution case that the international community played a very important role in sharing information and helping Egyptians by encouraging them and giving them solutions for their problems.

The fifth and last role explained by Sereghy, Bunk, and Preiss (2012) which could have turned against activists was the support of regime policies. Social media helped the Mubarak regime to gather information about anticipated protests and tackled them accordingly. Social media also helped the regime get hold of the activists and punish them for criticizing the government and causing social unrest. Egyptians were very smart in their response, they in fact used social channels to schedule false protests and trick the police forces into going to other locations (Dewey, et al., 2012).

When looking at the planning process in depth, it is very astonishing to see how well organized the people were as if they were a small group. One can imagine how difficult it would be to plan, organize and schedule protests on a very large scale, however, the Egyptians showed complete determination and devotion to their cause and stood as one.

Moreover, social media’s role was not limited to communicating, strategizing and organizing protests; its role was even extended to creating a platform for humor. In fact, Egyptians have always been known for their wit and sarcasm which was illustrated
in their creative jokes that were only disseminated and shared in closed circles. When
the revolution was finally launched and the spiral of silence had come to an end,
Egyptians expressed their dissent against their long term dictator by sharing jokes and
having a laugh. Twitter was the best platform to share such jokes that were limited in
140 characters and then tweeted to an entire community within seconds. Such tweets
included the following:

“Leave, my wife wants to give birth and the baby doesn’t want to see your face!”

“Why are you not leaving? Are you stuck to the chair?”

“Use Hosni glue. It sticks for 30 years!” (Anagondahalli & Khamis, 2014).

Accordingly, these social media platforms provided a gateway for the formation
of a creative citizen-journalism that was shared with the entire world, the tweets
mentioned above were posted originally in Arabic, social sites directly translated them
for the world to understand them, laugh and share them.

In this sense, Anagondahalli, and Khamis (2014) assert the creation of a new
form of political activism that took on humor as an important feature of social media
platforms’ content.

Jamishdi (2012) portrays social media as not only a gateway for coordination and
planning but also a crucial factor in changing the mind-set of young activists and lighting up
their inner creativity previously repressed. The author calls this concept
“Creative activism” which blossomed during the Arab spring in Egypt and was been successful
in creating immediate responses that generated mass support for one cause. It also encouraged
and inspired people to participate. This new approach of creativity not only entertained the
protesters and drew a smile on their faces but also challenged the rulers who were shocked by the unexpected atmosphere of happiness and laughter. “Humor fueled activism” was a concept that authoritarian regimes did not know how to deal with. Examples: Graffiti, video and film, music, dance (Jamishdi, 2012).

4.6 Government reaction

Teague (2011) argues that although the internet and social media platforms had its benefits, these new media tools were in reality a double edged sword that was used by the government to get hold of the people in charge of sparking the online revolution.

As explained in the above sections, although “We are all Khaled Said” Facebook page played a crucial role in the development of the revolution, the police found out that Wael Ghonim was the creator of the page although the creator’s name was anonymous on Facebook. Consequently, as the people were using these platforms increasingly for discussing, planning and organizing, the government learned how to closely monitor these channels and punished the activists accordingly. In this sense these tools could have become a threat rather than a modern revolutionary catalyst.

Additionally, the government started using social media platforms in order to anticipate the dates and locations of the organized protests and plan to shut them down accordingly (Howard, et al., 2011). Thus, technology in this case helped the people in centralizing their data, but it also helped the government find out useful information and prepare their brutal response accordingly.

On January 25 2011, Mubarak’s government shut down some mobile phones for certain activists and blocked Facebook and Twitter in order to destabilize the protesters
and put an end to the daily protests. These actions did not in any way deter or affect the activists on the ground; they simply bought new numbers and started using their mobile phones (Dunn, 2011).

The second and bigger retaliation by the government was the obstruction of the SMS system in the entire country as well as the blocking of the internet to completely ensure that people would not be able to talk to each other and thus would not be able to keep organizing and inviting each other to the protests (Dunn, 2011).

The internet was blocked from January 27 until February 2, whilst text messaging systems were not restored until February 6. This massive government initiative to block all forms of communication and coordination did not succeed in hampering the citizen activism. Once again, protesters started thinking of new ways and went back to more traditional forms of communication such as landline phones. The government also attacked the media journalists in order to obstruct the spread of information on satellite television. Police forces arrested and tortured international journalists that were recording the government’s brutal attacks towards the peaceful protests (Dunn, 2011). Similarly to the Tunisian revolution, Al Jazeera played a crucial role in disseminating real information uncensored by the government, this is why the channel was blocked in Egypt and was forbidden to function in the country.

The atrocious attacks on citizens as well as the attacks on journalists from all nationalities increased the anger and frustration against Mubarak from his citizens and created dissent from the international community. Mubarak’s brutal responses encouraged Egyptians to keep going despite all the complications and obstacles they
were facing, because for them dying had become better than living under Mubarak’s authoritarian rule. Activists were fully aware that they might be killed on the streets; proof is the dissemination of such tweets “I would rather die in Tahrir Square than have you govern me and live in humiliation” (Jamshidi, 2014).

4.7 Lessons Learned from Tunisia

As explained in the above sections, social media clearly seems to have accelerated the progress of the Egyptian revolution by providing a gateway for spreading news instantly, by sharing pictures and videos of police brutality during the peaceful protests which intensified the Egyptian people’s anger as well as strangers from all over the world.

In addition, social media was also a platform for sharing and giving advice. This initiative was done especially by Tunisians who wanted to help their fellow revolutionaries. Such examples included: opening up discussion threads on Facebook and Twitter, Tunisians activists advised Egyptians to pour some vinegar on their scarves in order to protect themselves from tear gas; others suggested that an onion would be better. Activists would ask questions and then receive countless answers, people would engage in a virtual conversation with complete strangers seeking new solutions and tactics to bypass Mubarak’s intelligence team and creative ways to survive on the streets which turned into battle fields with the police (Khamis & Vaughn, 2011).

On another hand, as stated previously, the international community played a very important role in helping Egyptians with their struggle. During the blackout the internet shutdown, Google and Twitter joined in an initiative to keep the #Egypt and #Jan25
trends active on social platforms. They developed an application called “Speak2tweet” which allowed Egyptians to send their updates through voice recordings by calling a number, the voice recordings would then be automatically translated into English and posted on Twitter (Khamis & Vaughn, 2011).

4.8 Fall of Mubarak

As protests kept heating up and as the threatened Mubarak kept raising the stakes of his response both offline and online, the Egyptian people were fully determined to reach their goal and nothing was going to stop them. Messages and Tweets were shared online to encourage people to keep going and not to give up. Such tweets included “If your government shuts down your Internet, it’s time to shut down your government” (Sereghy, Bunk & Preiss, 2012).

The uprisings in Egypt started on January 25 and kept spreading through the country on a weekly basis. It took eighteen days of non-stop protests and brutal police attacks for the Egyptians to oust their ruler Husni Mubarak.

On February 11, 2011, Egypt’s Vice President Omar Suleiman formally announced Mubarak’s resignation as president after eighteen days of local and international pressure. The ruling authority was appointed to the Armed Forces. Following his resignation, Mubarak was charged for abuse of power and murder and was ordered to court (Sereghy, Bunk & Preiss, 2012).

After Mubarak’s resignation, Tahrir square was transformed from a protest square into a celebration square, Egyptians were marching for the first time in celebration of their victory, and they were finally free! Banners were held up high to
thank Al Jazeera for helping them spread the truth while the government tried to spread false news (Samin, 2012).

4.9 Conclusion

In conclusion, it is safe to affirm that the internet, social media and modern information technologies played a crucial role in the rapid progression of the citizen led revolution against Mubarak. However, one cannot assert that the success of the revolution could solely be based on social media’s role. The Egyptian people are the first to be credited for the success since they were the main actors online and offline. Social media channels such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube provided empty platforms and gateways which were filled by the Egyptian people with important viral information. If the success of the revolution was only based on social media, then the internet and SMS shutdown would have surely led to breakdown of the protests and eventually to the failure of the revolution. However, the Egyptian people proved themselves and showed their strength every step of the way, they have responded with creative solutions every time they faced an obstacle. Due to their solidarity first, and with the help of social media and the support of the international community, they reached their final goal, the resignation of Husni Mubarak which for them meant freedom.

The next and final chapter will include a comparison between the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions with a comprehensive conclusion on the role of social media.
Chapter Five

Comparison, Analysis and Conclusion

5.1 Summary of thesis

This thesis focused mainly on the role of social media and modern information technology in the Arab uprisings of Tunisia and Egypt. Since the Arab uprisings involved many countries and shook many long-term regimes, the choice was to focus on Tunisia and Egypt which were the first two countries to have started the domino effect that led to revolutions in Bahrain, Libya, Syria and many other countries in the Middle East and North African region.

Many have called the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt the “Twitter” and “Facebook” revolutions to emphasize the prominent role of technology. However, these titles were very controversial among scholars who asserted that revolutions cannot be solely based on social media and that there are other factors that were much more crucial.

The important role of social media in the revolutions has verified that, for a short while, people depended on it to communicate. However, when the government shut down all new information technologies, people resorted to traditional forms of communication and even started using “word of a mouth” as a means to keep spreading updates and important news. This shows that with or without social media, the people were determined to reach their goal.

Nevertheless, the presence and speed of social media provided an accelerating tool for citizens in many ways. It is important to note that social media’s role cannot be
limited to one role; social media is a dynamic tool that can be used in various ways, for many goals and by almost anybody.

5.2 Answering the main research questions

As stated in the introduction, the aim of this research paper is to answer the following question: What role did social media play during the initial revolutionary mobilization in Tunisia and Egypt?

The question seeks to clarify whether social media platforms were the cause of the revolution or were they tools that were used to achieve a goal? The answer to the question is that social media did not cause the revolution; it was a powerful accelerating tool that was used first intuitively and then strategically by citizens in Tunisia and Egypt in order to discuss, share thoughts and plan their demonstrations online.

The argument reiterated throughout this thesis is that social media was not the reason behind the birth of the revolutions, but it was an accelerating tool that helped citizens speak up, unite and mobilize. Humans are and will always be the source and fuel of any revolution, thus, a revolution would have happened anyway even if these social tools did not exist. However, one cannot disregard the powerful effects and advantages these new media tools have offered citizens, which makes it easy to imagine what would have happened if Tunisians and Egyptians did not have these tools.

5.2.1 Similarities and differences of revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt

Social media’s influential and various roles were analyzed thoroughly by assessing the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions in detail. It is very important to note that both revolutions share a number of similarities regarding the use of social media,
which proved that it was an essential tool that played as a catalyst in overthrowing the dictators.

First, both countries are examples of durable authoritarianism (Tufekci & Wilson, 2012). This modern type of authoritarianism got away with human rights violations, socio-economic despair where media was censored and controlled by the government. Participation, in this type of regime, was not allowed whether individual or collective in order to forbid the creation of opposition parties (Tufekci & Wilson, 2012). This type of unlawful and harsh rule was endured by the people of Tunisia and Egypt for so long for many previously stated reasons:

1. It was forbidden to form opposition groups;
2. The police and intelligence agency closely monitored communication and gatherings;
3. People were afraid to get caught and then be severely punished or killed;
4. People kept hoping for reforms promised by the presidents at every re-election; and
5. People were not ready and did not have the sufficient tools to overthrow their rulers

Some scholars argue that the irrepressible long-term rule of most leaders of Arab countries can be explained by the idea that the present leaders are “the only alternative to chaos” (Filiu, 2011).

In this sense, as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube websites and applications were introduced in Tunisia and Egypt; citizens started using them for entertainment at the
beginning, but then realized these tools could be strategically used to form online opposition forums for people to communicate and share thoughts; all that was obviously forbidden. Also, citizens of both countries were affected by the same problems which were: unemployment, poverty, lack of political freedom, media censorship, corruption embedded in the systems and many other socio-economic driven problems caused by the autocrats in power. A second important similarity is the profile of online activists in both revolutions, the first people to have started this new wave of online planning before the actual demonstrations, were the young and well educated. However, on the streets, the protesters were from all ages and belonged to very different social classes and had different economic statuses. The profile of people on the streets between the two countries will be discussed in the differences below.

A third and very important similarity in both the Tunisians and Egyptian revolution is the creation and generation of content in real time (Tufekci & Wilson, 2012). Protesters were actually sharing pictures and videos on the spot as events unfolded. Moreover, mobile phones were considered a crucial tool on the streets which quickly turned to a battle field with government police. Rochdi Horchani a family member of Bouazizi’s family asserted, when describing the protesters during the Jasmine revolution that the people went on the streets with "a rock in one hand, a cell phone in the other" (Kavanaugh, et al., 2013).

Another important similarity is the role of traditional media in disseminating information. Usually, old media such as television channels and newspapers show what the elite groups in the countries want to hear without taking in account controversial issues on the ground. However, during the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt the role of...
“Al Jazeera” channel took on a whole new level; the channel started airing news from the protesters’ point of view, thus contradicting the authoritarian regimes. Tufekci and Wilson (2012) call this transformative role “reverse agenda-setting”. Al Jazeera gathered important information, pictures and videos from various pages and groups on social media and then placed them on satellite television for the world to see the truth.

In this sense, one can conclude that it was the same mechanism that made the success of Tunisia and Egypt’s revolutions possible. Protesters generated the content and provided real evidence on their own accounts on social media; other online activists shared the visuals and videos on Facebook and Twitter. By adding a simple hashtag (#) all the visuals and imagery related to a theme were then centralized in one thread which people referred to. Different bloggers started writing on the subject; traditional media such as Al Jazeera downloaded the videos and images worth sharing with the world and aired them on satellite television.

Furthermore, those who were online were kept informed and aware, and those who preferred to remain offline and were accustomed to traditional media, were also kept informed and in line on television. This dynamic and interactive mechanism, which was changing by the second, made sure the entire world was aware of what was going on in Egypt and Tunisia, and thus international support and awareness grew stronger. Consequently, the people were supported by the international community which increased the pressure on the dictators to step down.
With reference to the mechanism described above, the sequence started with the young tech-savvy generation and then reached the wider population through an interactive mix of new and traditional media.

Hence, social media played a very important role in the revolutions of Tunisia and Egypt; however it cannot be given the entire credit. It was actually a mix between traditional and new media that generated the successful spread of information and revolutionary thought.

Nevertheless, the most crucial factor was the creation of a revolutionary environment where the people could no longer tolerate their dictators. Thus, the uprising did not take place because of social media; social media was a key tool that helped citizens in reaching their goal. The revolutions, according to Khonder (2011) were a result of the long years of severe violations of human rights and dignity.

Finally, another similarity is the unity and solidarity of the Egyptians and Tunisian citizens who were comfortably able to call themselves “the people” and “we” when demanding their rights and needs. The people of both countries were united for one cause and were determined to reach it as one (Stepanova, 2011). Wael Ghonim stated that “the power of the people is stronger than the people in power” the term “everyone” was finally used to describe the Egyptian people who were standing as one for the first time in history against their powerful ruler. Ghonim explains that the revolution had no single hero; everybody was a hero because everybody contributed to the success of the revolution in their own way (Hofheinz, 2011). It is worthy to quote in this section a statement by an Egyptian activist called Omar Kamel: “We had
experienced and Egypt that we had never dared imagine; one in each we could all stand together rich or poor, educated or illiterate, religious or secular. No matter what our political ideologies might have been, we formed a community of individuals that cared deeply for one another, one in which you knew that the man or woman standing next to you, whose name you did not happen to know, would easily risk his or her life to save yours.” (Jamshidi, 2014)

It is possible to add to this assertion that the success of the Egyptian revolution was also due to the Tunisians success, since it directly followed it. Tunisians helped Egyptians and gave them solutions to problems they had already encountered during the Jasmine revolution.

On the other hand there are also some differences concluded after a thorough review of both the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions.

The first difference which is important to note is that Egypt is a country eight times bigger than Tunisia in terms of population. Tunisia had around 10.5 million citizens whilst Egypt’s population was estimated around 85 million in 2010 (Kavanaugh, et al., 2012). Despite the huge population number in Egypt, the people were able to achieve solidarity and overthrow their dictator. Comparing to Egypt, Tunisia’s population seems small, however 10 million people is not a small number. This fact proves that overthrowing a dictator is not dependent on the population size.

The protesters on the streets of Egypt were mostly middle class, some were professionals and some belonged to religious groups especially the Muslim Brotherhood. Whereas the protesters on the streets of Tunisia were much more diverse
in composition, they included the young generation of students, workers, the unemployed and secular groups (Beissinger, Putnam, Jamal & Mazur, 2012).

The location of the first protests can also be considered a difference between both revolutions. In Tunisia the first protests kick-started in the rural town of Sidi Bouzid following the self-immolation of Bouazizi and then stretched to other towns until it reached the capital Tunis. However, Egypt’s first protests started in Egypt’s central square of Cairo: Tahrir Square and then spread all over Egypt (Kuhn, 2012).

Another difference is that the Tunisian population was much more tech-savvy and connected to new information technologies than the Egyptian population. In fact, around 37% of Tunisians were internet users comparing to 27% of Egyptians. However, a much bigger gap existed with Facebook users: only 6% of Egyptians were active on Facebook whereas around 18% of Tunisians were active Facebook users in 2011 (Kavanaugh, et al., 2012).

5.2.2 Analysis of the role of social media in both revolutions

The present study’s main argument is that social media played a crucial role in accelerating the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions. The use of social media by citizens did not cause the revolutions but it did provide a dynamic catalyst and allowed them to overthrow their dictators in a couple of weeks.

The first and foremost role social media has played in both revolutions, was providing a platform for youngsters to communicate and share their thoughts online. The internet paved the way for them to read about Western democracies and human rights, thus, citizens started expressing their concerns and sharing possible solutions. In this
sense, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube became platforms for interaction and communication, each targeting different audiences.

As explained, social media was first used intuitively by citizens who were forbidden to speak publicly about their concerns and criticize their rulers or to form opposition groups. Thus, their online dialogue was the only way they could share and find solutions for their problems. This virtual communication through common pages and hashtags got them closer together and made them realize how numerous they were by crossing all types of boundaries: such as social class, educational level, culture and many others. They then realized that they were capable of doing something altogether to change their situation, and thus started coordinating, planning and advertising their demonstrations on social channels.

Another fundamental social media advantage was that it connected online activists to the international community. It is very important to note, as discussed and explained throughout this paper, that the international community played a big role in the revolution through social media channels. The international community read and shared the news posted by the Egyptians and Tunisians. Some countries also helped activists with proxies and internet solutions during the internet shutdown by the government. In all, the international communities helped the people living the revolution raise awareness around the globe and supported them with their quest, which eventually increased the pressure on Ben Ali and Mubarak to step down. As Samin (2012) argues, social media did not cause the Arab spring but was mainly a crucial factor in accelerating a process that was already taking place. Moreover, the reason for placing social media at the forefront of the revolutions is, according to Samin, because it served
as a “window” for the international and western community and allowed them to delve into the minds of the people of the Middle East (Samin, 2012).

Social media’s role was also prominent since it defied the governments’ restrictions in Tunisia and Egypt and allowed the formation of virtual opposition groups online. Social media channels provided multiple platforms for online activists to connect among themselves and with the outside world. Even though this thesis shows that social media is a double edge sword and the governments used it for their own benefit of getting all information about future protests. Governments also increased the levels of online monitoring in order to arrest the activists spreading democratic thoughts and criticizing their rulers. The clearest example of this is the arrest of Wael Ghonim after the Egyptian government found out that he was the creator of “We are all Khaled Said” Facebook page. However, Ghonim and other activists did not stop after his arrest; on the contrary, they were much more determined to topple the regime.

One of the most important roles social media played during the revolutions was the successful transformation of ordinary citizens to credible journalists. As explained throughout this paper, mainstream media and state owned television did not mention what was really going on; they manipulated events as per the governments’ requests in order to keep the people ignorant and unaware. With social media, this manipulation was not possible anymore, since people shifted to a newly trusted source: protesters. In this sense, online activists and protesters became journalists conveying real stories and supporting their updates with evidence ranging from imagery to videos and blog posts on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and different blog websites. This was how proof of government corruption and brutality against peaceful protesters were spread all around
the world.

Social media’s content was also used purposefully to fuel traditional media especially Al Jazeera. The content posted on all social media channels became much more credible than the news posted on state owned media. This is why Al Jazeera channel conveyed the truth to the world on satellite television by showing the most important highlights posted online. Thus, the mix between new media and traditional media resulted in raising awareness and showing the real citizen led revolution.

Last but not least, another social media benefit was that it has honored those who have died because of government corruption and brutality. Names such as Mohammad Bouazizi, Khaled Said and many others would have gone unremembered had their stories and pictures not been shared on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube.

5.3 Progress of revolutions

Lynch (2011) argues that a small number of scholars had anticipated revolutions to burst in the Middle East and North African region, however, no one had expected it to be this big, this fast and this effective.

As stated throughout this thesis and as argued by many academics, the people of Tunisia, Egypt as well as Libya, Yemen and Syria, were ready for a revolution even without the existence of social media. The reasons behind their readiness are the long years of suppressing their anger, fear and agony (Khonder, 2011).

In fact, the success of social media and many other tools in the aftermath of the revolution does not necessarily mean the people of Egypt and Tunisia reached their goals in terms of achieving democracy and political freedoms, it was only restricted to
the time frame of the revolution. In this sense, the revolutions were a success only when assessing their ability to topple down the regimes.

As Buchanan (2011) affirms “For when autocrats fall, it is not always democracy that rises” History has shown that the fall of monarchs had led to even stricter autocracies: Following King Farouk in Egypt, Nasser took over in 1952. After King Idriss of Libya came Qaddafi, and Khoumeini took power after the fall of the Shah in 1979 Iranian revolution. Buchanan states an old saying that affirms that sometimes the present is much better than the future “Better the devil we know…”

In conclusion, the use of the internet and social media can help empower democratic movements in the Middle East to resist non-democratic regimes. But it will not produce the same outcome in every Middle Eastern country. Thus, social media should be analyzed along with the fundamental aspects of a state such as its internal politics, its economy and social issues. In this sense, social media cannot be considered as an independent factor (Samin, 2012).

In fact, the hard part is not done for Tunisia and Egypt. As countries in transition from autocratic regimes to democracies, many problems will be faced in order to achieve a good practice and applicable democracy on the ground giving the people their well deserved rights and freedoms (Salamey, 2013).

5.4 Ways forward

This present thesis portrays social media as a very powerful dynamic tool that was used by many actors throughout the Egyptian and Tunisians revolutions in order to achieve many goals.
Social media was first used by online activists in order to discuss and share democratic thoughts and wishes for freedom. It was then used by traditional media in order to derive important content and move it to satellite television. It was later used by the international community to show their support for the people and help them achieve their goals.

However the most dangerous role played by social media was feeding information to government police and intelligence units. By assuming this role, social media could be considered as a threat to the people rather than an effective tool. According to Lynch (2011) the new trend in social media also benefited authoritarian regimes, he quotes Heydemann’s statement “Arab authoritarianism has upgraded”. Instead of being threatened by this uncontrollable flow of information, internet gave the governments more control and access to public opinion. Through Facebook they used selective repression on the activists who dared revolting against the government.

In this sense, one can imagine the new trend that will be used by authoritarian regimes and even in the governments that will follow in Egypt and Tunisia: A new strategic approach to monitor all social media channels in order to anticipate any kind of opposition forum or a preparation for citizen mobilization. Thus, as Tunisians and Egyptians have done, citizens planning to use social media as a mobilizing factor for their revolutions, should be fully aware of the threats it poses with regards to governments’ close inspection and retaliation and should not only depend on it in order to ensure a successful coordination plan.

Moreover, Wael Ghonim’s statement “If you want to free a society, just give them internet access” (Khamis & Vaughn, 2011), is not entirely true. The people did not
only use the internet and social channels in order to achieve their goal, they in fact resorted to many other creative tools that were equally needed.

5.5 Conclusion

One cannot credit the entire success of the revolution to the social media tools only. If that were the case, the Egyptian government shut down of the internet and social media sites in January 2011 for five days would have led to the failure of the revolution. Teague (2011) explains that the Egyptian community itself had turned to a live social networking just like the online networking whereby information spread fast and was communicated instantly through friends and family. Other tactics were used during the blackout; the Tunisian and Egyptian people shifted towards traditional communication channels such as landlines.

We used to live in a world where famous media channels such as BBC, CNN, Al Jazeera and many influential channels, were considered as the only information source, where one could get information only if they turned on satellite television or bought local and international newspapers. In fact, what most people forget is that satellite channels and newspapers were mostly if not fully supported by governments: powerful leaders and elites. Thus general news became directly distorted and censored based on what the superpowers want to convey.

In late 2010, social media paved the way for a whole new wave of writing and sharing information in Arab countries. The information came from people on the field, activist living the true story. Thus information could no longer be censored nor distorted since it was supported by imagery and live posting. This shift created a new paradigm of
information that allowed people to succeed for the first time. People all over the world stood with Tunisia and Egypt because they finally learned the truth; television could no longer portray the citizens as rebellious and disobedient since the presidents were finally revealed as autocrats.

The main research question of this thesis was to identify the clear role of social media in the uprisings of Tunisia and Egypt which have been called “Facebook” and “Twitter” revolutions. This thesis reiterates that social media cannot be credited for the success of the revolution because without people social media channels would have been useless. As the famous marketing consultant Jay Baer explains it in a very powerful statement “Content is fire social media is gasoline” (Baer, 2014). The content created by people fed into social media channels, and these platforms were the gateways for communication, discussion and awareness. Social media platforms provided a virtual space for people to communicate and organize their action, however, had the action stayed online, the revolutions would not have succeeded in ousting the rulers. What made the revolution succeed was the fact that the people united online to form one political thought, one opinion and then took the streets as one people with one goal: freedom from their dictators. As Monshipouri (2014) states “messages posted to social networking sites alone cannot lead to formidable and sustainable change, unless they are followed up by action on the ground”

In all, any type of media or new technology provides a gateway for awareness, liberalism and modernity. With print media, people waited for the newspapers every day to read information around the globe and were thus kept informed. With the introduction of the television, people could see and hear the news rather than read. With satellite
television, people could watch channels around the globe and not only in their region. With landlines, people were able to communicate with each other when they were at home. With mobile phones, people were able to communicate at all times, wherever they were. With the internet, people started to surf the web for information immediately updated on websites. Media and technology kept evolving until they became one. Facebook and Twitter played a major role in the revolutions not only because they provided a gateway to millions of people, but because these applications were available on mobile phones. Thus, Tunisians and Egyptians took the pictures and directly uploaded them on social channels. The “share” and “re-tweet” options made the viral dissemination around the world possible. In this sense, mobile phones coupled with social media channels fueled by citizen journalism and creativity all led to the success of the revolutions by all the people. “History is in the making, the Arab renaissance is just the beginning” (Filiu, 2011).
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