From TUNeZINE to Nhar 3la 3mmar:
A Reconsideration of the Role of Bloggers in Tunisia's Revolution

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Introduction[1]

In mid-November 2010, prominent bloggers Lina ben Mhenni and Arabasta began a campaign to attract new voices to the Tunisian blogosphere under the rubric "7ell blog"[2] or "start blogging" through an eponymous webpage and Facebook group. Posts included instructions for beginners, links to hosting sites, explanations on how to add videos or how to participate in an aggregator, and debates about whether bloggers should write anonymously. By early January 2011 they tallied over 3,000 friends, and had posted links to 100 newly created or recently revived blogs. The site was then hacked by government censors (7ellblog 2011). While the initiative did not espouse an overt activist agenda, was not affiliated with any political party or civil society organization, by connecting blogs to increasingly popular forms of social networking it highlighted the importance of new media as a format for encouraging freedom of expression. Their efforts were comparable to previous online efforts to defy censorship in that a few motivated individuals were able to generate digital momentum for a cause just as their experience with censorship was typical of the prevalent Internet surveillance that characterized Tunisia under Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali (1987-2011). Across the Middle East, as young, well-educated, upper-class critics turned to the Internet to voice their opinions, they faced a range of serious consequences from harassment to arrest and torture (Lynch 2007). This article will examine Tunisia's particular case, showing that the international focus on social media's impact stemmed partially from the paradoxical ability of Ben Ali to control the Internet while maintaining a reputation as a modern, democratic statesman.

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[1] I would like to thank Niki Akhavan for preliminary suggestions and Will Youmans for his comments on an earlier draft of this article.

[2] Following SMS transliteration system, Arabic numbers are used to represent distinctive letters such as 3 for *ayn* or 9 for the letter *qaf* particularly when writing in a combination of Arabic and French, or in Arabic with the French alphabet. In this case the 7 indicates the heavier "h."

Despite state supervision of the Internet, in the final weeks of 2010 bloggers helped publicize the wave of protests that began in the small southern town of Sidi Bouzid, giving international exposure to the inhabitants of Tunisia's dispossessed, and often ignored interior. Whether focused on the demands of local communities for respect and economic opportunities, covering the wave of desperate suicides triggered by Muhammad Bouazizi's self-immolation, the lawyers' solidarity strike, or the closure of universities and high schools in early January, Tunisian bloggers visited sites of protest, gathered information from text messages, phone calls, and Facebook networks and posted them online. Their pages in turn served as databanks for foreign journalists with minimal experience in Tunisia. Blogs, Twitter feeds, and video sharing thus increased the international visibility of demonstrations, revealing the brutality of the police force and the vacuity of the regime, to people who knew little about Tunisia. As a result, Ben Ali's resignation on 14 January revived debates about the democratic potential of the Internet, a debate that had been largely dormant since the failed "Twitter Revolutions" in Moldova and Iran in 2009. While a few journalists offered more nuance (McManus 2011; Gilson 2011), flashy headlines zeroed in on how cyber subversives "helped topple a dictator" (Giglio 2011), and how activists "used Twitter to organize their protests and inform the outside world of their activities" (Tapscott 2011). The Egyptian uprising and downfall of Hosni Mubarak in the following month led to a celebration of the contribution made by Western technology (Kang and Shapira 2011) and proclamations that "The Revolutions will be hashtagged" (Radsch 2011).

That the protests in Tunisia caught many by surprise can be attributed to the country's international reputation as an exception to Middle East stereotypes of despotic regimes, an angry Arab street, and Muslim extremists. Instead, its presidents had built a successful tourist industry and lured foreign investors around an image of inviting beaches, women in mini-skirts, and an expanding middle class that was secular, educated, and European in outlook. If the socio-economic grievances and regional inequalities that fueled the revolution should have dispelled this myth, it was nevertheless perpetuated by the technocentric focus of news coverage.

By opening this article with the ephemeral popularity of the 7ell blog movement, driven by a group of tech-savvy, middle- and upper-class, bilingual professionals, directly prior to Ben Ali's departure, this study reconsiders the ostensible success of social media in the Tunisian revolution. First, I locate the experiences of netizens within Ben Ali's Tunisia in a longer trajectory of

regime critique. This entails an overview of Tunisia's media landscape and the institutional limitations on freedom of expression in order to suggest the continuities between the authoritarian policies of Tunisia's first president, Habib Bourguiba (1956-1987), towards the press and broadcast media, and the policies of Ben Ali toward the Internet. Rather than a novel phase in modern authoritarianism, the surveillance, harassment, and intimidation that plagued the Internet under Ben Ali were representative of the repression meted out against generations of journalists, human rights militants, union leaders, Islamic political groups, communists, and other dissenting voices.

I then place the revolutionary protests in the context of the preceding decade of online activism in order to demonstrate that while creative and innovative, ruses to circumvent state efforts to control the Internet produced few concrete results. In addition to adding much-needed historical context to theoretical debates over the impact of new media, this article incorporates the experiences of a prominent component of Tunisian bloggers. While on the surface the engagement of bloggers and the prevalence of social media in international coverage gave the revolution the appearance of being driven by technology, an in-depth examination of the Tunisian case supports the skeptical position of the limitations of online activism, and the power of authoritarian regimes to restrict Internet expression. It further indicates that the fame of netizens resulted more from tenacious stereotypes about Tunisia as a liberal success story than it demonstrated a causal relationship with political change.

The Tunisian Bloggers

Many of the political bloggers cited in the media and receiving recognition for their online activities in late December 2010 and January 2011 were bilingual, leftist, and often secular professionals, in part a reflection of the costs of Internet access and the linguistic parameters of blogging prior to 2005. Many had traveled regionally and internationally or lived abroad and were well positioned to serve as vectors between Tunisia and foreign audiences. For instance, Riadh Guerfali (Astrubal), a prolific blogger online since the early 1990s, is a professor of law and human rights activist who was based in France. By the time he co-founded the online discussion forum Nawaat with Sami ben Gharbia in 2004, the latter had become one of the most outspoken representatives of the Tunisian diaspora, an activist and journalist at Global Voices,

whose online projects included a blog, a digital book, and an interactive map of Tunisian prisons. Ben Mhenni, whose leftist father was a political prisoner, is a journalist who teaches at the University of Manouba and a former Fulbright scholar in the United States. The blogosphere contains a disproportionate number of liberal professionals such as Slim Amamou and Mehdi Lamloum, both in the IT sector, the engineer Yassine Ayari, and Zied Mhersi who works in medicine, academics Tarek Kahlaoui and Tarek Cheniti, the consultant Houssein ben Ameur, and Fatma Riahi (FatmaArabicca), a high school drama teacher. Along with anonymous bloggers such as Arabasta, Boukornine, Massir, and Z (an architect), they formed a network by posting links to and comments on each other's pages, collaborating both online and off.

The prevalence of intelligent, middle- and upper-class Tunisians who might use the Internet to foster political change coincides with soft-power policies and idealistic theories about the Internet as a source of democratization represented by figures such as Clay Shirky. It follows that social media and online activism have been credited with providing a crucial and material cause for the revolution (Tufekci 2011). Yet as skeptics caution, not only can the Internet be monitored and filtered, and social media deployed towards racist, extremist, or authoritarian goals, but online organizing also does not automatically translate into cohesive and committed social movements (Gladwell 2010; Morozov 2011).

Why Blog? One-Party Rule and Control of the Media

Structural and legal limitations on freedom of expression can be traced to the process of state-building that began shortly after Tunisian independence from France in 1956. As Bourguiba sought to create national unity and cultivate personal loyalty he installed a single-party monopoly on politics, civil society, and associational life that extended to the circulation of information and the organization of the press. The government monitored newspapers, and pushed independent publications to close, for instance outlawing the Tunisian Communist Party paper by forcibly dissolving the party in 1963. By the mid-1960s even "the nonparty papers learned to echo the political line of the government's Information Department" (Moore 1969, 78). If a few weekly and monthly reviews appeared towards the end of the 1970s, their content was limited by the 1975 press code, especially articles 68 through 80 which prohibited subversion and defamation, established fines and prison terms, and allowed the government to confiscate the

publication in question. Extralegal silencing was accomplished through the aid of printers and distributors who refused to publish or distribute publications by the opposition (Chouikha 2004). In spite of his modern veneer, Bourguiba's demand for allegiance from the press corps matched the repressive realities of his desire to control labor, the women's movement, and the political process more broadly (Belhassen 2004; Bessis 2004; Marzouki 1993).

Ben Ali's approach to print, broadcast, and digital media demonstrates continuity with Bourguiba's practices. In spite of the accelerated program of economic liberalization, the promise of "change" following Ben Ali's 7 November 1987 medico-legal coup proved superficial on multiple levels as he perpetuated party and state control over government and civil society and expanded state surveillance by tripling the police force (HRW 2010). Independent journals, allocated only minimal state subsidies and advertising revenues, were denied permission to publish, and the threat of sanction or unemployment led many journalists to practice degrees of self-censorship (LTDH 2004). Those who spoke out were followed by the police, harassed, and frequently arrested. When foreign dailies such as *Al-Hayat, Al-Quds al-Arabi, Courrier Internationale, Le Monde* or *Le Monde diplomatique* included content critical of the regime, they were delayed or did not arrive at kiosks. In 2005, there were only three opposition papers, and in 2009 the president's son-in-law Sakher al-Materi bought 70 percent of the al-Sbah group which edited two of the major dailies, *Al-Sbah* (Arabic) and *Le Temps* (French) (Beau and Graciet 2009). Thus even as the media became increasingly privatized the range of opinion remained narrow. By 2010, the blogger Arabasta offered a cynical synopsis of the situation:

- Official newspapers (*Renouveau & Al-Hureya*): newspapers sold for a fee, distributed free of charge in order to clean the windows of administrative offices and eventually those of private homes
- Newspapers of the "moderate" opposition: nonexistent, read *Renouveau,* it is less exhausting for everyone. (Arabasta 2010)

The repetitious nature of print media contributed to low distribution figures and popular disengagement, with an estimated 45,000 for *Al-Shuruq* and 30,000 for *La Presse*. According to a 2004 report, there were only 19 daily newspapers per 1,000 inhabitants, one of the lowest rates in the region, higher only than Libya and Yemen (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

2004). By the end of Ben Ali's tenure the newspapers with the largest circulation were either owned by the state directly (*Al-Sahafa* and *La Presse*) or indirectly through the ruling party (*Renouveau* and *Al-Hureya*) and friends and family of the president (*Al-Shuruq*, *Al-Sbah*, *Le Temps*) (El-Issawi 2012).

Radio and television were similarly monotonous and state controlled even after privatization (Chouikha 2005-2006). Frequencies were assigned by a national agency within the Ministry of Communications as a way to prevent independent broadcasting. The first private radio station, *Mosaique,* was given to a zealous supporter of the regime and then to presidential brother-in-law Belhassen Trabelsi. Other private stations were owned by al-Materi (Zaytuna FM), Ben Ali's daughter Cyrine Mabrouk (Radio Shams FM), and the son of his private doctor. The state monopoly on television ended with the arrival of Italy's Rai Uno, and the broadcasting of France 2 in 1989, although the first private station Hannibal (2005) was backed by Trabelsi. After initial efforts to regulate and limit access to satellite receivers, the regime realized their diversionary potential and made them available on credit (Chouikha 2002). A range of measures was employed to limit regime criticism, from harassing foreign correspondents to pulling the plug. On one occasion in the summer of 2002, while the exiled opposition figure Rashid Ghannushi was speaking on al-Mustaquilla, an Arabic-language station based in England, power was cut throughout the capital, although most Tunisians had been watching the final matches of the World Cup. Given the omnipresence of the state in print and broadcast journalism, by the late 1990s there was hope among the Tunisian opposition that digital media held fewer obstacles. At least this hope motivated the news site Kalima to go online in 2000 after they were denied permission to print a journal (Pintak 2007). However, similar repressive practices were soon extended to the Internet.

The Expansion of the Internet and Internet Control

In 1991, Tunisia was the first Arab country with Internet access, and the state later supported increased connectivity and technology, such as broadband, to encourage foreign investment and maintain its image as an open society. It simultaneously enacted measures to control access and content such as the Telecommunications and Internet Decrees of March 1997 which extended the restrictive provisions of the 1975 press code to the Internet. In particular, articles 49 and 50,

which prohibited the dissemination of false news and penalized defamation (broadly defined), were routinely deployed against Internet users (HRW 2005). In addition, a 1998 postal regulation was extended to email to permit the interception and confiscation of messages deemed a threat to public interest and national security (RSF 2002, 110). As early as 1999, authorities were monitoring activities in Internet cafes and online discussion forums (Ben Brik 2000, 244-246). Internet service providers (ISP) and the owners of Internet cafes were liable for content accessed through legal provisions that implicitly encouraged them to monitor individual users.[3] These measures established a legal apparatus with which to monitor the Internet and prosecute digital dissent.

Internet usage remained quite limited for the first decade, with many of the initial connections serving administrative purposes as the costs of services and owning a personal computer were prohibitive for the average Tunisian. According to data provided by the Tunisian Internet Agency (ATI) which operated the country's only server, in 2000 there were about 100,000 Internet users or roughly 1 percent of the population (compared to almost 6 percent in Lebanon and Kuwait). In a 2004 report, the Tunisian Human Rights League underlined the low rate of Internet users compared to Latin America and Asia; even in Algeria, there were four times as many Internet cafes per capita (LTDH 2004). Government subsidies for Internet cafes, connections at universities and secondary schools, and efforts to facilitate the purchase of computers contributed to a significant increase in users after 2007. By 2010 around 34 percent of the Tunisian population was online, slightly above the average for Arab countries in the Middle East (29 percent), although considerably below Oman and the UAE (Internet World Stats).

Regardless of the slow growth rate of the Internet, the regime began demonstrating its commitment to monitoring online content and utilizing punitive legislation with the incarceration of Zouhair Yahyaoui in 2002. A highly educated man unable to find employment to match his qualifications, he opened an Internet café where he created one of the first online discussion forums in 2001 under the pseudonym "al-Tunsi" (the Tunisian). The site, TUNeZINE, featured political cartoons that parodied the president (referred to by his initials, ZABA), mocked the vacuity of official rhetoric, and involved Tunisians from across the political spectrum. Notably,

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[3] One of the first private ISPs, PlaNetTunisie, was owned by Ben Ali's daughter Cyrine Mabrouk.

he posted an open letter to the president from his uncle, the outspoken judge Mokhtar Yahyaoui, criticizing the subordination of the judicial system. Visitors to the site were polled as to whether they considered Tunisia a democracy, a kingdom, a prison or a zoo. The majority voted for prison. As the site gained more readers, it also earned the ire of authorities; Yahyaoui, Tunisia's first cyber-dissident, was apprehended at work in 2002 and sentenced to 28 months for disseminating false information. The number of Internet cafes subsequently dropped from approximately 300 to 260. Subjected to ill treatment and torture, Yahyaoui undertook hunger strikes while in prison, as his family, friends, and French fiancée mounted an international awareness campaign on his behalf. When he was conditionally released late in 2003, his health had already declined due to prison conditions. This episode of protest reached a sad end when Yahyaoui died of a heart attack in March 2005 at the age of 37.

Government recourse to stereotypes of Islamic terrorism offered a consistent premise for the silencing of dissent. Ben Ali first used a potential Islamist menace as a justification to suppress opponents in the 1990s, taking advantage of the dirty wars in neighboring Algeria (Amnesty International 2003). While relative political stability by the end of the decade might have inaugurated a more lenient approach, the 2001 attacks in the United States ushered in a new phase of Internet repression under the umbrella of anti-terrorism and led to a series of statutes enacted in 2003. These statutes were retroactively applied to the February 2003 arrest of eight young men in Zarzis and twelve high school students in Ariana, all of whom were charged with acts of terrorism based on files they had supposedly downloaded from the Internet. The cases were marked by procedural failures including falsified arrest records and constraints upon the defense lawyers, while the young men were subjected to ill treatment and torture, and some of their family members were harassed. Although independent observers found the charges entirely groundless, four youths from Zarzis were sentenced to thirteen years, and the Ariana youths received sentences varying from four to sixteen years (IFEX 2005; Ben Amor 2004).[4] By cracking down on students surfing the web, these heavy sentences indicated a concentrated attempt to dissuade people from online browsing or frequenting Internet cafes.

Policing the Internet took on myriad forms both online and offline. US-manufactured commercial software called SmartFilter was programmed to censor foreign reporting on Tunisia,

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[4] Those still detained in February 2006 benefited from a massive presidential pardon that year.

the pages of human rights organizations, a range of blogs, opposition groups, as well as video sharing venues such as YouTube and DailyMotion often by inserting a standard "404: not found" message indicating that the server was unable to connect with the page (Villeneuve 2006). Bloggers were the targets of routine harassment; between 2001 and 2008, at least twelve bloggers were arrested, and "almost every single Tunisian opposition website and self-hosted blog has been the victim of one or more hacking incidents" (Ben Gharbia 2008). Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, the Committee to Protect Journalists, and Reporters Without Borders all documented the relationship between strict censorship and physical violence including torture of and legal sanctions against cyber-dissidents, labeling the country an "Internet Enemy" and earning it third place in a 2007 list of "The World's Most Net-Repressive Regimes" (Eid 2004; Greenberg 2007; HRW 2005). By 2010, government censors practiced extensive phishing, sending fake email messages to steal passwords for Facebook pages and blogs of activists; once secured they deleted the content (Amamou 2010a).

While the Tunisian government combined widespread surveillance with punitive measures against dissidents, this did not significantly mar its international credibility (Wood 2002); it was designated to host the 2005 UN World Summit on Information Society and Habib Ammar, widely known among human rights advocates for orchestrating a campaign of torture against political prisoners during his term as Minister of the Interior (OMCT 2003; Whitaker 2001) was appointed head of the preparatory committee.

The Beginnings of Cyber-Dissent: Blogging with 3mmar

As Internet access expanded in the 2000s, so too did the use of blogs covering subjects as diverse as politics, poetry, personal narratives, technology, or international affairs, and producing a similar panoply as seen across much of the Middle East (Bunt 2009). Ben Ameur, the administrator of the aggregator "Tunisie blogs," estimated that in early 2006 there were possibly 300 to 400 blogs, only a handful of which were overtly engaged with Tunisian politics. Compared to the more active blogging opposition in Egypt or Iran, he attributed this to the smaller population of Tunisia despite its relatively higher proliferation of Internet access (Ben Gharbia 2006). A similar conclusion was reached in a 2009 analysis of Arabic blogs stating that

Tunisians (and Algerians and Moroccans) were more attentive to human rights than other bloggers, but that Tunisian bloggers "rarely discuss political issues" (Etling et al. 2009, 23).

At least for some Tunisians, blogging fostered pan-Arab connections and awareness, but remained restricted to the blogosphere and did not translate into greater activism or national organizing around Tunisian issues. For instance in May 2010—a time when some bloggers were trying to organize a protest on the ground—the cartoonist-blogger Seif Eddine Nechi focused on headlines about the Israeli attack on the humanitarian flotilla to Gaza, but did not discuss the protests in Tunis. Similarly, the blogger Massir, who reviewed books by prominent liberal Arab feminists such as Fatma Mernissi and Nawal al-Sadawi, was discussing Anouar Benmalek's novel *Oh Maria* and baking, rather than the online efforts to organize protests. Those who were more active included Nadia from Tunis, a "proud member" of the MidEast Youth, an online activist network and news page bringing together youth from across the region. Others rallied to the Free Kareem campaign in solidarity with the Egyptian blogger arrested for his writing in 2006 (Radsch 2010) just as ben Mhenni encouraged the release of Bahraini blogger Ali Abdulemam by posting a banner on her page.

Avoiding sensitive topics such as human rights or politics did not protect bloggers from sanction as demonstrated by the November 2009 arrest of Fatma Riahi. Although she blogged and wrote poetry under the name FatmaArabicca, her interrogators claimed that she was the anonymous blogger Z whose cartoons and satires poked fun at Tunisian politics. As other bloggers organized for her release and started a Facebook page to the same effect, Z posted a solidarity cartoon that juxtaposed the message "I am not Fatma," to substantiate her innocence, with the clichéd statement of support "We are all Fatma" (Al Jazeera English 2009; Z 2009). Massir also saw the censoring of her blog in May 2010 as unwarranted, as she wrote about recipes, humor, books, careers, spirituality, and travel.

Within Tunisia a small cohort of politically engaged bloggers ensured that online dissent kept pace with the restrictions of the censor. Online actions supporting freedom of expression included protests against censorship in 2005 and 2008, demanding the unblocking of DailyMotion in 2007, and Blank Post days in 2006 and 2007 (Ben Gharbia 2008). In December 2008, about a dozen bloggers, including Kahlaoui, Mhersi, ben Mhenni, Stupeur (Amine

Kochlef), Arabasta, and Sofiane Chourabi, created a group page in favor of free speech, the "Network of Tunisian Bloggers for Free Blogging." This site was increasingly active throughout 2009 and the number of contributors doubled, although the project fizzled early in 2010. False "404" messages became the subject of satires targeting an invisible censor who came to be called by the common male name "Ammar" or "Uncle Ammar" (see Figure 1). While advocates of free speech were isolated from mainstream bloggers, all these activities fostered a climate of mutual support among the activist community.

Figure 1: With the caption "the blogosphere responds to Ammar," Ammar, the invisible censor, *is questioned by a police officer who sees the online protests and asks "Ammar, what is this all about?" The overworked Ammar is depicted in a violet-colored suit representative of Ben Ali's party, with his scissors on the desk, an incomplete "404 to-do list" on one wall, and the obligatory photo of Ben Ali on the other. Blog by Z.*

The first major effort to take blogging networks to the streets was an anti-censorship demonstration called "Nhar 3la 3mmar" (the day against Ammar), planned to take place in Tunis

on 22 May 2010. It was a response to a wave of heavy censorship that blocked approximately 200 websites and blogs in April (Khadhraoui 2010a). Simultaneous protests at Tunisian embassies in Paris, Montreal, Bonn, and at the Mission to the UN in New York were planned by Tunisians living abroad with participants wearing blank white t-shirts or adding slogans related to censorship. The action was organized under an apolitical façade, coordinated through online discussions and face-to-face meetings, and not affiliated with any of the officially recognized political parties (generally the only groups authorized to hold demonstrations). When Z proposed to make a poster depicting President Ben Ali sitting in front of his computer, defensively gripping a pair of scissors, as protestors walked out of the screen into his room, it was rejected as too political. The intent of the organizers was to gain visibility around the human rights issue of freedom of expression, and not to directly criticize the regime.

Prior to the event, bloggers Amamou and Ayari went to file the constitutionally mandated paperwork, yet the official refused to accept their declaration in person or by mail, thus rendering the demonstration illegal (Malek404 2010). On 21 May, Amamou and Ayari were arrested and only released that evening when they made a video telling people not to attend the protest. As a result the march did not materialize in Tunis, although small groups in white t-shirts sat at cafes on Bourguiba Avenue, the capital's main boulevard (Amamou 2010b; Dryef 2011). Three months later bloggers again attempted to organize offline with a flash mob planned for the touristic coastal suburb of Sidi Bou Said. The event was to be a nonviolent action during which participants would dress in white and gather for a minute of silence against censorship. About fifteen participants convened but were faced with twice as many police officers waiting to escort them back to their homes (Ben Mhenni 2010; Khadhraoui 2010b). On both occasions the non-political message of a relatively small cohort of activists was blocked by police interventions that limited their ability to generate further public engagement.

The arbitrary and unaccountable nature of censorship created a climate of intimidation that succeeded in dividing the blogosphere, and uniting activists. Leilouta, a Tunisian blogging from the US, was cut off from other bloggers after posting an adulterated photo of Ben Ali (Ben Gharbia 2006). In organizing a Tunisian Blog Awards competition in 2008, "nationalist bloggers" deployed anodyne eligibility requirements in order to disqualify their outspoken counterparts such as Stupeur and Boukornine who were unable to register (Brea 2008; Stupeur

2008). Frustration with the regime's punitive measures led Boukornine to observe in June 2010 that most of the pages that were censored became inactive, leading him to conclude "Ammar is efficient." Massir added "I look at my stats and the number of pages read per day was divided by six. When you know that you are writing essentially for Tunisians and that the majority of them will not be able to read you… discouragement begins to set in and you ask, what for?" (Boukornine 2010a). By the time the 7ell blog campaign opened in November 2010, Mehdi Lamloum saw the Tunisian blogosphere as past its prime, having slowly dwindled in numbers since 2007 (Lamloum 2010). Z was cautiously optimistic and wondered if the movement might "resuscitate the corpse of the Tunisian blogosphere mutilated by regime censorship" (Z 2010a). Emna ben Jemaa was similarly hopeful that the 7ell blog campaign would generate renewed interest in creating and reading blogs since people were turning instead to social media forums (Ben Jemaa 2010). If the 7ell blog experience confirmed the greater popularity of social media than blogging, a cohort of bloggers remained committed to online activism, regardless of a sense of pessimism about the effect of censorship and their small audience.

The events of May 2010 illustrated the difficulties of taking digital protests into the public space in Ben Ali's Tunisia. If a minority of bloggers was willing to take risks and then openly commiserate online about the ensuing difficulties with the political police, they were subjected to travel bans, and risked arrest. These common perils coupled with similar educational and socio-economic backgrounds fostered solidarity among these bloggers in the early years of Internet growth. As the online community diversified from 2005 onwards, some activists saw it as less cohesive and for Stupeur the network remained "A world that I love, that I worry about, and that I support. Throughout my experience in the world of blogging I have made friends, enemies, virtual relationships that have transformed into real relationships" (Stupeur 2008a). Censorship did not stem the flow of information within Tunisia or protect Ben Ali's manicured image (Beau and Graciet 2009; Beau and Tuquoi 1999), but surveillance and policing mitigated against the possibilities of collective action in favor of political change such that bloggers did not see themselves as reaching a significant audience within Tunisia, nor as capable of mobilizing the masses.

The Questionable Impact of Bridge-blogging during the Tunisian Revolution

In December 2010, several factors combined to make the Internet an ideal space for the dissemination of information both within Tunisia and abroad, among them the convergence between digital and broadcast media and the many multilingual Tunisian bloggers living in the diaspora. The Ben Ali government's response of first ignoring, and then dismissing, protests in Tunisia's central region further widened the communicative potential of the Internet. The national station TV7 waited days before referring to the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi claiming that it was an isolated incident. Police encircled Sidi Bouzid attempting to block communication with the rest of the country. What information did leak out via cell phone cameras and videos, text messages, and word of mouth was posted online by attentive bloggers. For instance, Chourabi combined reports with an audio broadcast in standard (as opposed to Tunisian) Arabic on the recent events in Sidi Bouzid, and later posted videos from Facebook of the demonstrations taking place in the town (2010a; 2010b). Ayari (then in Belgium) included a Twitter feed on #SidiBouzid on his blog (2010), whereas Boukornine expressed his thoughts in prose and poetry juxtaposing them with the official version of events (2010b). With typical sarcasm and wit, Z mocked the brief TV7 coverage with a series of cartoons including one of Ben Ali yelling into the phone "nothing is happening in Sidi Bouzid!! Just an idiot playing with his lighter!" (2010b). Massir encouraged all her readers to turn to Facebook and Twitter where they could watch live footage and stay up to date if blogs were blocked (2010). The use of Arabic and the direct challenging of false claims made by national television show the bloggers' concern with misinformation, and an effort to increase national awareness, but not necessarily the goal of mobilization.

Other bloggers combined standard Arabic, English, and French to provide a broader context to the events, one that would serve as a bridge to international spectators (known as "bridge-blogging") (Zuckerman 2008). Ben Mhenni, an experienced journalist, was one of the first bloggers to report about protests in Sidi Bouzid in mid-December 2010, and consciously wrote in a manner accessible to Tunisia neophytes, posting similar articles in French, English, Arabic and German that were supplemented by high-resolution photographs (2010b; 2010c; 2010d). She soon became a contact for various Canadian and French newspapers, as well as for Al Jazeera (Lynch 2011). New blogs posting information and photographs appeared in English such as that of Youssef Gaigi (who was in touch with Al Jazeera English) and a satirical parody of the president's wife, under the heading "Leila Trabelsi ben Ali" (Gaigi 2011). As an increasing

number of Tunisian bloggers directly spoke out against the regime in late December and early January, Tunisian authorities responded by attempting to restrict access to Facebook, removing unwanted content, and limiting video sharing by stealing passwords and hacking into accounts (Madrigal 2011). The first indication of international awareness and support arrived via the hackers' collective Anonymous, whose Operation Tunisia, inaugurated on 2 January 2011, led to the hacking of government sites. Although this was initiated by Anonymous, they collaborated with Tunisian bloggers such as Amamou (Norton 2012), who was arrested on 6 January along with Sofiane Belhaj (who blogged as Hamadi Kaloutcha), and Azyz Amamy, under suspicion that they had instigated the attacks.

Despite the escalating cyber-battle waged by Tunisia's bloggers critical of the government and national media, its precise impact remains questionable. Contrary to the situation in Egypt, the protests in Tunisia were not initiated by any online contingent nor were they affiliated with any sector of civil society. The protests' rural origins indicated that bloggers did not contribute to mobilization, a fact which is confirmed by the posts that focused on disseminating information about the events rather than organizing them. Although Facebook pages constituted a popular discussion platform, as of late 2010 it remained confined to a narrow demographic, with 78 percent of Facebook users in Tunisia between the ages of 15 and 29 (yet representing only 37.5 percent of the total population) (Mourtada and Salem 2011). The government did not feel threatened enough to shut down the national server, as was the case in Egypt.

In terms of international observers, as late as 12 January, media scholar and Internet activist Ethan Zuckerman wondered if anyone outside of Tunisia not already interested in the country was actually paying attention to the protests and the nationwide massacres. Examining data collected on Google Trends, he pointed out that the moderate spike of interest on 12 January was lower than the amount of Tunisia-related Google traffic that followed the country's loss to Ukraine in the 2006 World Cup (Zuckerman 2011a). As Table 1 similarly indicates, Ben Ali's departure on 14 January grabbed headlines and brought Tunisia into the spotlight for the following weeks, the major peak in blogging about Tunisia occurred between 14 and 15 January 2011, and dissipated soon thereafter. One blogger writing on the discussion forum Nawaat charted very little Tunisia-related Twitter activity between 17 December and 3 January. While there was an increase over the next ten days it resulted from discussions about solidarity protests

in France, and the huge peak occurred only after 14 January (Eli'copter 2011). Despite what appeared to be a sensational surge, Tunisia, Sidi Bouzid, and Ben Ali did not rank high enough for Twitter's 2011 Hot Topics list of cities, countries, top hashtags, or world news (Twitter 2011).[5]

Table 1: Tunisia-related blog posts December 2010 to April 2011
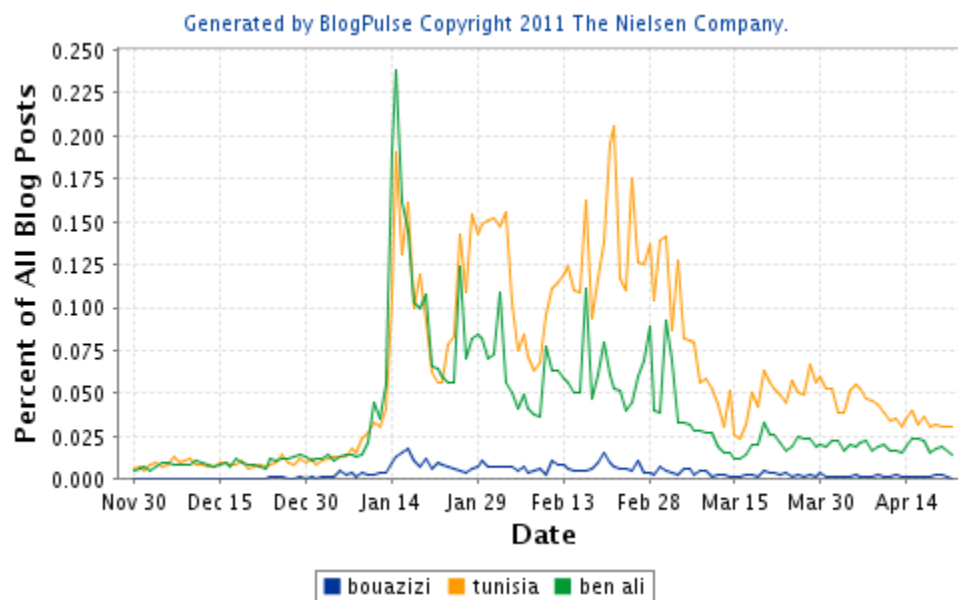
This raw data from Google Trends and Twitter is only partial as it does not indicate the geographic origins of bloggers or Twitter users, nor the locations or responses of readers. One selective sample of Tunisia-related Twitter feeds between 12 and 19 January indicated that the most popular Tweets were those circulating among activists, journalists, and the numerous bloggers who maintained an active profile on the micro-blogging platform. In other words, they remained largely confined to a circle of previously attentive Internet users (Lotan et al. 2011). Another study attempting to broach the question of how online information was consumed concluded that linked articles circulating on Twitter were mainly followed by an international audience, and not domestically, with minimal long-term impact (Aday et al. 2012). Finally, media attention cannot be linked to any diplomatic pressure on the regime, as its major ally, France, and its Minister of Foreign Affairs in particular, remained staunchly in support of Ben Ali until his departure (Beau and Muller 2011).

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[5] Yet Cairo topped the list of cities and countries,#egypt and #25Jan were in the top ten hashtags, and both Mubarak's resignation and Qadhafi's death were among the leading news stories.

As skeptics have argued in relation to micro-blogging, an increasing number of hashtags and protest-related trends does not prove greater understanding of an issue or action since Twitter-based news is "repetitive and uninformative," and difficult to verify (Forte 2009; Pintak 2011). In the US, Tunisia rarely made the headlines of international newspapers before 14 January as CNN's web reports were based on wire services up until 10 January. On that day the first *New York Times* online article on the protests appeared. Anecdotal evidence suggests that headlines had a minimal impact on American perceptions of Tunisia. One of the first post-revolution pieces, published on the popular online magazine *Salon.com,* "President flees amid riots, possibly ending 50 years of oppressive rule. What's it mean -- and where's Tunisia?" offered a short (and inaccurate) background to its readers (Estes 2011). As news anchors turned their attention to Egypt and the wave of protests spreading across the Middle East, Steve Colbert of Comedy Central's *Colbert Report* summarized the loss of interest in Tunisian affairs by joking "The country that started this freedom-nami is Egypt, because I don't know where Tunisia is." The tenacity of clichés about Tunisia and its "Jasmine Revolution" led the blogger Nadia to acerbically retort "Tunisians were not prancing around with flowers to protest against the regime." Insisting that "the Tunisian revolution is not a postcard," she considered such picturesque and folkloric images representative of the entrenched vision of Tunisia as a seaside tourist destination, and not its revolution (Nadia 2011; see also Hazbun 2008). Although Tunisian bloggers were able to circulate information about the growing protest movement through a combination of old and new media, the increasing vociferousness of the online conversation about Tunisia does not appear to have definitively impacted the course of events given that most viewers tuned in following the departure of Ben Ali, and international media attention was fleeting.

Concluding remarks

Although the months following the revolution witnessed an unprecedented media opening and surge in independent news publications with promising ramifications for freedom of expression and online communication, these appear to have benefited television more than the Internet.[6] The

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[6] Significant changes since January 2011 include the replacement of top media personnel including the director of the Tunisian Internet Agency, and the restructuring of the Ministry of Information. At the same time there have been repeated incidents of censorship, and journalists remained concerned about government attempts to limit their freedom of expression seen recently in the July 2012 resignation of Kamel Labidi from the National Authority to Reform Information and Communication, and the August

revolutionary flourishing of citizen reporting and the visibility of online social media did not correlate with a substantial increase in Internet accessibility or forge a popular consensus of the Internet as a source of information. As of January 2012, 64 percent of Tunisians said they were most likely to get their local news from Tunisian television, with only 14 percent citing the Internet. When asked about the most effective campaign strategies in the 2011 elections, 62 percent cited the appearance of candidates on television. Door-to-door campaigning (38 percent), the organization of public events (34 percent), radio appearances (31 percent), and the distribution of written material (25 percent), were all mentioned before online media with 15 percent (International Republican Institute 2012). Another 2011 poll asking Tunisians which media sources they use most similarly placed television at the top of the list with Tunisian stations at 74 percent, followed by foreign channels (67 percent), radio (45 percent), and then the Internet. At almost 37 percent, this figure reflects the portion of the population that has routine Internet access (El Ouid 2011). The arrest and detention of television producer Sami Fehri, owner of the Al-Tunisiya channel, and the ensuing campaign for his release generated sustained media attention, and a level of visibility unmatched by even the most prominent bloggers.

Throughout the protests Tunisian blogs and social media had consciously operated in tandem with older media platforms in order to reach a larger audience, making this convergence, or hypermedia interaction more significant than the Internet alone (Jenkins 2006; Kraidy and Mourad 2010). As the enthusiasm of new bloggers linked to the 7ell blog project had dwindled by April 2011, with only about 25 percent still actively posting after the revolution, the site moderators encouraged them to participate in print and broadcast media.[7] A final message on the 7ell blog page, dated 14 January 2011, addressed the "blogging community," insisting that "our martyrs did not die only to end censorship on the Internet." It urged everyone to start publishing newspapers and magazines, to become involved with radio and television, and to engage with all forms of media to demand their rights. With its call to take activism offline, the post was cognizant of the limits of blogging as a means of digital protest. "Are you Tunisian?" the post concluded, "then speak up."

2012 appointment of government crony Lotfi Touati as head of the Dar al-Sbah media group (El Zein 2012; Guellali 2012).
[7] Of the rest, 10 percent had been removed, 35 percent had posted three times or less during the campaign and not at all in 2011 and many others had not posted in the previous forty-five days.

Tunisian bloggers have also debated amongst themselves the extent of their role in the national protests. Akram ben Yedder asked the question "Who consults the blogs of Influential Bloggers?" to answer it tongue-in-cheek, only "other Influential Bloggers," revealing his opinion that the blogosphere was mainly a self-contained community. While Lamloum jokingly commented "You think there really are influential bloggers in Tunisia?" Ben Yedder went on to lament the sad reality "that blogs have not been able to touch the masses" since only those already connected "know the universe of the Tunisian blogosphere" (Ben Yedder 2011; see also Ferhatovic 2011). Cheniti characterized the particularities of the blogosphere's activist core as representative of a "post-Bourguibist generation." Mainly in their thirties, raised in a milieu that prioritized education, they placed economic success before ideologies or idealism (2010). For Mhersi, their financial comfort allowed them to shop at high-end commercial centers, to buy cars and to lead an urban, consumerist lifestyle accessible only to a minority of Tunisians (2010). Post-revolution book contracts (Ben Mhenni 2011; Z 2011) and free speech awards (received by ben Mhenni, and Guerfali) suggest the notoriety of a few individuals. Fame may have fostered professional opportunities for ben Mhenni, ben Jemaa, Chourabi, Gaigi, and Haythem el-Mekki who continue to build on their work as journalists in Tunisia and abroad.[8] Yet if their privileges allowed politically minded bloggers to publicize the protests, they were never representative of its masses; none of the bloggers who ran for seats in the 2011 Constituent Assembly were elected.[9]

The international focus on social media as an explanation for the success of popular protests in Tunisia resonates more with cyber utopianism than with any direct correlations between blogging, domestic mobilization, international pressure, and regime change. If the American fascination with the tech-savvy, upper-middle class, educated youth who led the online protests brings to mind Orientalism (El-Mahdi 2011), it also perpetuates the conventional wisdom defining Tunisia as an exception to the Middle Eastern stereotype. According to official depictions accepted by international lenders and diplomatic allies, Tunisians under Bourguiba

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[8] In January 2011 ben Jemaa and Mhersi began to produce a weekly radio program called Net Show on Express FM. Their first broadcast included discussions with ben Ameur, Cheniti, and Kahlaoui, with Amamou, ben Gharbia, and Ayari appearing on subsequent shows.

[9] This included Ayari, Guerfali, Kahlaoui, Lamloum, and Amira Yahyaoui (Mokhtar's daughter) most of whom ran as independents in the overseas electoral districts; Yahyaoui ran with the Sawt Mostakel list which earned only 0.34 percent of votes in northern France.

and Ben Ali benefited from an economic miracle and liberal family laws that elevated their standard of living, encouraged secular norms and a Westernized outlook (Beau and Tuquoi 1999; Hibou 2006; Lamloum and Ravenel 2002). It was not the connection between bloggers and popular protests that created headlines about a "Twitter Revolution," but the facile connection made between such entrenched myths and a preconceived belief in the democratizing power of the Internet.

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