

# Facebook and the Mass Media in Tunisia

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## Abstract

Facebook played a considerable role during the political uprisings of the so called ‘Arab Spring’ in 2011. Together with Al-Jazeera, it was one of the few reliable sources of information for protesters at that time. In this paper, we explore the media landscape in Tunisia two years after the uprising. We conducted a qualitative investigation (participant observation and interviewing) with young Tunisians. The paper describes how they use Facebook (FB), newspapers, and TV for gaining information and for exchange. By that time, FB was their primary medium for access to political information. They prefer the variety and diversity of user-generated content, they select information, discuss issues among their friends inside FB and with that, co-create meaning and trust. It seems that both traditional censorship in the national mass media and the revolutionary experience have created a unique media landscape among young Tunisians. Facebook still plays a leading role for many in that landscape, but there remains a ‘digital divide’.

## 1. Introduction

The media landscape has changed radically during the last two decades. An important aspect of this change is the digitalisation of mass media content and its distribution via www-sites and computer networks. At the same time, we see a serious change in user behaviour: they move from being more or less passive consumers of mass media content to becoming active participants in creating ratings, recommendations, and self-generated content via a large variety of different functional-

ities such as comments, annotations, wikis, blogs, micro blogs, or social media platforms (Thurman 2008). This has serious consequences for professionally produced mass media content and for the culture of engagement. As Jenkins has suggested, there are consequences with respect to media convergence, participatory culture, and collective intelligence (Jenkins 2006). He argues that “if old consumers were predictable and stayed where you told them to stay, then new consumers are migratory, showing a declining loyalty to networks or media. [...] If the work of media consumers was once silent and invisible, the new consumers are now noisy and public” (Jenkins 2016: 15). In political terms, as he suggests, there is as yet no agreement about the ‘terms of their participation’ but, even so, the skills learned through the use of new media “may have implications for how we learn, work, participate in the political process, and connect with other people around the world” (Jenkins 2016: 23). Obviously, such changes in the media landscape have the potential to wield influence on public policy and democratic decision making, as has been indicated by a number of writers (see e.g. Axford/Huggins 2001; Howard 2006 and Thurman 2008). An attempt to make sense of global variation in the reporting of events, and specifically the role of new media, is the edited collection, *Citizen Journalism* (Allan/Throsen 2009). In contrast to Jenkins’ views concerning the ‘noisy and public’ consumer, however, the latter authors are more likely to reflect Raymond Williams’ original contention that the effects of the media would be the outcome of a relationship between various forces, including the technological, the social-cultural, the political, as well as the legal and economic (Williams 1974). If so, there remains a need to contextualise online activity through careful examination of the interplay between the changing media landscape and the political and economic realities.

In this paper, we point at a specific case and reflect on the political usage of Facebook (FB) by young Tunisians, members of the generation who started the ‘Arab Spring’ uprising, but who were not actively involved in

the uprising. The national media landscape in pre-revolutionary Tunisia entailed a strict regime of political censorship – with the exception of satellite TV and social media platforms. Consequently, social media like FB, Twitter and satellite television like Al-Jazeera played an important role both in the ‘Arab Spring’ (Kavanaugh et al. 2011; Kavanaugh et al. 2012; and Lotan et al. 2011) and specifically in the Tunisian revolution (Warnick/Heineman 2012; Kavanaugh et al. 2016). In earlier works, we provided first materials from our long-term research in Tunisia (Wulf et al. 2013). Additionally, there are some studies on social media use during the uprising in Tunisia (see e.g. Kavanaugh et al. 2016), but these studies were mainly surveys, quantitative research and lack in-depth insights that only qualitative research provides. However, we know little about the long-term effects of social media use in the Tunisian media landscape. After the old regime fell, most political censorship disappeared from the national mass media and thus, in principle, activity became ‘open’ again. Below, we examine the degree to which that is true, and the role new media play in contemporary Tunisian politics.

Our research mainly focusses on the ‘revolutionary’ generation – young Tunisians in their 20s and 30s – who were the drivers of the revolution. We are interested in their use of social media *inside the country*, specifically FB, as well as traditional mass media (TV, newspapers, radio) for political purposes. In this respect, we investigated both the way and the extent to which these social media are used. We focus on FB in particular because available data suggests that it had a key significance, especially during the uprising in various countries since 2011 (Crivellaro et al. 2014; Wulf et al. 2013). Lynch, Glasser, and Hounshell have stated that “Mubarak provided the grievances, Tunisia gave the inspiration, Facebook set the date, and the Egyptian people did the rest” (Lynch/Glasser/Hounshell 2011: 72). The role of the media in these countries can primarily be defined as providing a tool, not the cause for the political movement. Twitter, though used, seems to have been less important. Thus, as Kavanaugh et al. state,

The most frequent tweeters (Twitter users posting messages or 'tweets') are not necessarily in the country. There is a large majority (almost 63%) of our collected tweets that are retweets (original tweets that are copied by other tweeters and sent out under their Twitter account as 'retweets'). This pattern is a likely indication of users outside Tunisia forwarding on messages from users inside the country. (Kavanaugh et al. 2012: 5).

Based on recent qualitative research in the country, the paper describes how members of this generation rely vastly on FB for political information and opinion building that replaces traditional mass media.

## **2. Related Research**

A number of studies have examined the relationship between new media and it is often stated that Twitter, Facebook, and other social media platforms have a great influence on the disruptive and non-disruptive political participation (e.g. Cha et al. 2010; Jungherr/Jurgens/Schoen 2011; Lynch 2011; Shirky 2011). More specifically, a series of studies on social media use in a political or activist context have been published in the CSCW community (Lotan et al. 2011; Al-Ani et al. 2012; Kavanaugh et al. 2012; Wulf et al. 2013; for an overview of earlier work see Mark/Semaan 2009). These studies describe aspects of the use of blogging and micro-blogging sites such as Twitter, mainly during the uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia in 2010 and 2011. They have made a hugely valuable contribution to our understanding of political change and the role of new media. For good reason (Wulf et al. 2013), most of these studies have concentrated on people actively posting and are thus limited to the analysis of digital traces downloaded from the (micro-) blogging sites. Howard/Hussain (2013) compared the role of conventional mass media such as radio, television, and newspaper to the role of social media.

While the conventional mass media played a major role in other stages of the ongoing democratisation process, social media was used

for mobilisation during the early days of the uprisings. Hence, they tell us less about the relation between the use of social media and users' everyday political activities 'on the ground'. One of the few studies which used the 'on the ground' approach was conducted by Rohde et al. (2016). The study is based on 17 interviews with Syrian FSA fighters, activists, and refugees and describes the current fragmented telecom infrastructure in Syria and the critical role of mobile video for documenting, mobilisation, and propaganda.

To our knowledge, there are few qualitative studies that look into the political dimension of social media usage from the point of view of the activities of ordinary citizens. M'barek/Jeddi/Achouri (2015) investigated the impact of social networks on the voting behaviour of Tunisian voters during the 2014 elections. In their study, they collected direct self-declarations (in face-to-face surveys) about the voting behaviour of 564 Tunisian citizens, its determinants, and the main factors that influence it. For the investigation of the influence of social media and the importance of it when choosing political parties, the authors used the variance ANOVA for their qualitative analysis. In comparison, Woolley/Limperos/Oliver (2010) present a quantitative content analysis of more than 1,000 FB group pages dealing with the 2008 US presidential campaigns of Barack Obama and John McCain. Like the Twitter studies mentioned above, this study is limited to digital traces and does not provide an understanding of FB's relevance in the practical political decision-making process. More recently, other studies have begun to emerge. They include, for instance, analyses of social media use in Egypt based on survey data (Tufekci/Wilson 2012) or online data and reporting (Lim 2012). A number of empirical studies of non-activists in the context of political crisis exist. They include Semaan/Mark (2011), who conducted (mainly telephone) interviews with a set of ordinary Iraqi citizens to examine Internet use, trust building, and the shaping of (public) identity in disrupted environments during the second Gulf war and the civil war that followed. In addition, Shklovski/Wulf (2018)

observed how soldiers use ICT and also social networking sites during war time. This qualitative study highlighted the importance and dangers of using mobile phones as well as smartphones while being in war zones.

Another area of research covered the usage of social media by terrorist groups such as ISIS, where social media were not always used with the goal of pursuing democracy. On the contrary, social media has given terrorists the ability to directly come into contact with their target audience and either spread terror or recruit (Alffi et al. 2018). In fact, ISIS has been repeatedly described as the most adept terrorist group at using Internet and social media propaganda to recruit new members (Farwell 2014).

The purpose of our research was to track the use of social media for political purposes, focusing mainly on FB, inside Tunisia and, moreover, to see how the interweaving of FB use and political activity might have altered since our first study. Overall, we still know relatively little about the extent to which the use of social media is related to the socio-economic and political landscape, which impacts the political activities and the interest in these evolving situations. We investigate these issues via the case of Tunisia, and concentrate on the current situation, two years after the successful uprising. This study forms part of an ongoing project that has been taking place in Tunisia for two years. That is, the study has a longitudinal element. Here, we specifically focus on changes that have taken place as something that could be considered a transition into a new “normality” in Tunisia.

### **3. Tunisia’s Media Landscape: Mass and Social Media**

Tunisia was ruled for some 24 years by Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali (1987-2011). The Ben Ali regime was basically a dictatorship. Political participation of the people in the sense of Western democracy was not encouraged. National radio and TV stations as well as newspapers were censored and under strict state control. However, Arab satellite TV

channels, such as Al Jazeera, with its headquarters in Qatar, had started to fundamentally change the media landscape. Since most Tunisian households were able to receive satellite TV, Al Jazeera played a major role in the Tunisian revolution (see e.g. Wulf et al. 2013). After the subsequent uprising, the Ben Ali regime was replaced by a transitory government. After a first democratic election in October 2011, a coalition government under the leadership of the moderately Islamist Ennahda party took over. In 2014, a new constitution was established, and the country voted for a parliament again and later on also for a new president. Censorship within the mass media system has been largely abandoned, so newspapers, terrestrial TV stations, and satellite TV today offer a rather wide range of perspectives on national politics. At the same time, statistical data demonstrate the increase in the number of Internet users in Tunisia from 27.5 of 100 people in 2008 to 39.1 of a 100 people in 2011 (World Bank 2013). At the end of 2010, Tunisia had one of the highest rates of FB usage among the Arab states (17.6%), a trend which continued in the following year (22.5% in April 2011). Young people made up 75% of FB users (Kavanaugh et al. 2012).

#### **4. Research Design and Empirical Methods**

Before presenting our findings, we would like to reflect on our field work and describe its setting and the people involved (e. g. the interviewees), our methodological approach and methods of data collection and analysis.

##### **4.1 Qualitative Research “on the Ground” in Tunisia**

We characterise the work we describe below as broadly ethnographic (though largely interview-based). Here, we follow the likes of Clifford Geertz and George Marcus as well as work in the specific context of CSCW (Randall/Harper/Rouncefield 2007) in arguing that ethnography implies no particular stance on method, but an analytic position reflecting, in a necessarily incomplete and partial way, the point of view

of participants. Much of our data comes from a series of open and later semi-structured interviews. The interviews are additional instruments to gain insider perspectives about media use and patterns of interpretation by native Tunisians. The interviews are predicated, as stated, on a longer-term involvement with Tunisian life. Our empirical work started in December 2011 and is still ongoing. Based on the first field trips, a research paper was published. The focus of this previous work was on the role of social media during the uprising (Wulf et al. 2013). The findings indicate that social media “performed an amplifying role for people who might otherwise have been content with a lower level of participation” (Wulf et al. 2013: 1417).

The data for this paper was collected during two visits in Tunis, the capital of Tunisia, and Kélibia, a provincial town on Cap Bon peninsula some 40 km south of Tunis. The last author visited Tunis in February 2013 to establish research cooperation with the Higher School of Science and Technology (ESSETT) of the University of Tunis. He taught a project-based course and stayed for ten days. During his stay, the opposition politician Chokri Belaid was murdered and Tunisia experienced a political crisis including country-wide demonstrations and strikes. Due to the insecure political conditions, the author stayed mainly in Tunis. During this time, he worked with students, engaged in discussions with academic colleagues, and had conversations with a wide range of people in and outside the scientific community in Tunis. These contacts helped furnish access to the field and to find some of the later interview partners.

One of the surprising first field observations was the fact that FB seemed to play an important role as a primary source for political information and exchange. Subsequently, we followed this observation and explored this theme in fifteen qualitative interviews. We firstly conducted six informal, exploratory interviews for gaining initial information about media usage in general in Tunisia today and for broadening our contact base. These interviewees are all connected with the



university and have a high level of education (except one): They are faculty members of the Computer Science department, PhD- or Master's students, and one is a driver working for the university. The age of the interviewees varied from 22 to 50 years. Back in Germany, we additionally interviewed a female Tunisian Master's student in Media Science currently studying in Germany.

These interviews and their first analysis brought forth more aspects of the related topics and research questions, but also revealed a number of open issues. These findings induced a second phase of data collection and interviewing in April 2013. The third author, a Tunisian native, conducted seven additional interviews in her home town of Kélibia on Cap Bon (interviews 9 to 11) and via Skype (interviews 12 to 15). These interviews were semi-structured and focused on broad areas based on our initial findings. All the interviewees were first asked to describe their personal background. Central topics of the following guideline of the semi-structured interviews were: media use in general, Internet usage, social media usage, FB usage and preferred sources for gathering political information.

The choice of the interview partners relied on efforts to find as much variation in our sample as we reasonably could, given access and time restrictions. In contrast with our initial interviewees, who were well educated and centrally located (Tunis), our follow-up sample lived mainly in smaller towns. Three of them have a low educational qualification (elementary school), the others hold a degree in Engineering or the Humanities. All interviewees of this second data collection phase were aged between 19 and 30 years. Overall, we conducted 15 interviews; the length of which varied between 25 and 150 min.

The first, open interviews were conducted in French or English depending on the interviewees' foreign language capabilities and were not recorded due to the sensitive context but documented in intense field notes directly after the interviews took place. In comparison, the semi-structured interviews by the third author were conducted in Ar-

abic, the mother tongue of the interviewees and were audio-recorded and partly transcribed thereafter. The interviewing by a native Tunisian of the same age group provided some guarantee that an 'outsider' effect could be avoided.

The analysis of the field notes and of the interview transcripts were realised by a qualitative content analysis, which entails controlled analysis of texts within their context of communication. It combines inductive category development, focussing only on the data material, and deductive category application, also integrating the findings of the first data collection phase, in order to identify central aspects of our research question that will be further developed in follow-up research (see Mayring 2000). After the different phases of data collection, the data was analysed cooperatively by the team of authors who, in this paper, present selected findings of their analysis and research.

#### **4.2 The Interviewees**

The interviewees represented a fairly broad spectrum of Tunisian society, although most of the interviewees have an academic background and were under thirty years of age. The discontent of this age group was the main driver for the demonstration movement leading to the fall of the Ben Ali regime. One-third of the interviewees were female. Five of the interviewees had a background in Computer Science, two in Engineering, and three in the Humanities and Social Sciences. With regard to political activities, our sample represented a rather diverse spectrum. During the time of the Ben Ali regime, it was not opportune for ordinary people to engage with politics, specifically not for those who could be understood as opposing the regime.

However, the countrywide demonstration movement in 2010/11 had contributed to a considerable political activation of the Tunisian population, specifically among the younger generation. Two years after the revolution, some of our interviewees expressed disappointment about the disharmonious character of the democratic discourse and the slow

pace of improvement in the material dimension of their living conditions. For instance, Arij<sup>1</sup>, a 23-year-old housewife from Cap Bon, explained that she had been interested in politics during and after the revolution, but now she is disappointed about her decreasing standard of living. She also finds it difficult to understand the current political situation. Still, she watches occasional broadcasts of the constitution-shaping assembly on state-owned TV. However, she considers the political fights and the personal attacks as often ridiculous, while somehow amusing as well (see int. 11). [table 1]

Except for Karim, all interviewees expressed some interest in the political developments of the past two years, though to different degrees. Three of our interviewees indicated support for Ennahda, the ruling moderately Islamist party. Others expressively favoured the laicist opposition. None of them positioned themselves as a political activist.

All interviewees use the media and show some similarities in their preferences, despite the differences that will be discussed later on: FB clearly is the most frequented media in our group of interviewees, followed by TV and newspapers. Three interviewees mentioned radio: Amin, a 30-year-old day-labourer, Mahdi, a 25-year-old hydraulic engineer with a long history of unemployment, and Hanan, a 27-year-old female English teacher.

In contrast to other countries, additional social media platforms, such as Twitter, are not really common for our interview partners: *In Tunisia, we do not use Twitter.* (int. 4, Ali, a student). One exception is Mahdi who used Twitter as part of his job for a political party and puts high confidence in the quality of information received via Twitter.

## 5. Findings from the Ground

In the following, we are going to address the major findings of our data analysis in depth. We decided to structure the findings based on the central categories that emerged during the data analysis: We start with feedback concerning the general access to and usage of Facebook by our

Table 1: Interviewees' Background Information (as of 2013)

| No. | Pseudonym                             | Age          | Gender | Residence                       | Education                               | Professional Engagement   |
|-----|---------------------------------------|--------------|--------|---------------------------------|---|---|
| 1   | Khaled                                | 25           | M      | Tunis                           | MA Computer Science                     | PhD student in Computer Science   |
| 2   | Sami and Mohamed                      | Mid-twenties | M      | Tunis                           | MA Computer Science                     | PhD students in Computer Science  |
| 3   | Adel                                  | Mid-thirties | M      | Tunis                           | Basic education                         | driver  |
| 4   | Ali                                   | 22           | M      | Tunis (originally from Cap Bon) | Unknown                                 | Master student in Computer Science  |
| 5   | Laila                                 | 30           | F      | Tunis                           | PhD in Engineering                      | Junior Faculty at a university in Tunis, Computer Science department          |
| 6   | Samir                                 | 50           | M      | Tunis                           | PhD in Computer Science                 | Faculty (Professorship) at a university in Tunis, Computer Science department |
| 7   | Moncef Ben Salem (needs no pseudonym) | 60           | M      | Tunis                           | PhD in Math and Physics                 | Minister for Higher Education (2011-2015), died in 2015                       |
| 8   | Samira                                | 27           | F      | Cap Bon (50 miles from Tunis)   | Master in Language and Communication    | Student of Media Science  |
| 9   | Karim                                 | 19           | M      | Cap Bon                         | Elementary school                       | Barber  |
| 10  | Amin                                  | 30           | M      | Cap Bon                         | Elementary school                       | Day-labourer  |
| 11  | Arij                                  | 23           | F      | Nakhla                          | Elementary school (just three years)    | Housewife   |
| 12  | Marwan                                | 26           | M      | Kelebia                         | Degree in engineering                   | unemployed for more than 9 months now   |
| 13  | Mariam                                | 29           | F      | Tunis                           | Degree in History (to become a teacher) | unemployed for quite some time now  |
| 14  | Mahdi                                 | 25           | M      | Nabeul                          | Degree in Hydraulic engineering         | Engineer, before: long-term unemployment                                      |
| 15  | Hanan                                 | 27           | F      | Jendouba                        | Degree in English (Teacher)             | English teacher (part time)   |

interview partners, then we enlarge upon this topic by focussing especially on the use of political Facebook pages as well as their use during the uprising. In this context, the categories of *trust* and *distrust* in social and mass media turned out to be a crucial factor for the interview partners. Hence, we report on the findings in that respect in more detail in subchapter 5.5, pointing first at mass media, specifically television, as a questionable source for information, followed by the perception of newspapers and finally, reflect upon the question of trust/distrust in Facebook).

### 5.1 Getting Connected: Accessing Facebook

While conducting the first interviews in the larger capital area, our data indicated that Tunisian society is deeply divided in its access to the Internet in general and to FB in particular. None of the interviewees from Cap Bon have access to the Internet at home. Arij, the above-mentioned housewife and mother of two children only went to school for three years and is scarcely literate. She just owns an old mobile phone to organise her bread baking and selling activities. She explains *“it’s expensive to have Internet access in the village. It requires one to have a telephone landline and to pay an additional registration fee of 120 Dinar”* (some 73 US-Dollars) (int. 11). Due to the limited financial resources available, her home does not yet have a landline. As a consequence, she does not use FB and has only a very vague understanding of what it is about: *“Facebook is like a newspaper in which people inform themselves with regard to the political situation. Moreover, you can watch videos like in the TV.”* (ibid.).

In contrast, Karim, the barber, who also lives in a rural area, is a quite avid FB user, having started in 2010. He uses the local Internet café that had been opened after the revolution. However, in relation to the income levels in that region, access is rather expensive (one Euro per hour).

As opposed to this, all students, university graduates, and academics had access to the Internet at the university, at home, or in the student

dormitories. They were all avid FB users, even before the revolution. Many of them also had access to the platform via their smartphones. According to Sami and Mohamed, Tunisian telecommunication operators offer “*free access to Facebook. So even people who have only a pre-paid phone card can access Facebook for free, upload data and view it. Moreover, the telecom operator offers free sms to inform the users about updates on Facebook.*” (Int. 2). Our interview partners interpreted this as a marketing strategy by the providers of these services. These examples clearly underline the differences in generally getting access to the Internet with respect to one’s place of residence (in towns and all the more in the capital Tunis, it is more common to have access for everybody than in rural areas) and with respect to economic resources, especially within the rural or poor areas.

## 5.2 Patterns of Facebook Usage

Those of our interviewees who have Internet access in their homes have used FB since well before the Tunisian revolution. One of the Computer Science students, Ali, explained that after coming home from the university to his dormitory, he directly opens FB and leaves it open the whole evening. He uses FB for a variety of different activities, such as socialising, job search, and political information (int. 4).

Samira, a 27-year-old communication science student, reports an even more intense usage of FB (having been a member since 2008): She opens FB first thing in the morning after waking up. She keeps it open and checks it regularly during the day via her mobile and reads longer articles and watches videos in the evening. She explained that FB is her “*most important media to inform about politics*” (int. 8).

Karim, who can only use FB from the Internet café, has also appropriated it in quite interesting ways: He shares music and funny videos via FB. He told us that he works with two accounts: “*a ‘serious’ one registered with my real identity, mainly for chatting with friends and a ‘non-serious’ one which I use to chat with girls.*” (int. 9).

The PhD students from the capital Tunis (Khaled, Sami, and Mohamed, all in their mid-twenties) informed us that most of the events in Tunisia are nowadays organised via FB. Mohamed, for instance, announced a scientific workshop via the network to make people aware of the event and to make them look at the workshop's WWW-site. In this way, initial traffic was created. Sami explained that he even invited friends and family to his marriage party via FB and that all of his friends have FB, using it on the PC as well as on the mobile (see Int. 2). He also told us that he has stored all of his photos on FB and many of his friends do the same. He uses FB's privacy settings to control access to his photos.

Sami, as well as other interviewees, mentioned *"some people even apply through FB for jobs. Companies announce jobs on FB and young people apply there."* (int. 2). But he modifies this statement by explaining that this might not necessarily be the best way to do things because it bypasses the WWW portal of the state-owned employment bureau. To fight the high unemployment rate among Tunisian youth, the bureau considerably subsidises early stages of employment and first job contracts by means of a government programme. Bypassing the bureau via FB means abstaining from this source of financial support (see int. 2).

Since FB plays such an important role in the life of most of our interviewees, it also influenced their practices of gaining information and discussing matters. One of the engineering students, Marwan, explained that he does *"not need to search for actual political information on FB as I have some 400 Facebook friends, most of them from Tunisia. (...) When opening Facebook, one directly finds lots of this information created or recommended by them."* (int. 12).

Ali, Computer Science student in Tunis, stated that FB is his main means of obtaining political information. He likes to follow political pages – but he prefers those that are politically moderate. He is not affiliated with either left- or right-wing radical FB groups. He finds new FB pages via content sharing from his friends. If he finds their content

interesting, he marks them via the 'I like' button. If he later finds out that a page does not offer good quality information, he 'unlikes' it (see field notes int. 4) in much the way users would do elsewhere. This way he keeps updating his sources of political information.

Ali also discusses things with his friends on FB. Among his classmates, there are three supporters of the current government and one of the opposition. He recalls that, the night before the interview, they had been arguing about who had burned the cars in the parking lot in front of their faculty building. The faculty building is located just opposite the cemetery where Chokri Belaid was buried. The burned cars belonged to supporters of the opposition who had participated in the funeral. The student in favour of the opposition argued that actors close to



Fig. 1: Cars burned during the funeral of Chokri Belaid in the parking lot in front of the faculty building (picture: last author, February 2013)



the Ennahda party must have burned the cars. The students supporting the government argued that this was not true. They assumed that the perpetrators were rather kids who did not have any political agenda. This discussion took place on the FB wall of one of his classmates (see field notes int. 4).

One of the female interviewees, Samira, reported recent negative experiences when actively contributing to a political discussion on FB. While quite actively posting during the time of the revolution, she now states that *“the discussants are not anymore of one opinion and one often experiences quite negative topic-unrelated reactions.”* (int. 8). Therefore, she does not contribute actively to political discussions on FB anymore. However, FB is her most important medium for informing herself about politics in general.

Samira also explains this statement in more detail, pointing out the functions of FB as primary information source, useful for the dissemination of incoming information from multiple sources via its users: She regularly receives links to TV programmes and newspaper articles via FB. When reading these links, she finds it easy to identify and name the original sources (www sites of the newspapers) of the posting. Sometimes she then moves to that website (see field notes of int. 8). Like other interviewees, she is also a member of Tunisiana, a private TV station's FB group. There she can download videos of programmes of this TV channel.

### 5.3 Political Facebook Pages and Groups

Beyond representations of TV programmes and newspaper content or recommendations to them, FB users in Tunisia have created a wide range of pages and groups which cover more or less exclusively political content. There is a FB page called 'Tunisia' through which many political videos are shared. These videos originate from TV channels such as Al Jazeera, Al Arabia, or CNN. However, this FB page also provides the platform to exchange amateur videos with political content. At the time of investigation, more than one million users were following this page.

Even Tunisian TV stations seem to take amateur videos from this site and broadcast them.

There are also FB pages and groups which articulate a clear political stance, sometimes framed ironically. Like most Tunisian politicians, the head of the Ennahda movement, Rached Ghannouchi, has an official FB page that is liked by some 250,000 people. However, our interviewees also mentioned pages that have a clearly Ennahda-critical tone in their title. One of these pages is called ‘Get Ghannouchi back to London’ which has more than 200,000 followers and comments ironically on the Ennahda rule. The page’s name refers to the London exile, where Ghannouchi had lived for 20 years before returning to Tunisia after the revolution. Hanan, the English teacher, mentioned that she shares slogans against the ruling party via a FB group called “*I am Muslim but Ennahda does not represent me*” (int. 15).

In addition to their major representatives, all political parties in Tunisia are represented on FB. They even seem to use FB to comment on each other’s news releases. The Tunisian government has widely embraced FB as well. All ministries in Tunisia were represented on FB at the time of research.

#### **5.4 “Thank you Facebook!” – Facebook Usage During the Uprising**

The importance of FB today cannot be discussed without looking back at its role during the Tunisian revolution in 2010/2011 (Wulf et al. 2013). This is demonstrated by the fact that some of our interviewees referred to their experiences of the revolution during our interviews. To many of them, FB, together with Al-Jazeera, was the only source of reliable information during the uprising:

Ali, for instance, mentioned that he had probably heard about the self-immolation of the street vendor in Sidi Bouzid for the first time on the very day it happened. He was not very sure whether he had received the news via FB or via Al Jazeera (int. 4). However, he did not pay much

attention to the event because these things happened often in Tunisia in those days. He got more concerned when the demonstrations started to grow. Looking at FB and Al Jazeera, he was able to get an appropriate understanding of the evolving political uprising (see *ibid.*).

FB use was very widespread during the revolution and played a “*major role*” (int. 12). Political discussions as during that time are partly still ongoing (see int. 8 with Samira), but often they do not appear on the pin board, “*but via messaging*” (Mariam, int. 13). From the point of view of Marwan, “*there are not many political discussions any more as people are disappointed, frustrated with the long transition period and the actual political situation*” (int. 12). Nevertheless, he is still sharing articles, videos that reflect the recent political situation, and background information via his pin board. Along with Samira, other interviewees stated that FB usage was surveyed by the Ben Ali regime.

## 5.5 Trust in Social and Mass Media

Trust and distrust in the diverse forms of media became one of the key issues in our interviews. Although this topic is more than present nowadays (fake news etc.), looking back at the perception of our interview partners during that very specific and politically charged time is worth making the effort in order to gain more insights into that context.

### 5.5.1 Television in Tunisia: A Reliable Source for Information?

Television remains an important medium, in Tunisia as elsewhere. Even so, our interviews clearly show that TV usage has to be distinguished “*before, during & after the revolution*”: Before, all TV programmes were censored and were not entirely trusted. After the revolution, the channels are perceived as much better and more differentiated. During the uprising, the Arab channel Al-Jazeera had a unique position in gaining reliable information that was not otherwise reported. Besides FB, it was the central source of information for a lot of people but lost “*all the trust*

*they had built during the revolution*" (int. 8 with Samira) due to its growing proximity to Ennahda: "*they are clearly one-sided*" (ibid.).

Marwan – as a very active user of FB and the most reflective interviewee when it comes to trust and validity of information – shows complete distrust in Al-Jazeera today and blames them for a *plot against Tunisia* (even before the revolution, int. 12). Laila, a 30-year-old junior faculty member at the Computer Science Department at the University of Tunis ascribed misinformation to them: "*They have distributed wrong information – even already during the revolution.*" (int. 5). For Mariam, another problem is that the channel is not focused on Tunisia anymore and that the reporting is "*too sensational and bloody*" (int. 13).

TV usage after the revolution also has to be distinguished with regard to different channels: 'Al-Tunisia' was often mentioned in the interviews as the political and 'social' programme viewed by many people. Three of our interviewees, Marwan, Mariam, and Hanan (one engineer and two teachers) give this television station 100% credit with respect to reliability because their journalists are supposed to be under surveillance by the public.

Another well-liked and often mentioned channel is 'Al-Wataniya'. Mahdi, a hydraulic engineer, perceives it as "*the best one, very objective*" (int. 14). With regard to the time before and during the revolution, when there was no trust in Tunisian TV at all, that change is remarkable (see int. 11 with Arij).

Despite this development, TV in general is still perceived as being too selective, not always sufficiently neutral in its reporting, and failing to offer detailed analysis in the way that FB does, for instance about the killing of Belaid in February 2013. This might be a central reason for the practice of comparing news from one channel with another channel or with reports about the same incident in different media.

### 5.5.2 Perception of Newspapers

Most of the newspapers are perceived as being anti-government and “*very biased in their perspective*” (int. 1 with Khaled, a PhD student), and consulted mostly by people from *the older generation* (int. 2 with Samir and Mohamed). The papers more likely to be trusted are perceived to be politically “*more neutral, and not supported by or supporting any political party*” (see int. 12 with Marwan).

Media use in this field has sometimes shifted from the classical papers to their online versions. Adel, for instance (driver for the university), prefers to read the newspapers online (see int. 3) via his mobile, although Marwan prefers the printed versions, reading mainly local or international press about political news and sports (int. 12, Marwan).

### 5.5.3 Trust in Facebook?

Generally, the quantity of information available on FB is perceived as a better basis for gaining information and for filtering out the most untrustworthy sources than other media: “*In FB, I can better make up my mind (...) there are much more unfiltered sources which one can better rely on*” (int. 4 with Ali, a Master student).

During the revolution, FB was used and described as the most reliable medium, but that image has also changed slightly with time. Karim, the barber from Cap Bon, is less trustful of information on FB and accuses some sources of making up stories and spreading lies (see int. 9). But despite the distrust in the reporting of political issues, he uses the network for private communication quite intensively.

Mahdi puts confidence in just 20% of the postings on FB, based on his short-time experiences as political activist in a political party (CPR – Congress of the Republic, a liberal, secular party in Tunisia). He describes videos and pics as “*often edited*”, cut, etc. and that is the main reason why he validates postings by checking the links (int. 14). Hanan, the female English teacher, believes in some sort of control (censoring) as she observed that some videos disappeared from FB – that is why she

distrusts FB and validates information via TV (see int. 15). In reference to FB's role in the political landscape in Tunisia today, Sami and Mohamed said that FB plays the main role in the political landscape, "a 90% role in sports and in politics" (int. 2).

Marwan, being a vivid FB user, confirms the importance of FB as first source for information: "You can find every news there and don't have to look somewhere else." (int. 12). He likes the variety of information but stays sceptical with regard to the reliability of information on FB at the same time. That is why he reads all the information that he is interested in and then separates the wheat from the chaff, picking out the information that seems trustworthy to him and discussing it with friends .

Concerning postings from FB-groups, Marwan comments "one should be sceptical about postings from groups that have a more or less clear political position, left or right. (...) One should take that critically." (int. 12). He relies on information pathways that have additional comments about reliable sources or include hints about the uncertainty regarding the reliability of that source. By actively checking and verifying the sources with others, spreading information or links via his pin board, or in starting discussions about postings with his friends via messaging, he co-creates meaning and trust (ibid.).

## 6. Discussion

During our field studies in Tunis, we observed and spoke with both a well-educated, urban group (mainly students in Computer Science and similar disciplines) and with a less favoured group outside of the capital city area (with respect to education and socio-economic position). The latter group provided a useful reminder that social media use is not universal. A 'digital divide' clearly remains both because access is expensive and because Internet infrastructure is of relatively poor quality outside the capital. Nevertheless, as we have already indicated, we were specifically interested in how the socio-economic and political land-

scape was mutually elaborated with FB use, especially during a process of 'normalisation'.

The reported media usage of the Tunisians interviewed is rather particular and has evolved within the specific historical and political setting in which national mass media could not be relied upon due to heavy political censorship. Since the fall of the Ben Ali regime at the beginning of 2011, a central, non-governmental source for political information during the Revolution – Al-Jazeera – has lost credibility, at least in the eyes of those actors critical of Ennahda politics. But the second central resource for information in the revolutionary uprising – Facebook – has not lost its importance. On the contrary! The social network offers a media space in which many users generate content, often almost at the heart of the action or immediately after a political event. Therefore, it still is clearly faster and more diverse in its content production than traditional mass media and allows an 'on-site' perspective on events. The comment by Ali, one of the Master's students interviewed, puts this into a nutshell with reference to traditional media: "*There are much more unfiltered sources which one can better rely on*" (int. 12). Rohde et al. (2016) describe a similar phenomenon with regard to content production by means of mobile media in the Syrian civil war.

Nevertheless, we see certain shifts since our first visit: The first and most obvious is that Tunisia has, at least to some degree, become a more pluralist and open society. The paradox – if that is what it is – here is that this is associated with a more sceptical, critical approach to content by FB users. There was without question a considerable scepticism about the mass media at the time of the uprising, where political censorship was pervasive (Wulf et al. 2013, for the case of Syria see Rohde et al. (2016)), but we now see a much more prevalent intertwining of the mass media and FB content. Journalists routinely use materials published on FB to include in their own reporting and vice versa: Users of FB post video snippets or reports from different mass media on their pin boards to spread information, but also to start critical discussions

of it. Citizen journalism (Allan and Throsen 2009), that is, is alive and well. The ‘mood’, so to speak, has shifted from FB being a locus for and a call to political activity, to it being a locus for pluralistic, critical discussion. Unsurprisingly, at the same time, content taken as a whole becomes less overtly political and FB is put increasingly to uses that any Western user would recognise. In this period of transition, however, the politics has not disappeared.

Given the experience of long periods of censorship and a mass media landscape which is still in the process of its transformation, materials imported into FB, recommendations and links from FB-friends help users to find their orientation and to reduce complexity. The new pluralism is, for some, bewildering, and FB – supported by its structure of social networks, implemented via friendship relations, ‘likes’ and FB groups – provides a means to navigate this complexity. The network is not to be seen as a black box, but as a dynamic network that supports the needs for media usage of many of our interview partners, but also calls for a very critical reflection and selection of the material presented there. This can be seen in the conflict in the Ukraine as well, where mass media is not trusted and soldiers rely on social networking sites to gain information of the conflict to understand what is happening (Shklovski/Wulf 2018).

So, in Tunisia, FB has become an important platform for user-generated content production and recommendation in the political domain. This role is facilitated by the fact that FB has become a key infrastructure in many aspects of young Tunisians’ life – it merges the public and the private sphere in new ways (Wulf et al. 2013) as summarised in the quote that became eponymous. A vast range of persons, (political) institutions such as government ministries, and businesses have FB pages. The process of normalisation includes a developing breadth of usage. In a similar way to that reported by Wyche/Forte/Schoenebeck (2013a and 2013b) in their studies of urban poverty in Nairobi, Kenya, who observed that FB plays an important role for people’s job search living in



that very poor setting, the same is happening in our context. A number of our interviewees use FB for job-hunting (for example Sami, Mohamed, and Marwan). One could argue that FB provides a widely applied IT infrastructure for societies that are poor in other IT resources, one that is available to a relatively large sector of the population.

However, our later interviews in rural Cap Bon indicated that FB and the Internet are *not* ubiquitously accessible all over Tunisia. There is a considerable issue of digital and economic exclusion related to FB usage (as we exemplified with the cases of a housewife, Arij, and Amin, a day-labourer, who did not have the financial resources for the Internet).

While FB usage affords active involvement in allowing users to contribute content and recommendations, there is a severe problem with the platform it provides. The public space that FB provides to Tunisians is offered by a private US company – a fact that becomes even more critical, given recent NSA disclosures. This company has its own rules with regard to censorship of content and it owns all rights to the data produced by users of the platform. FB has used its ownership rights to impose certain rules on which content could be published. These selection criteria can be quite political in nature, e.g. in their interpretation of incitement of violence or their definition of pornographic content. If users display their political activities on a social media platform, their political beliefs, networks, alliances, and tactics can be tracked. FB owns a database on political activities, which many secret services may envy. Recently, it was leaked how Cambridge Analytica could access the data of FB's users, which could be used later on to target all of these users with personalised political ads (Solon 2018). Cambridge Analytica stated that “its tens of thousands of propaganda items were viewed billions of times” (Adams 2018), nonetheless, it is still unclear how and in which ways these posts may have influenced the presidential elections in the USA. But FB blurred the boundaries between different contributions (e.g. editorial and promotional articles), which are then delivered

(shared) via FB with the reliability of being “shared” by a trusted person (Adams 2018).

It is interesting to note that the empirical data suggests that FB has taken over the role as first information source from other (mass) media, and even newspapers are perceived as less reliable (int. 1) and not suitable for the new generation of young Tunisians (int. 2). Videos tend to be posted on FB first; interviewees describe how these videos could be seen on TV later (see int. 13 with Mariam, a teacher). Two of the PhD students as well as a Master’s student go even so far as to say that “Facebook replaces TV” from their point of view (see int. 2 and int. 4). Furthermore, people actively contribute to this change: They post news and articles from newspaper websites on FB and share them with their friends and relatives.

Pluralism in Tunisian society is mutually constituted with pluralism in FB usage. There are multiple ways for the complex use of FB for the young people. Mariam for instance, a 29-year-old female teacher who has also been unemployed for quite some time now, reports that she entered FB late (in July 2012) and that she “uses it now for gaining international and local news from TV, newspapers, and FB on FB and for communicating with friends” (int. 13). Other interview partners describe that they generally use it for gathering information about recent political events, to advertise events (even weddings, see int. 2).

FB started its career as an Internet infrastructure in the social and then in the political domain. It gained credibility during the Tunisian revolution and has retained it, although it is now being viewed through a more critical lens. Arguably, the very fact that continued interest in political activity and information is woven in with a more pluralistic set of possibilities in relation to ordinary social life is what cements its role. In FB, there is no particular need to differentiate between the personal and the political. A similar phenomenon we observed in Palestine when investigating the appropriation of FB by political activists who were fighting against the wall (Wulf et al. 2013b).

FB offers universal access to political information, integrating access to different mass media, merging the public and the private sphere, merging reading, advising, and coproducing content. Closely connected with that, political discourse is changing from top-down to more bottom-up which means on the one hand that it is less easy to influence, but on the other hand also becomes more variegated. Above all, the influence of FB means that a private company in Silicon Valley (with its own content-oriented censorship) becomes the platform provider for a country's political discourse. And, as shown with Cambridge Analytica, this influence can be used to change political opinions.

## 7. Conclusion

The majority of current literature on media usage focuses on certain themes and is often based on the analysis of Western democracies above all other political contexts (with a few exceptions, see Dawson 2003). Here, the tension between the development of new media (such as FB and also Twitter) and the political process is a recurring theme. One consequence of this research focus is that we have very little empirical data which examines the situation in a rapidly evolving, non-Western, political context. The situation in Tunisia, while no longer one of 'crisis' or 'revolution', is nevertheless unstable. The nature of Tunisian democracy is dynamic and rapidly evolving. A feature of this, and unlike most Western democracies, is that interest in the political process remains high and is often focussed on the new media and specifically on FB. Jenkins and Thorburn (2003) report that, according to Pew research, only 18% of Americans had used the Internet to learn about the candidates in the Bush-Gore presidential election. Later on (2012), it is reported that 21% of the 60% of Americans who are social network users belong to a group that pursues political or social issues, while 20% of them follow elected officials. Strikingly, however, social media users in the USA are more likely to express interest in the political process than non-users. Also, as seen by the leak about Cambridge Analytica (2018),

these users are targeted by political online-campaigns to change their opinions about political candidates. Even with the limited sample in the context of Tunisia, we could show that most of the statements made for the Western society appear to be true for Tunisians as well.

If we are to understand the interplay between new media and other political, economic, and social factors, however, then some kind of ethnography recommends itself, particularly one that focusses on precisely those issues. Moreover, to our knowledge, no longitudinal study has hitherto been attempted in order to ascertain how things change as we move from a 'crisis' situation towards one which is relatively normalised. Political behaviour in stable democracies (we use the term advisedly) cannot automatically be generalised to emerging democracies. Our study attempts – in an admittedly small way – to rectify these omissions.

The study, we suggest, makes three main contributions:

- 1) It provides an initial basis for understanding the way in which social media use is embedded in a dynamic, rapidly changing, socio-economic context.
- 2) It introduces the prospect of longitudinal studies of social media use in developing situations, providing a comparative possibility as a society moves from a 'crisis' situation towards some form of 'normality'.
- 3) It provides a dynamic account of the interplay between the 'old' and the 'new' (social) media.

Our findings show that the relationship between 'old' and 'new' media has shifted over a period of two years. Where Al-Jazeera had a dominant role during the uprising, it is –somewhat paradoxically – less well-regarded now as competing narratives have become available. Perhaps more importantly, we see no overall decline in the use of FB as a politi-

cal medium, despite the availability of these new narratives on television and in the press.

We would argue that what we are seeing is an emergent, uncertain, and somewhat tense development of a pluralistic democracy tied in with the affordances that the new media provide for 'citizen journalism'. However, and this bears emphasising, such practices do not emerge automatically in virtue of the mere existence of new media. They are embedded in socio-material life. Equally, they have to be learned. Saeed/Rohde/Wulf (2011) list some of the skills that are required for a 'participatory culture' to emerge: They include collective intelligence, transmedia navigation, appropriation (sampling and remixing media content), judgment (about reliability), networking, and negotiation. Our findings reinforce the notion that these skills are a function of a developing pluralism as well as of new media's affordances.

Following our empirical work in Tunisia, we have created a larger body of empirical studies which analyse the use of social media on the ground by particular actors over a longer period of time. We looked at political activists in other Arab countries such as Palestine (Wulf et al. 2013b) and Syria (Rohde et al. 2016). Currently, we study Berber villages in the High Atlas Mountains in Morocco which only recently got access to the Internet in general and to social media in particular. We also investigated social media use in countries which are in a transitory phase from a communist past, such as China (Liu et al. 2014), Bosnia (Tadic et al. 2016) and Ukraine (Shklovski/Wulf 2018). Such a body of empirical studies allow us to compare their findings and contrast them with social media use in the Western Hemisphere. It also allows to ground the design of new social media functionality in an understanding of its appropriation in practice (Wulf et al. 1999 2015, and 2018).

## Notes

- 1 All the names are pseudonyms with the same cultural background as the original.

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