

NETWORKED PUBLICS AND DIGITAL CONTENTION

*The Politics of Everyday
Life in Tunisia*

Mohamed Zayani

Foreword by John D.H. Downing

A large crowd of people, mostly young men, are gathered for a protest. They are holding a large white banner with the word 'FREEDOM' written in large blue letters, and 'FOR TUNISIA' written below it in smaller blue letters. Some people are holding up their phones to record the event. In the background, a red flag with a white crescent and star is visible. The scene is crowded and energetic, with many people looking towards the camera or the banner.

FREEDOM
FOR TUNISIA

Networked Publics and Digital Contention

THE POLITICS OF EVERYDAY
LIFE IN TUNISIA

MOHAMED ZAYANI

FOREWORD BY JOHN D. H. DOWNING



GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY
School of Foreign Service in Qatar
Center for International and Regional Studies

Published in Collaboration with
Georgetown University's Center for International and Regional Studies,
School of Foreign Service in Qatar.

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

OXFORD

UNIVERSITY PRESS

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford. It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship, and education by publishing worldwide.

Oxford New York

Auckland Cape Town Dar es Salaam Hong Kong Karachi

Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Nairobi

New Delhi Shanghai Taipei Toronto

With offices in

Argentina Austria Brazil Chile Czech Republic France Greece

Guatemala Hungary Italy Japan Poland Portugal Singapore

South Korea Switzerland Thailand Turkey Ukraine Vietnam

Oxford is a registered trademark of Oxford University Press in the UK and certain other countries.

Published in the United States of America by

Oxford University Press

198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016

© Mohamed Zayani 2015

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the prior permission in writing of Oxford University Press, or as expressly permitted by law, by license, or under terms agreed with the appropriate reproduction rights organization. Inquiries concerning reproduction outside the scope of the above should be sent to the Rights Department, Oxford University Press, at the address above.

You must not circulate this work in any other form and you must impose this same condition on any acquirer.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Zayani, Mohamed, 1965–

Networked publics and digital contention: the politics of everyday life in Tunisia/Mohamed Zayani.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-19-023976-3 (hardcover: alk. paper) — ISBN 978-0-19-023977-0 (pbk.: alk. paper)

1. Social media—Political aspects—Tunisia. 2. Online social networks—Political aspects—Tunisia. 3. Social movements—Tunisia. 4. Youth—Political activity—Tunisia. 5. Tunisia—Politics and government—2011– I. Title.

HN784.Z9I5693 2015

320.961109051—dc23 2014050092

Foreword

If ignorance indeed is bliss, then inside the general run of the Western commentocracy at the time of the upheavals that began in 2011 in the Arab region, verily bliss it must have been in that dawn to be alive, trilling tweets, firing off op-eds, and doing pundit TV. Instant sweeping political change, the drama of day-by-day twists and turns, magically omnipotent mobile media, “our” Facebook, the ever-mysterious Orient: “they” don’t hate us after all; why, look how they are suddenly *becoming* “us” ... at last!

From 2011 onward, the pundits divided broadly into two groups. There were those who knew very little about the region but were mesmerized by then-new information technologies, and who gushed with frothy optimism about the digital transformation of Arab-hood. The stereotype of Arab emotionalism fused with the instantaneity of “social” media.

The second group was in some ways even more impregably invincible than the first. Dismissing information and communication technologies as somewhere between epiphenomenal and incomprehensible, they sought comfort in caressing continuity. The Middle East was still irrevocably what it was and would always be. The region’s oft-quoted demographic skew toward the under-25s somehow stayed a statistical abstraction. Yet those younger citizens were the most likely to be actively exploring fresh communication hardware and software avenues.

Mohamed Zayani’s detailed study of how these upheavals took shape in one country in the region before, during, and since 2011 whisks us away from both these reductive frameworks. Drawing upon Henri Lefebvre’s analyses of the sociology of daily life, Michel de Certeau’s explorations of subterranean challenges to the official order, Asef Bayat’s discussions of “social non-movements”

and Béatrice Hibou's "historical sociology of the political," Zayani traces out the intricate web of unanticipated consequences that over the decades led up to 2011's explosion.

Anchored in his own experience of Tunisia, but armed equally with the insights of distance through being based elsewhere in the region, Zayani generates a rigorous and convincing narrative of events—one that heavily underscores the need for comparably penetrating studies in Egypt, Syria, Yemen, Bahrain, and Libya. Whether focusing on the regionally distinctive roles of Tunisia's legal profession and labor union activism, or on the lure of new communication technologies for well-educated younger Tunisians in search of entertainment, or on the sterility of most of Tunisia's official media up until 2011, or on the advanced Internet surveillance techniques that went hand in hand with the country's embrace of the Internet as a key component of modernity, Zayani forms a composite picture, piece by piece, of a digitally connected social movement, which to almost everyone's astonishment evolved into powerful challenges to Zine El Abidine Ben Ali's despotism.

It is, frankly, a fascinating account. The author also takes care to include the story's international dimensions, particularly the role online activists in the diaspora played. This historical, on-the-ground yet subterranean exploration of how these trends and processes gradually and unexpectedly grafted themselves on to each other, or clashed, leaves the commentocracy's simplistic shibboleths by the side of the road.

Tunisia's story continues. But to have this exceptionally well-grounded case study provides a marvelous foundation for understanding what may now transpire there, and possible repercussions within the region. It also offers a highly suggestive model for a multilevel approach to the complex dynamics of social movements *over time*, their numerous communication formats, their relationship to the state and economic change. It moves decisively beyond hitherto conventional models of social movement actors that characterize them as mute, noncommunicating pieces on a Rational Social Actor chessboard.

Particularly, this account fleshes out the enduring importance of carefully studying the various roles played by small-scale media of all kinds within the genesis, apogee, and recomposition of social movements. It does so by using sociological, historical, and political analysis, and by resolutely avoiding the standard media studies vice of media-centrism. These nano-media today include uses of smartphones, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, blogging, and other digital connective media. Ten and twenty years from now, perhaps, a whole

fresh array of digital titles and options will dominate debates on the nano-media generated within social movements.

Social movement media, to be found past and present all over the planet, are only recently coming to be taken with the seriousness they deserve, no longer dismissed out of hand as ephemeral trivia. They range from street theater and popular song, body art and murals, dress and satire, dance and demonstrations, cartoons and poetry, posters and mime, all the way into the legacy media of radio, recorded music, television, print, and cinema. They do not work magic—to my surprise, having spent much of my career sociologically investigating such media, I frequently found myself in 2011–12 inveighing against their *overestimation* by one wing of the commentocracy. But, going back in time, these media have often played very significant subterranean roles. Subterranean, that is, to the far observer; not to those on the ground, whether activists or surveillance agents, possessed of alert eyes and ears.

I confidently expect readers to benefit considerably from this study, whether they are specialists in digital connective media, social movements, international affairs, the anthropology of daily life, the Arab region, and/or Tunisia itself. There is much here to plumb and to spark further reflection.

John D. H. Downing
Editor of *Encyclopedia of Social Movement Media*

Acknowledgments

This work would not have been possible without the invaluable help of a number of people and tremendous institutional support from the Georgetown University School of Foreign Service in Qatar. A considerable part of this project was carried out in the course of a research fellowship with Georgetown University's Center for International and Regional Studies, which also provided me with the valuable release time to complete my book. I thank the director of the center, Mehran Kamrava, for his intellectual stimulation and generous support. The Office of Research has also been instrumental in facilitating my work; I thank in particular Valbona Zenku, Ivanka Hoppenbrouwer, and John Crist. From the Office of Scholarly Publications, I would like to thank Carole Sargent, and from Georgetown University Press, I thank Richard Brown. For research assistance, I am grateful to Abdullah Ahmad, Jana Al Okar, Sophia Vogel, Salar Khan, and Dalia Elsayed. Thanks should also go to the following librarians for their help and resourcefulness: Frieda Wiebe, Robert Laws, Susan Fahy, Donna Hanson, and Stefan Seeger. Finally, I would like to especially recognize the support and inspiration I received from three colleagues at Georgetown University and to warmly thank them for helping bring this project to fruition: Gerd Nonneman, Robert Wirsing, and Patricia O'Connor.

I owe a special debt to a number of scholars who were generous with their time and who read earlier drafts of the manuscript, either in full or in part, and provided invaluable critical commentary and insightful feedback to sharpen the book's claims: Paul Musgrave, John Downing, Annabelle Sreberny, Marwan Kraidy, Amy Nestor, Gary Wasserman, Mark Farha, Rogaia Abusharaf, and Joe Khalil. Their critical comments and valuable advice improved the formulations

of this work tremendously. Needless to say, the book's shortcomings are entirely my own. I am also grateful for stimulating conversations with a number of scholars at various conferences, research meetings, and academic settings: Jon Anderson, Michael Hudson, Kristina Riegert, Deborah Wheeler, Dale Eickelman, Mohamed Kirat, Noureddine Miladi, Hamid Nafisi, George Joffe, Rikke Hostrup Haugbølle, Adel Jendli, Lahra Smith, Sofiane Sahraoui, Larbi Chouikha, Fatima El Issawi, Muzammil Husain, Sadok Hammami, Philip Seib, Salem Labiadh, Walter Armbrust, Riadh Ferjani, Romain Lecomte, Nouri Gana, Francesco Cavatorta, Noureddine Jebnoun, John Chalcraft, and Randy Kluver. From Al Jazeera Center for Studies, I would like to especially thank Ezzeddine Abdelmoula and SalahEddin Elzein for providing a stimulating forum to present and discuss research formulations. My thanks also go to a number of my colleagues who assisted in other ways: Suzi Mirgani, Zahra Babar, Patrick Laude, Amira Sonbol, Daniel Westbrook, Christine Schiwietz, Johnathon Chapman, Jeremy Koons, Salah Troudi, Max Oidtmann, Clyde Wilcox, James MacGregor, Daniel Stoll, Matthew Tinkcom, Joe Hernandez, Carina Lawson, and Virginia Jones.

Many of the ideas in this book were developed and discussed in the context of the "Media, Culture and Politics in the Middle East" seminar I conducted at Georgetown University and the CCT Summer Institute on Media, Technology and Digital Culture in the Middle East I codirected with J. R. Osborn. I especially thank my students in the Media and Politics Program for their critical engagement with preliminary thoughts and discussion of key formulations. A note of thanks also goes to the anonymous readers who provided useful commentary and constructive readings of the manuscript and to Rene Carman for her marvelous editorial input.

I am also grateful for a great many individuals who provided assistance in the course of my fieldwork in Tunisia. In particular, I thank the activists, bloggers, Internet users and political players who agreed to be interviewed, often more than once, and who gladly shared with me their insights, experiences, and views. I owe much gratitude to Lilia Weslaty for assisting with the field research and Zouheir Makhoulouf for connecting me to several activists in Tunisia and facilitating many of the interviews I conducted in Tunis and Sidi Bouzid. Likewise, I am most appreciative of the support I received from Sabeur Zayani, Karim Zayani, and Fatma El Aych while undertaking fieldwork for this project.

Research for this book was supported by generous funding from the Georgetown University School of Foreign Service in Qatar. Grateful acknowledgment goes to Qatar Foundation for its support of research and scholarly endeavors.

Finally, I am deeply grateful to my dedicated editor and series editor at Oxford University Press, Angela Chnapko and Andrew Chadwick, respectively, who believed in this project and diligently and enthusiastically saw it through to its completion. Last but not least, I would like to thank my wonderful wife, Sonia, for her generosity and support while writing this book.

Contents

Foreword by John D. H. Downing ix

Acknowledgments xiii

1. Introduction: On Digital Contention and Everyday Life 3
2. The Mirage of Progress: A Nation's Unfulfilled Promise 25
3. A Crisis of Authority: Offline Activism and Simmering Discontent 52
4. Cyber-Activism Comes of Age: Activists, Diasporas, and Networks 80
5. The Politicization of the Blogosphere: When Diarists Become Activists 107
6. The Battle over Internet Control: From the Web to the Street 131
7. Mediatizing the Revolution: The Appeal of Social Networks 168
8. Post-Revolutionary Dynamics: Changes and Challenges 190

Appendix: List of Interviews 203

Notes 205

References 239

Index 265

Networked Publics and Digital Contention

Introduction

On Digital Contention and Everyday Life

Media and the Arab Predicament

No account of the Arab uprisings is complete without reference to digital activism. In the popular imagination and academic circles alike, the revolutionary fervor and momentous changes some Arab countries witnessed in the second decade of the twenty-first century were intimately connected to an unprecedented media momentum that fueled “networks of outrage and hope,”¹ forced a number of dictators from power, and altered what had seemed to be an immutable political reality. The Arab uprisings set off intense debates about the relationship among communications technology, revolutionary dynamics, political activism, and social movements. Initially, these debates centered on the role that social media played in the revolts and the extent to which the uprisings were powered by social networks. But the events also sparked interest in the implications that digital media and social networks have for political dissent, collective action, and street protests. The presumed relationship between citizen-led action and youth-driven movements, on the one hand, and the adoption of a wide range of communication tools and information technologies, on the other, gave media in the Arab world an added relevance and a pointed political significance.

This judgment about the centrality of technical innovation to political change in the Arab world stands in stark contrast to the predominant narrative of only a few years ago, which emphasized the region’s aversion to change. Although the advent of transnational satellite television in the 1990s and the widespread adoption of the Internet in the first decade of the new millennium

undermined the hegemonic control of Arab governments over information, such transformations appeared to be politically inconsequential in the face of the region's entrenched authoritarianism. Nor, for that matter, had digitally networked technologies and participatory media paid democratic dividends for a region that has long been marked by non-participatory political systems. At best, the vibrant Arab media scene was deemed by some scholars to have created a space of interaction that is akin to what Habermas calls the public sphere—an inclusive mediated space of interaction that thrives on reasoned positions, critical debate, and public deliberation.² But attempts to conceptualize the political implications of media in an undemocratic Arab context are fraught with theoretical difficulties, not least because they are embedded in normative claims about democratic politics and mass media workings. Even though the energized media sphere helped break the state monopoly over public discourse and the new culture of connectivity helped democratize the right to access information and interpret events, the effect on the region's political culture remained either constrained or impalpable. In spite of its vibrancy, media in the Arab world did not seem to have affected power relations or to have changed the region's political reality.

Neither the story of technologically enabled revolutions toppling Arab dictators and bringing in sweeping political changes nor the narrative of authoritarian rulers determinately controlling information and stifling online dissidence provide a nuanced understanding of the media experience in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Although the energized media environment in the Arab world and increased access to information and communications technologies (ICT) have attracted considerable attention in academic and policy circles, the focus has been largely on the political effects. One of the key issues informing Arab media and communication scholarship pertains to whether media could play a transformative political role and have a democratizing potential or whether the altered media environment is undermined by evolutionary adjustments and non-democratic alterations geared toward shoring up regime stability.³ The security implications of the wide adoption of the Internet for the region's political systems have made this issue even more insistent.⁴

Underlying these formulations is an analytical perspective that leaves a number of significant dynamics unexplored with regards to the nature and workings of changing media practices. Taking heed of these limitations calls for a reformulation of the inquiry into the sociopolitical dimension of media in the MENA region in a way that opens up the possibility of reexamining the

complex, subtle, and ingenious ways in which media have been experienced, adopted, and appropriated within the particular context of a rapidly changing Arab world. Capturing the intricacies of these mediated experiences requires a better understanding of the processes that have shaped media usage over the years, in particular the significance of the communication possibilities the adoption of new information and communications technologies affords for imagining and negotiating one's lived reality.⁵ Such an endeavor also calls particular attention to the way the media experience intersects with broader social contexts, cultural dynamics, and political realities.

The Youth Factor

Studying the media experience in a complex region like the MENA poses considerable challenges. The region, as Sreberny reminds us, "reveals remarkable differentiation among almost any indicator one cares to choose."⁶ Still, one can point out common trends and general tendencies that operate across the Arab world, the most obvious perhaps being the demographic transformation. The MENA region is marked by an unprecedented youth bulge, with half of the population being less than twenty-five years old.⁷ This sizable generation grew up at a juncture of Arab histories that has been shaped less by the kind of pronounced ideologies that had dominated earlier decades (whether pan-Arabism or communism) than by a set of disparate constellations induced by the increasing interpenetration of the local, the regional, and the global with new defining vectors ranging from social modernization to commodified consumerism and from religious revivalism to a deeply fascinating cyber-culture. While these forces can be observed throughout much of the Arab world, they are far from being uniformly experienced. What is common though is the seeming inability of youth to effect change. Despite the generation's size, Arab youth have been largely marginalized from institutional political life—a sphere of action that is clearly demarcated and vigilantly guarded as the purview of the authoritarian state. The perceived political irrelevance of Arab youth, though, is only an obvious instance of understudied changes that are affecting an entire generation. Arab youth, as one sociologist put it, "are caught in a poignant and unsettling predicament: the undermining of traditional vectors of stability and loyalty (family and the state) as opposed to the modern alternative sources of education, employment, security, and public opinion that have proved unable to fill the void."⁸

Nurturing these tendencies, Dale Eickelman argues, are various sociocultural developments that have been greatly intensified and significantly shaped by two important vectors: mass education and mass media.⁹ Mass higher education has fostered a break with earlier traditions of authority. The educated express their beliefs more publicly and in ways that relate more directly to political action, entailing shifts in the political consciousness of a younger, educated generation in many parts of the Middle East and North Africa.¹⁰ Improved levels of education coincided with notable changes in the reach and nature of mass communication. The advent of the satellite era in the 1990s and the development of a remarkable transnational television industry that spawned hundreds of Arabic-language channels offering a rich repertoire of programs have arguably altered audience experiences, habits, and expectations.¹¹ If the advent of the satellite era opened the eyes of Arab publics to new experiences and alternative views, the wide adoption of the Internet favored the rise of an even more vigorous and interactive space of engagement for a larger Arab cyber-public.

The changing media environment in the MENA region is having notable effects on society and traditional forms of authority, but it is also affecting the political sphere in unique ways. What is interesting to note in this context is not so much the extent to which growing public access to and intense use of various forms of information and communications technologies are eroding state control over political life, but the way they are changing the nature of political engagement itself. While the latter trends may not be readily or uniformly observed throughout the Arab world, they are nonetheless indicative of new sensibilities and dispositions. New ways of creating, consuming, and using information have arguably brought about subtle and dynamic forms of political engagement that are engendering alternative forms of citizen action and reconfiguring the relationship between citizens and the state.

In spite of these innovations, the dynamics and implications of the region's reconfigured communicative space remain largely understudied, bringing up a number of questions: How are the mediated sociocultural practices that emerged in recent years at the intersection of the real and virtual world affecting agency? How is the changing communication culture altering subjectivity? How do forms of online engagement bear on identity negotiation? Are participatory media harbingers of new or different forms of sociality and to what effect? And how have communication practices that are embedded in social networks redefined the practice of politics and the meaning of citizenship?

Cracking the Carapace

Answering these questions with sufficient depth necessitates moving beyond facile generalizations to study specific contexts. As Kalathil and Boas point out in their study of the impact of the Internet on authoritarian rule, “assertions about the technology’s political effects are usually made without consideration of the full national context in which the Internet operate in any given country.”¹² Context matters because, as Axford reminds us, “the affordances supplied by communication technologies in general and participatory media in particular impact differently in countries with diverse histories, constitutions, political cultures, and policies towards freedom of expression.”¹³ Despite such potential, though, studies of the Arab media experience remain mired in generalities. There have been few extensive country-specific studies that delve into the subtle nature of the mediated changes in the MENA region,¹⁴ and even fewer studies that explore the evolutionary dynamics of the Internet in the Arab world. North Africa in particular has received scant attention despite its rich digital experience.¹⁵ Focusing on individual cases is valuable to help us avoid a pervasive tendency to homogenize the Arab digital experience. Grounding the analysis in contextual realities and highlighting the specificity of particular experiences can also create the basis for a much-needed comparative theorization of media practices and experiences.

I contribute to the debates on the political sociology of media in the region through my in-depth study of the Tunisian digital experience. The project is based on extensive fieldwork that I conducted in Tunisia between 2011 and 2013, during which I met with journalists, college students, militants, politicians, online activists, bloggers, cyber-dissidents, new media players, and ordinary Internet users. By delving into the Tunisian experience, I sought to bring into focus the intricate relationships among digital culture, youth activism, cyber-resistance, and political engagement. Anchored as it is in the Tunisian experience, this book is also necessarily about digital activism in an authoritarian Arab context. It takes a close look at an array of forms of online communication that arose within the larger sociopolitical context of the authoritarian state. The book explores the various forms of digital contention and different modalities of online resistance that authoritarianism breeds within an increasingly intense communication environment that is conducive to new kinds of sensibilities, experiences, and actions. It tells the story of the coevolution of technology and society in a specific Arab setting in which the aspirations of digitally empowered publics were often at odds with the instincts of a repressive regime.