

The Arab Spring**The Role of ICTs**

“I Have Understood You”: The Co-evolution of Expression and Control on the Internet, Television and Mobile Phones During the Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia

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The mass demonstrations that led to the Jasmine Revolution in late 2010 and early 2011 have radically changed the media and communications landscape in Tunisia. All forms of information technology were until recently either heavily regulated by the Tunisian state or were owned by individuals with close links to then-President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. This analysis looks at regulatory regimes across three media and communications technologies during the Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia—Internet, television and mobile phones—and shows that the regulatory regimes of media and communications technologies co-evolved with the protests. As expression about public protests became increasingly pervasive within these media, efforts to control them became increasingly restrictive. Thus changes in the media and communications landscape are discussed in the context of the co-evolution of regulatory regimes.

The Internet

The Tunisian Internet is characterized by very high levels of growth in the number of Internet users coupled with some of the most restrictive censorship in the world (OpenNet Initiative, 2009). Figure 1 provides a brief overview of the historical development of the number of Internet users within the Tunisian population.

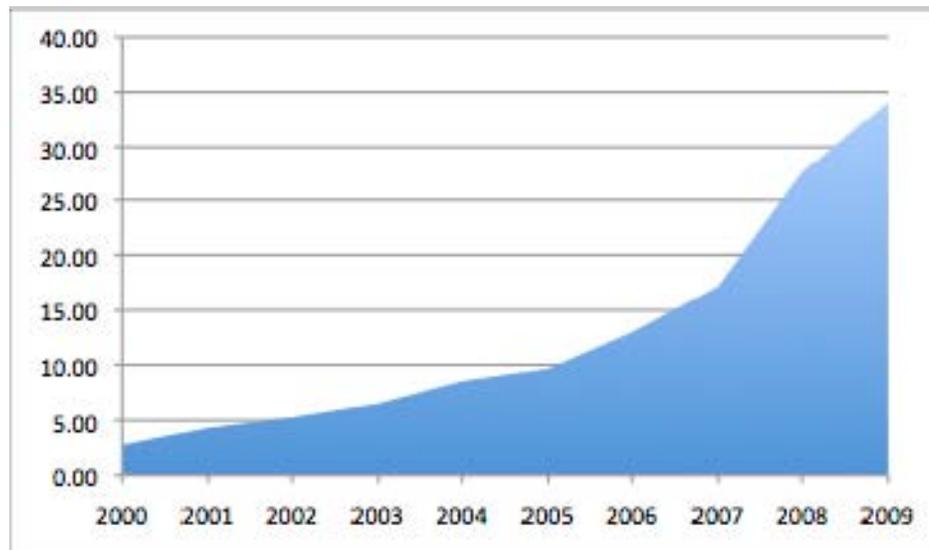


Figure 1. Estimated Internet Users per 100 Inhabitants from 2000–2009. (Data ITU)

Clearly the graph reflects a massive expansion of Internet use, with 34% of the population estimated to be Internet users by 2009. After the beginning of widespread popular protests in Tunisia in December 2010, existing Internet censorship and control were increased, with the “head of the Agence Tunisienne d’Internet (ATI) [announcing that] the number of websites blocked by the authorities [had] doubled in just a few weeks (Reporters without Borders, 2011a). At the same time, the government orchestrated “cyber attacks” on Internet activists, journalists and bloggers, breaking into the Facebook accounts and Facebook groups of activists and defacing or deleting their websites and blogs (Ragan, 2011).

These developments need to be seen against the backdrop of widespread popular protests, which by early January had spread to all parts of the country and the capital, Tunis (Rifai, 2011). The parallel development of these two processes suggests that the Internet controls co-evolved with the protests, becoming increasingly restrictive and aggressive as street demonstrations expanded. Two other events are also indicative of co-evolution between Internet censorship and online expression.

The first was the detention of bloggers, journalists and Internet activists on January 7, 2011, with a “string of arrests that come in the midst of what is being described as a nationwide uprising” (Ryan, 2011). The specific targeting of these three groups suggests a deliberate attempt to stifle expression and gain control over dissemination of information about the protests.

The second—and in this context crucial—event was the statement by Ben Ali on January 13, 2011, which was televised on all channels at the height of the protests. It was his last televised speech

before he fled the country, and its core message—"je vous ai compris" (Aouij, 2011)—or "***I have understood you***" was delivered partly in the Tunisian dialect, rather than in the more formal Fusha Arabic that he typically used (Souag, 2011). What Ben Ali termed his response to political demands is particularly relevant in the context of this analysis:

In regards to the political demands, I have told you that yes, I have understood you [ana fahimtkum] and I have decided: full and complete freedom of information in all its media [wasa'il al i'lan], no more blocking of the Internet websites and the rejection of all forms of censorship & surveillance [raqaba]" (Ben Ali, 2011, Translation from Arabic by Heinrich Köllisch, University of Tübingen, Tunis, Tunisia).

Several hours after Ben Ali's speech, all restrictions on Internet sites in Tunisia were removed. What remains unclear is what motivated former Ben Ali to make this decision. One possible motivation is that it allowed Ben Ali to provide swift evidence to protestors of his willingness to make concessions. His ability to implement these concessions so quickly suggests the existence of an efficient and performative Internet control regime, giving Ben Ali access to a metaphorical "red button" to turn Internet censorship on and off at will. The internet control regime which empowered former President Ben Ali to make such swift concessions could be termed "push-button autocracy" (Wagner, 2011). Another important motivation for this decision can be found in the widespread popular demands for an open Internet and a free press in Tunisia. These had spread from Internet chat rooms to the streets of Tunis and were an increasingly prominent component of protesters demands.

Television Networks

In many ways the regulatory regime for television in Tunisia is as restrictive as the Internet control regime, given that the television landscape is dominated by public broadcasters and heavily regulated by the state (Ayish, 2002). The one notable exception is satellite television, which is omnipresent in Tunisian society despite extensive government attempts to control it. Among the satellite channels available in Tunisia, by far the best known—even long before the revolution—is Al-Jazeera (Lynch, 2006), which rose to international prominence through its coverage of the Tunisian revolution (Zayed, 2011).

Although the scholarly debate on the role of Al-Jazeera during the Jasmine Revolution is still ongoing, there are strong suggestions that it played an important role in the Tunisian revolution (Watson, 2011). This analysis will focus on the ability of Al-Jazeera to circumvent state control as well as Al-Jazeera's extensive use of new media.

Al-Jazeera was able to provide unrestricted information via satellite, which was highly difficult for the Tunisian authorities to prevent. Because of professional editing the information it provided was far more organized than information provided by Internet sources, a notable feat given that Al-Jazeera's bureau in Tunisia had been closed and that it maintained only a camera team in Tunisia after the fall of Ben Ali (Zayed, 2011).

Al-Jazeera's focus on Internet-based reporting seems to have provided an important unregulated conduit of information at the height of the protests (Al Sharekh, 2011). Although the Tunisian government increased its control over Internet expression, it did not have the technical capacity to control satellite television. While modifying or even dismantling Internet capability was possible in a matter of hours, removing satellite dishes from houses across Tunisia was not an option that could be carried out easily or quickly.

Thus television, a traditional medium, helped the Internet, a new medium, disseminate information about the Tunisian protests, because those who could not access YouTube could still watch Al-Jazeera. This is particularly relevant in the context of political mobilization, as "traditional media such as the press can serve as a bridge to the general public sphere, helping to operate results of discussions online and to transform the newly acquired space of discussion into actual power on the street" (Kuebler, 2011). In this context, new media co-evolved with media reporting through satellite television; consequently they must be viewed as part of a specific process that contributed to telling the world about the Jasmine Revolution.

Mobile Phones

The mobile phone is nearly ubiquitous in Tunisia, with 95% of the population having subscriptions. Figure 2 shows an overview of the growth of mobile phone subscriptions in Tunisia since 2000:

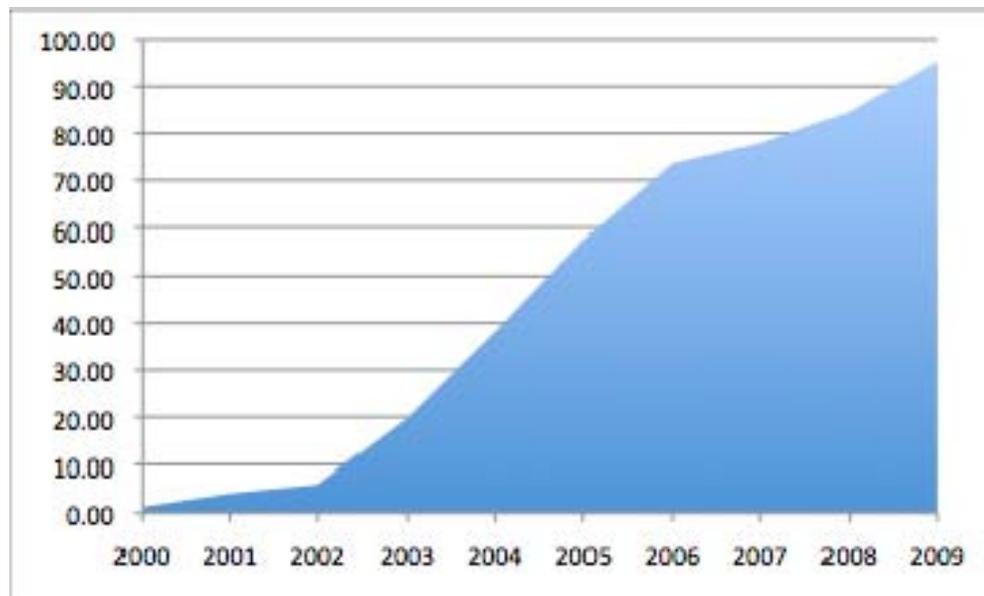


Figure 2. Number of Mobile Cellular Subscriptions per 100 Inhabitants from 2000–2009. (Data ITU)

Mobile phones are a major resource for organizers of protests, but they are also extremely vulnerable to surveillance and control because of their centralized communication infrastructure. Tunisian police had complete access to mobile phone conversations and employed substantial numbers of translators in order to monitor their conversations (Goldstein, 2011). In addition, mobile phone network ownership was dominated by public organizations and a close-knit elite with very close links to the state or to Ben Ali's family.

Despite surveillance, however, "the role of cell phones also proved crucial [in Tunisia]. Citizen journalists kept file-sharing websites supplied with photos and videos, and fed images to streaming websites" (Reporters without Borders, 2011b). Although there are many problems associated with these practises—both for those filming and those being filmed (Gregory, 2009)—the importance of citizens being able to partake in news production should not be understated (Gordon, 2007). It is also worth noting that perhaps the most relevant technological contribution of mobile phones to the protest movement may not have been allowing individuals to talk, exchange SMS or use the Internet; it may instead have been putting cameras in the hands of a vast number of Tunisians.

During field research on mobile phone networks in Tunisia, it was not uncommon for mobile phone connections to be cut off, depending on how many sensitive keywords were used. However beyond arbitrarily cutting off some sensitive phone calls, there is little evidence that the mobile control regime co-evolved with the protests.

This is in notable contrast to Egypt and Libya, where the governments used mobile networks to widely disseminate pro-government SMS and to shut down parts of mobile phone network (Reporters Without Borders, 2011b). Concerns about increasing restrictions on mobile and Internet devices seem particularly prescient in this context (Zittrain, 2008).

Conclusion

Some generalizations can be seen in regard to the co-evolution of expression and control of the media and communications technology discussed here. The first is that although Internet control clearly co-evolved with Internet protests, the same cannot be said of television and mobile phone control. It seems clear that the Tunisian government lacked the capacity to effectively implement its policies on satellite television, thereby allowing Al-Jazeera's coverage of public protests to continue unhindered by government regulation. It remains unclear why the Tunisian government did not extensively manipulate the mobile phone network during the Jasmine Revolution, as the Egyptian and Libyan governments did during protests.

The second point is that hybrid models of communicating protest, –that combine the Internet, television and mobile phones seem to have been the most resilient during the Jasmine Revolution. The broad spectrum of communications of communication was used to seek, receive and impart information during the protests. This task could not have been completed by one communications medium alone. In environments with highly restrictive regulatory regimes, diversity of communications media seems to be particularly effective.

Moreover, the Tunisian Internet control regime led to an increased functional differentiation among media. The Internet was still used extensively by individuals with the ability to circumvent government control and was therefore particularly useful for those who needed its publishing function. For international audiences that were not restricted by government controls, the Internet doubtless also had a dissemination function. By contrast, satellite television was probably more important to Tunisian audiences through its dissemination and editorial functions.

Finally, the co-evolution of new media on the Internet and traditional media on satellite television seems to have been particularly important. Specific properties of each allowed them to co-evolve with clear benefits for each. This would seem to confirm the hypotheses of mobilization theorists, who suggest that only when new media spread to traditional media are they likely to be effective in mobilizing large numbers of people.

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