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Tunisia's Revolt: the Impact on Arab Media*

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Summary:

The Tunisian uprising has reverberated across the Arab world. The use of new communication technologies – social networks, blogs, text messaging, videos uploaded by cell phone – continue to play an important role in events there, with their influence felt in the work of broadcasters like Al-Jazeera; they have also become part of the repertoire of protesters in Egypt, Yemen, Algeria, and elsewhere. The new tools have created opportunities to overcome censorship, spread information and expand spaces of activism. At the same time, Arab systems and leaders fearful of a “domino effect” are seeking ways to curb these effects, avert their potential dangers, and absorb the anger within their societies: from controls and clampdowns on media (as in Syria) to government reshuffles and economic measures (as in Egypt and Jordan). Thus, if the new technologies highlight a deep change in the Arab media scene, they have also become part of the larger political contest for democracy and freedom in the region.

Tunisia's revolt: the impact on Arab media

The popular protest that erupted in Tunisia following the self-immolation of a 26-year-old university graduate on 17 December 2010 led only a month later to the collapse of the regime of President Zine el- Abidine Ben Ali. Both during this period of intense mobilisation and in the weeks after the president's flight abroad on 14 January 2011, a key role was played by new

communications technologies – the internet, blogs, videos uploaded by cell phone, and social networks.

The end of Ben Ali's regime opened the way for the development of this sector, in all directions. Several groups that reflect Tunisia's different social and political trends have established a new-media presence, and all the political formations have set up accounts on

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social-network sites. Tunisia's Islamists also managed to join the web protests which helped lead to the regime's overthrow. But no single force, existing or new, is so far predominant online.

The social networks are now often ahead of traditional media, such as Tunisia's newly freed TV channels and the pan-Arab broadcasters – in that they offer virtually live transmission of events and developments, backed up by videos and documents. These networks also give an opportunity to everyday Tunisian people (anonymously) to deliver more or less prepared statements on issues that concern them, which are thus available directly to their fellow-citizens.

It is important to note in this respect that some of Tunisia's private channels – such as Hannibal (owned by a person close to Ben Ali's family) and Nesma (owned by Tarak Ben Ammar, a friend of the country's governing elite – have performed a complete U-turn, and now seek to outdo their rivals in proclaiming their commitment to democracy, but without any kind of self-questioning or self-criticism about their previous stance. The owner of Nesma even appears on French television and talks as if he had been a great democrat all his life, without bothering to hide his frequent and personal contacts with Ben Ali himself.

“I'm Syrian, I'm Tunisian”

All Tunisia's Arab neighbours were closely concerned by Tunisia's political transformation, but the surprise they shared at the rapid turn of events meant that decision-makers and censors did not have enough time to react with a clear line.

In Syria, there was an initial period of silence and hesitancy, when the audiovisual media avoided any mention of what was happening in Tunisia (as during the fall of Baghdad in 2003,

when Syrian TV was broadcasting scientific programmes); then editorials in the official press began to allude to the dark experience of Iraq, in order to hint that developments in Tunisia could lead to similar instability. Yet after Ben Ali's flight to Jeddah, the official newspaper of Syria's ruling Ba'ath Party made its own striking U-turn by describing the events in Tunisia as “a transition from an authoritarian state to a nation-state, where the people hold the power with national unity, democracy, development and social justice (...)”. This ostensible ideological reversal cannot hide its real objective: to support the steps undertaken by Syria's own government in order to absorb the fallout of the Tunisian revolt and avoid potential domestic repercussions.

The private websites operating in Syria are closely controlled, though some managed (albeit with a considerable time-lag) to provide their readers with some highly restricted information. Moreover, well-informed sources say that the authorities there have issued a strict warning that at no point must the media draw any comparisons between Tunisia and Syria.

But this has not prevented blogs by Syrians representing all political trends from congratulating Tunisians, welcoming their achievement, and recalling the similarities between the two peoples and their two political systems. Some social networks have hosted new groups to support Tunisians; one account, entitled “I'm Syrian, I'm Tunisian”, has been devoted to posting all material from Tunisian sources, with space for comments from thousands of Syrian internet users.

Calls for opening in Algeria

The new-media's role in other Arab countries has varied. In Algeria, which many consider the most likely candidate to replicate the Tunisian experience, official media coverage reflected the state's anxiety by being minimalist in the

extreme. The private press and websites are by contrast full of enthusiasm for events across the country's eastern border, of direct references to Algeria's situation, and of claims that a similar outcome there cannot be ruled out. Hence the many calls to the government to learn from the Tunisian revolution and open up the domains of freedom before it is too late.

Yemen's students protest

In Yemen, many young people managed to follow the Tunisian events on the social network Facebook. They responded by staging rallies on the campus of Sana'a University and in several places around the capital, chanting slogans that referenced Tunisia. Their primary concern was to protest against the tyranny of Yemen's long-standing president, Ali Abdullah Saleh, and his clan, as well as the economic situation. In turn these demonstrations were broadcast on the web using mobile-phone cameras.

Egypt's Facebook revolution

In Egypt, the authorities' fear of contagion (or the domino effect) meant that references to Tunisia in the official media focussed on the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of "brother" states and (as in Syria) underlining the risks of potential chaos that could push the army to take over. But Egypt, unlike Syria, has a private press and audiovisual media which was able to fill the void by providing direct coverage of the Tunisian revolt and inviting Egyptian opposition intellectuals to analyse it.

Moreover, blogs and social networks were very active and critical, with many young Egyptians using them to make constant comparisons between the two countries and disseminate calls for Hosni Mubarak to follow the example of Ben Ali. The announcements that demonstrations would be held during Egypt's

Police Day on 25 January were covered widely on the web; on the morning of the previous day, one Facebook group contained the names of more than 83,000 persons who said they would be attending the protests. Many thousands of Egyptians gathered in Cairo and other big cities on the day, and the demonstrations were broadcast almost live to social networks via cellphones, leading the authorities to order phone operators to limit access to 3G services and even shut down internet access for several days.

Al-Jazeera in the lead

But the influence of social networks couldn't be contained, as for the first time in the field of media monitoring and coverage they became the main source for all press agencies and TV channels. Al-Jazeera was in the lead in using demonstrators' videos and audiotapes, while the station also tried hard to check their authenticity and reliability. The effect in Tunisia itself was marked: after years when the majority of Tunisian intellectuals shunned the station because they considered it close to conservative movements, Al-Jazeera has become the Tunisian channel *par excellence*.

Al-Jazeera's coverage of the month-long Tunisian crisis proved extremely professional, and left the other pan-Arab channels (especially Al-Arabiya) attempting to match it, once they had realised the seriousness of the situation. Al-Jazeera's Tunisian-born anchor (Mohammed Krichen) and star reporter (Lotfi Hajji) played a prominent role in spreading news of the unfolding drama. Krichen suggested one reason why the station outranked its competitors: "For long years, we didn't have the possibility of sending any cameraman to Tunisia, but now we find ourselves all of a sudden with hundreds. It was the demonstrators themselves who were our key sources".

Governments under pressure

The events of Tunisia have highlighted a deep change in the Arab media scene. These were watched by millions of Arab internet users as well as TV viewers, and the initial scepticism shown by some activists vis-à-vis the usefulness of social networks seems to have been discarded. Arab systems and leaders have come to understand as well as fear the dangers that new communication technologies present to them, and begun to search for ways to limit them. These include economic measures to absorb the rising anger within their societies, and (as in Jordan and Egypt) some changes in personnel in government and party leaderships.

In Jordan, the approaches have been combined. King Abdullah, even before he sacked the cabinet on 1 February 2011, had already visited the towns that were suffering most acutely from

the country's economic crisis and held meetings with representatives of trade unions and political forces that had organized protest rallies in the streets of Amman.

Meanwhile, intelligence agencies have started in their own way to sound out the reactions of the public. In Syria, security officers have invited several intellectuals to "discuss" the Tunisian phenomenon and its repercussions on the society.

These responses show that Arab governments are more than ever feeling the power of the internet and new communications technologies. It is very likely that the determination to avoid a "domino effect" from Tunisia could include further attempts to enforce control over the media, both traditional and new.