



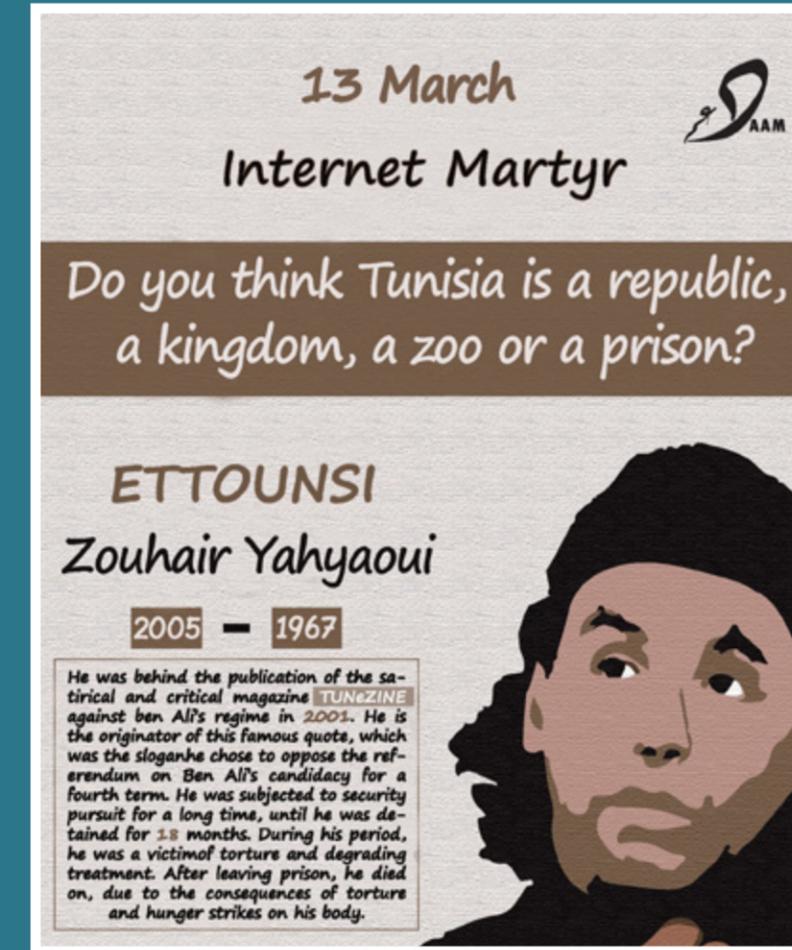
The Tunisian Facebook: a tool for liberty or a trumpet for the public?

An article dedicated to the soul of Lina Ben Mhenni on her birthday



Anterior to the revolution: from the “internet” to “Facebook”

Starting from the year of 2007, I was studying abroad in a country that used to belong to the Soviet Union and the city was not crowded with Tunisians. My companion was the internet and especially video websites. The internet speed was (comparing to now) very high in comparison with the same service in Tunisia. I understood later that this was related to a country’s policy and the rulers’ way of misleading and guiding. Contrary to my habit in Tunisia, I became searching the net for hours and hours looking for content that might or might not interest me. Until I got to a content which I did not perceive before in ‘the Tunisian internet’ (I do insist on using this term for it will have meaning later on this article). Forums, articles, and chat rooms criticizing and cursing the system (Ben Ali, the government and the Trabelsi family back then) publicly. I remember the first moments while I was reading the lines belonging to TunieZine blong by the late Zouhair Yahiaoui; the 1st martyr and “electronic/ cyber” militant or the Extravaganza sharp words. the textual content was enough to incite you to look around to make sure that no one is watching or stalking you while you are calmly reading these words, even kilometres away from Tunisia it is a habit that the system inserted in us since our early age until it became profoundly engraved



These blogs became my daily hub even though I never dared to write or comment, that necessitated a higher degree of ability to beat the engraved obsession and a courage that amounts to militance.

One day in 2008, I was on YouTube as usual seeing videos like most users to find “vocal publications”, as called by the regime in accusations pinned to every rejecter or criticizer and videos from the region of Redaief: hundreds of outraged citizens in the streets shouting emblems “Laila the hairdresser, who defrauded the orphans”. For a moment, the blood froze in my veins because of terror. Aside from everything I wrote earlier. The hearer is not similar to the

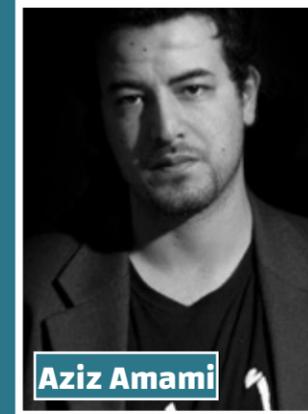
teller and vice versa. I watched other videos, carefully (it is noteworthy to say that I was kilometres away from Tunisia). The blackness of the police suits dominated the videos, throwing stones, chasing, real bullets. The videos stuck to my imagination for days until I started asking my friends who were immigrant in other countries such as France, Germany, Australia, Canada, Qatar etc whether they saw what I saw and they confirmed until I gathered enough courage to ask some trust-worthy persons from family and friends (Ben Ali was so frightening that he caused doubt to spread among relatives, some of them blocked me on Facebook. Now they are honest and free opinion-expressers about every criticism that crosses their minds). Everyone I solicited in Tunisia was surprised, no one I knew knew! The ministry of interior blocked all communication that covers the region of redief, security presence was fictional and surpasses the numbers resorted to in Soliman incidents. Al-Jazeera broadcasted the news but was anyone following or listening?

That day, the strength of the system blew my mind and how far it is willing to oppress any opponent, criticizer or “any devil who said no” surprised me.

Bit by bit I got acquainted with other blogs and profiles, using fictive names or direct ones, such as Aziz Amami, Salim Amamou, Fatma Arabica and the great Lina Ben Mhenni. Electronic opposition

shifted from blogs to Facebook as its star started shining since 2008 and especially in 2010. The system also developed its ways into hacking not only activists’ accounts but also groups, and pages through the youth of the reigning party on Facebook. Yes, “electronic armies” are not a new thing in Tunisia whether coordinated or not.

These names that who emancipated from the engraved fear from Ben Ali found in the internet then in Facebook since 2005 an outlet in which they could write about what no one dares to say or even read. 2005 was the year a new kind of militance emerged, a symbol, as Tunisia organized on that



year the World Summit on the Information Society WSIS, the system dared to invite a Zionist delegation (led by Netanyahu) to Tunisia. Here, an electronic Guerrilla war started among unorganized bloggers against a system that recently revealed a hole, one from which defeat started. It enhanced its defence potential day by day from blocking to shutting off the internet, to blocking international website (Facebook and YouTube) and performing arrests and physical torture upon cyber activists.

Facebook; the voice of the unheard?

The Facebook star shined directly and strongly after the revolution, as one of the most important actors and causes that helped the popular uprising succeed, be archived and let its message be heard worldwide in an ambiance of popular ecstasy.

Why did talking about the internet get restricted to talking solely about Facebook? because it gradually became the code name (as it is named mostly in the market, the average citizen calls internet “Facebook” OMO of Tunisian “laundry products” some operators have even started providing internet packages for Facebook alone). Facebook users’ number increased to surpass 8 million in Tunisia this year, it is among the highest in comparison with the population number in the African

continent.

Facebook pages and its owners became important persons for novel users that are still figuring out the particularities and tools of the regular account. Some “Admins” were totally conscious as per the relative power they had over the followers of the Ben Ali pages who were then called “Fans”.

While Facebook and platforms of its kind provide addictive doses of hormones such as dopamine, let’s imagine how addictive could that be to a page admin who receives hundreds of messages and reacts per day?

Back then, pages became official sources firstly for the news and scoops , regarding all types of subjects from music (especially the increasingly popular Rap music at that time), to football, reaching politics notably during the time of “popular commissions” which guarded neighbourhoods when some media caused bloody incidents in some quartiers through broadcasting false news without fact-checking. Facebook came as a popular alternative for “sure” information, taking advantage of the non-confidence in the media that served the system for long year, whether it was private or public, and despite the rushing of some to seem as revolutionary or to victimise themselves as being

“the servant” under the tyranny of Ben Ali.

As Facebook, its algorithms, profits economic plan evolved, its average use changed too.

The “fans” started turning against the page admins and requesting more space to express themselves, the mask which the admins wore had fallen and the blue temple’s secret was revealed to everyone: anyone could become an administrator of a page, he/she doesn’t have to be knowledgeable. After some pages collected huge numbers of followers in so little time and with the emergence of other tools to increase the popularity of some pages (as it is termed in medical aesthetics: fake enlargement with fake fans), some groups emerged and got enlarged, that provide equal space for everyone and horizontal relations between the admin and the member (they were no longer called fans or even followers).

Some pages reached million followers and more, the ecstasy of the admins turned into an easy source of income for some. A few years ago, the Tunisian Facebook user started noticing strange content about ‘the object’ behind the page he has been following: a hybrid object which is paid or sometimes voluntary.

This developed into a media interface, the publishing price augments in conjunction with the number of followers. And since the electoral campaigns are temporary for the candidate political parties, these parties directors of publicity and communication companies did not miss to concentrate upon Facebook and its tools as a means to reach potential electors. This arbitrary act evolved to become more organized in the elections of 2019 (presidential and legislative) and the report of DFR Lab entitled “Carthage operation” that alleges the attempt of some candidates to influence voters through



Facebook through specialized companies and advanced services.

While Facebook became a multi-coloured platform to show opinions, however, its algorithms that are complex and segmented towards making the biggest material profit possible created opinion groups highlighting points of views in the eyes of its adopters. As the famous phrase which doesn't have an owner said "If the product is free, then you are the product," Facebook sells its "users." In addition to the data it repeatedly abuses and then apologizes for, the original product that Facebook actually sells is the average user usage of it. , that is, the average time an individual spends daily on Facebook. To ensure that the individual continues browsing for at least two hours, the algorithms work to highlight the content that the user likes, whether it is cats, cars, funny clips or political posts that resemble his ideological and political positions. Behind the sentiment that they control Facebook and that their idea and their cause is dominant, while in fact they only see similar opinions. Some politicians in the last elections of 2019 even predicted that they would reach the second round of the presidential elections in Tunisia, while their voter turnout did not exceed low numbers.

Ironically, the "police regime" was one of the most prominent beneficiaries of the revolution and freedom of expression and organization.

Members of the public sectors carrying weapons after the revolution were organized into different trade unions depending on their administration. As Facebook emerged as a communication tool and a media for those without a platform, these unions, like all ministries and various institutions, resorted to Facebook to reach the public. Syndicates have created pages for them since 2011 and some of them have been renewed, under official names or other names (lions of the country, Republican Security). However, it is noticeable in recent years that these pages have begun to broadcast and publish other content in addition to their labour union messages. The matter has evolved to become more dangerous during the recent social protests since October 2020, as these pages have been publishing publications that do not respect the specifics of security investigations and write their personal opinions directly as far as politics and politicians are concerned without regard to the impartiality imposed upon them to serve national institutions and all citizens without discrimination. Indeed, some publications morally consider the actions, clothing, and looks of citizens (the youth participating in the protests, for example) as a blatant interference in individual liberties, in

addition to the direct threat of disobedience against security leaders and the arrest of some protesters or attacks on them and their property, even without prior permission (warrant).

Accordingly, arrests have also been repeated in recent years for some citizens (former bloggers or simply citizens exercising their right to expression), due to written or video posts on Facebook, under the pretext of “violating social media” based on a law that does not contain the phrase “media Social Communication” originally (Communication Magazine).

With the advantages that Facebook brought, there were some disadvantages in turn. The same Facebook, which became a tool by which minorities communicate their voice, has also become an inflated trumpet for reality and the opinion of the majority and their morals as well. Opinions that are contrary and counter to the highest manifestations of human rights, regardless of their different characteristics and phobias, are only an embodiment of public opinion in the issues raised by minorities, whether intellectual or human rights, because they differ from the usual prevailing, without trying to discuss them in the first place, in an attempt by society to defend its convictions and morals which are a well-established inheritance of custom and religion. Misogynistic publications that demean women and others that are violent, each against a difference in dress, appea-

rance and thought, are no longer rare but prevalent, especially with Facebook policies that do not differentiate between violence and a dissenting opinion (as is the case in the recent Palestinian electronic uprising).

Some admins of groups and Facebook pages, isolated under the shadow of political parties or personalities, whether with or without coordination, took advantage of this sensitive chord: the morals of the public, to appear as the last defender of it against the encroachment of “human rights” and human rights organizations. This defence sometimes amounts to treason and defamation, and perhaps not all political factions in Tunisia have agreed, except on this point, from Islamic parties to conservatives and even the far-right exclusionary right emanating from the party that used to rule Tunisia before the revolution “RCD”.

Meanwhile, Facebook is still trying to find tools and policies that convince all its users ,with their differing opinions, but it resorted to electronic repression with former US President Donald Trump and with every publication that mentions the Palestinian resistance or even the term “Al-Aqsa” to apologize later, as usual.

What is the future for the freedom of opinion that is contrary to the opinion of the majority in light of a society that is resistant to change and social media platforms which are trying to find a unified definition of freedom, and in tandem with the challenge of the different political systems in the region as well? Will Tunisia remain the only bright spot in the region in terms of freedom of expression?

