

From the Lived Experience to the Theoretical: Interdisciplinary and Cultural Production in Revolutionary Tunisia

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Throughout 2011 simplistic accounts of the Arab uprisings emerged that subsumed these diverse revolutionary movements into narratives on the power of Hip Hop, Facebook, or Twitter to initiate change. Despite the innumerable calls to refrain from premature assertions of causality, narratives such as these seemed to quickly migrate from the news media and into academic works. Among the many issues in this process was the foreclosing of any honest comparison of how scholars from different academic fields interpreted these events, the parallels and the differences, not to mention the lived experience of the Tunisian artists and revolutionaries that took part in the uprisings. This study which began in 2011 investigates Tunisian cultural production by focusing on the three industries of music, cinema, and caricature. Pursuant to that aim it is necessary to examine the artists, the texts they create, the fields and communities they exist and compete within, as well as the tools available for said artists to conceive a work and make their voice heard, in order to conduct an exhaustive study of what has transpired in the life-world of Tunisian cultural production.

We have been charged in this symposium to elucidate the advantages and disadvantages of our “disciplinary and/or comparative combination.” After careful consideration, this task is not so straight-forward, as it would simply be impossible to conduct my research without utilizing cultural studies, postcolonial studies, sociology, and media studies. In Tunisia, censorship and patronage networks drove producers to other technologies of diffusion, and any study of the arts in Tunisia cannot ignore social media or technological changes (such digital editing software Garage Band, Fruity Loops, or the advent of digital camcorders, etc.). More generally, studying cultural production requires textual and discourse analyses on individual works, taking account of the social and material conditions surrounding said works, in addition to how these works are disseminated. In light of these lines of inquiry, the advantages of an interdisciplinary approach appear to be self-evident; more compelling however, are the areas of disciplinary overlap that invite controversy. Taking the *Facebook* and *Twitter Revolution* motif as a case study allows a window into those realms of contentious interdisciplinarity.

Immediately after the Tunisian Revolution, journalists led the way in assigning a causative value to social media, often stating its prime importance among other drivers. Tunisia was

not the first to fall victim to this essentialism, and media studies scholars have definitively shown how the *Twitter Revolution* theme has been applied to both Moldova and Iran in 2009 (Zuckerman, 2011; Morozov, 2009). The assertion of social media's primacy in these diverse social movements constitutes a narcissistic celebration of the Western self, leaving one the reassuring subtext that 'they simply couldn't have done it without us.' Philip Rizk succinctly criticized the trend in Western media portrayals of the Egyptian revolution as "the undercurrent of an unrelenting need to identify, validate, and valorize the role of the familiar" (Rizk, 43). Accurate though Rizk's observation may be, it inevitably leads to another question, 'to what extent did artists and activists package their dissent in familiar parcels specifically for the purposes of Western consumption?' In any case, celebrating the role of social media, prickly though the debate may be, is still a more convenient conversation than a sober inventory of Western complicity in the dictatorial structures of power prior to the revolution(s).

In his essay entitled "Small Change: Why the revolution will not be tweeted," Malcolm Gladwell postulated that because large-scale activism depended on "strong ties" between participants, and social media utilizes 'weak ties,' that the internet will not yield the democratization that 'cyber-utopians' foresee. Gladwell even states that "weak ties seldom lead to high risk activism" (Gladwell, 2010). However, Gladwell's article was published in early October of 2010 and should be read as a response to those who champion the rise of the internet as a "Gutenberg event" (Snowden, 410). Evgeny Morozov has been at the forefront of the cyber-activism debate, correctly chastising those engaging in a "fetishism of technology" when studying revolutions and stating: "This is not to suggest that neither of these communications devices played a role in these decades-old uprisings – but it is to note that the people directly involved may not have the most dispassionate appraisals of how these watershed events occurred" (Morozov, 2011). Morozov's first point is of utmost importance; the technologies utilized by activists surely deserve a patient analysis and tedious nuancing as to the advantages and limitations they bring to the fore. To his second point however, we must register our strongest disagreement: if we have any interest at all in how technologies were utilized (whether as logistical tools or simply for informal news-gathering) the "people directly involved" (i.e. the activists) are precisely the people to articulate a narrative of technologies in these revolutionary movements.

Ethan Zuckerman – a media scholar who has long been in touch with Tunisia's activists – was among the first to comment on the Twitter Revolution motif relative to Tunisia, when he published on January 15, 2011 (the day after Ben Ali fled Tunisia) an article cautioning against what he knew would be a lazy reversion to technological causality, even stating, "any attempt to credit a massive political shift to a single factor -- technological, economic, or otherwise -- is simply untrue" (Zuckerman, 2011). Still, Zuckerman maintained that technologies surely played a part in the Tunisian revolution and that their role would be fought over and untangled

for years to come (Ibid).

Unfortunately however, the backlash against assertions of a ‘social media revolution’ were such within the humanities and social sciences, that we students of culture have yet to grapple with many important questions, preferring instead to leave the debate to media studies scholars whereupon we may embrace or denounce their findings from a comfortable distance. Among the questions deferred are not only those in reference to the revolutions in the MENA region, but questions of a disciplinary nature as well: ‘How do we reconcile all of our social theory with changes wrought by the internet?’ ‘How do we reform classical definitions of autonomy within the social sciences as we incorporate and account for new media and mediums of exchange?’ The refusal to engage with these problematics has nurtured a climate of incongruous extremes within the social sciences that range from those who deny technology’s influence outright, those who simply pay lip service to technologies, and those so-called ‘cyber utopians.’

The aversion to engaging in the technology debate within the humanities did not arise with the revolutionary fervour of 2010-2011. In 2004, Henry Jenkins attempted to entice cultural scholars to engage more fully with the media and technology debates, stating: “we need to shed some of our ideological blinders, to avoid kneejerk or monolithic formulations and imagine new possible relations with corporate and governmental interests” (Jenkins 42). Jenkins maintained that we should do this in order to positively influence policy, even if it comes at the expense of academic autonomy or purity. Unfortunately however, Jenkins’ call seems to have gone largely unanswered.

Pursuant to the calls of Jenkins and Zuckerman, I have attempted to test media studies theories (including those of Zuckerman and Jenkins) against the lived experience of Tunisian artists and activists. In 2008 for instance, Zuckerman posited his “Cute Cat Theory of Digital Activism,” which holds that if people cannot access “banal,” mundane, and non-political content such as pictures, videos, and tweets of cute cats, then they will learn how to use internet tools (such as forwarding proxy servers) in order to do so. Zuckerman stated, “Every time you force a government to block a web 2.0 site – cutting off people’s access to cute cats – you spend political capital” (Zuckerman, 2008a). Zuckerman’s theory feeds into a larger trend transcending the digital wherein the act of censorship and repression can backfire and result in precisely that which a government sought to prevent. Borrowing from sociology, we could state that censorship in itself can function as a mechanism of consecration and elevate a given activist. The act of censorship, by virtue of its consecrating function, can very well bestow social and symbolic capital on censored parties. In a discussion on Zuckerman’s Cute Cat Theory, caricature artist Nidhal Ghariani was quick to point out the cyclical nature between censorship and curiosity: Referencing the film *Se7en*, Ghariani confidently stated, “Exactly! It’s like that movie, ‘what’s in the box, man?!’” (Ghariani, 2013)

In reference to the Algerian resistance, Franz Fanon instructs us that, “In an initial phase, it is the action, the plans of the occupier that determine the centers of resistance around which a people’s will to survive becomes organized” (Fanon 47). In a tellingly analogous example, it was widely reported that on November 9, 2014, a student at Cairo University was arrested for carrying a copy of George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. In an edited translation of an *Al-Masry Al-Youm* article two weeks later, *The Egypt Independent* reports that this has been great news for Cairo’s booksellers: The price of the book has more than doubled, sales have soared, and ten new additions have been issued at one thousand copies each. Mohamed al-Sayed, one of the booksellers interviewed even remarked, “If the government arrests someone or confiscates a book everyday, that would be a great favor. Anyway, we should thank the Interior Ministry” (*Al-Masry Al-Youm*, 2014).

We should not be surprised that the digital realm follows this pattern quite closely. Before the revolution, Tunisia’s bloggers, once censored, would re-emerge with the suffix ‘404’ added to their name as a marker of cultural distinction.¹ Long-active Tunisian cyber activist Aziz Amami even stated: “A blogger with a blog that wasn’t censored isn’t really a blogger... When they see Ben Ali blocking someone they knew this guy was telling the truth” (Amami, 2011). In addition to consecration via censorship, we may also point to excommunication from the field of national politics, those known as ‘remnants’ of the old regime(s) in the aftermath of the large-scale demonstrations which forced Ben Ali and Mubarak from power. In Egypt, the *Feloul* (lit, ‘remnant’) movement used graffiti, digital technologies and even word of mouth to discredit and shame those who had stood with the ousted regime. In the elections following the departure of Mubarak, the word appeared on many of the posters and banners that filled the streets of Cairo. Additionally, “Lists of Shame” also surfaced that performed the same function for those with access to the internet (Qwā’m al-‘ār, 2011). This grassroots and diffuse movement found its counterpart in the expensive public relations firms employed by some of Egypt’s most affluent political candidates, some of them even unsurprisingly targeted by the *Feloul* movement (Borger and Vasili, 195). Similarly, in Tunisia, Tunisian President Moncef Marzouki compiled the controversial *Livre Noir: Le Système de propagande sous Ben Ali*, which contained the names of journalists who were reputed to have been willing collaborators of Ben Ali’s regime (Mandraud, 2013).

Any analysis of social media must pay attention to how censorship acted upon these media, the effects of said censorship, and the responses of the citizenry. Further, a study of such phenomena should not necessarily limit itself to studies of digital media, for the interplay between censorship and speech operates throughout the fields of cultural production in divergent, but often parallel ways. Finally let us not forget Judith Butler’s salient point that, “... under conditions when those with cameras or internet capabilities are imprisoned or tortured or deported, then the use of the technology effectively implicates the body. Not only must

someone's hand tap and send, but someone's body is on the line if that tapping and sending gets traced" (Butler, 2011).

The overlap between media studies and the humanities is just one point of interdisciplinary that, although necessary, is prone to much controversy. However, the social sciences have much to contribute on the role of technology in social movements and should not largely leave the task to media studies scholars. The need for students of culture to speak across the divide and test these theories could not be greater; we share the burden to nuance and complicate interpretations of media during the revolution, social or otherwise, before a faulty historiography ossifies further into the ostensible history of what Tunisian writer and activist Malek Sghiri correctly articulated as not only a revolution, but a "formational moment in contemporary political thought" (Sghiri, 45).

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Notes

- 1 "...[the] page the Tunisian internet authorities show when a site is blocked, to try to fool users into believing that the internet is experiencing a technical problem, rather than being censored." (Zuckerman, 2008b)