Trabajo de Fin de Grado

The impact of social media on the emergence and development of the Arab Spring in Tunisia and Egypt.

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Abstract:

The goal of this final Degree Project is to assess the role and influence that social media platforms had in the processes of the Egyptian and Tunisian Arab Springs. This assessment is carried out by analyzing the ideas regarding social media and the ways in which it engages with users, censorship, its effect on political obedience and disobedience, agenda setting and the structural issues that both countries had in the beginning of the 2010s decade. The paper reaches the main conclusion that the influence of social media platforms in the Arab Spring and its development was quite relative. While it is true that these platforms were key in spreading information and awareness, creating communities and organizing action, they were not a part of the ideological issues that triggered this revolution. Elements like political inefficiency, corruption, inequality, nepotism and abuses towards the Egyptian and Tunisian populations were the reasons behind this uprising. In this complex situation, it is quite difficult to determine the true impact of these social media platforms in this process of political activism without bearing in mind the political status quo in which they operated and the importance of it.

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1. Introduction

If there is something that can be said about international issues and global affairs, it is that these are highly complex and exist through multiple layers of intertwined ideas and events that exert an influence over one another.

This truth is especially noticeable in the 21st century, an era of extremely heightened connections where globalism is among the main ruling international agents (Inan, 2022). Through technologies developed in the last few years, an increasing number of people have been given the opportunity to better express themselves and to better hear what others are saying about topics of all kind. This not only allows a wider range of options for entertainment or personal relations, but also gives the user a platform to coordinate and build on the messages that other users are publishing. A perfect example of these new technologies is social media where, after an easy process of logging in, the user can share contents in different forms and to a potentially global audience with barely any restrictions. While this may seem rather normal in our current western society, it has not been a given idea in different areas of the world through the last decade.

A clear time-space example of disruption through social media-related actions can be seen in the events that took place - starting in December 2010 - throughout various countries in Northern Africa and Western Asia. This historical event, comprised by different and unique sociopolitical discourses for each country, is usually referred to as the Arab Spring.

Despite offering a larger definition in its corresponding chapter, the Arab Spring can be explained as a series of political, social and cultural shifts experienced in different Arab countries in the early decade of the 2010s. These changes were product of a series of protests, rebellions (both armed and unarmed) and insurgencies that started in December 2010 in Tunisia but soon expanded to other countries like Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Syria, Bahrain, Morocco or Algeria, among others. As a result of these protests, governments like the ones in Egypt or Libya were deposed and countries like Algeria or Morocco suffered from a great political destabilization that impacted their political and social scene in the years to come (Yildirim & McCain, 2019).

All over the academic field, there is a presence of theories that support or question the idea that social media platforms played a quite important role in the development of the different political and social processes that took place under the Arab Spring. Social media platforms, especially ones like Facebook or Twitter, were a great tool that made interactions and communications easier between the political activists of each country and reinforced the sense of community in the pursue of a unified goal. Protesters took advantage of social media channels to coordinate demonstrations, fight against governmental censorship and raise awareness of both their cause and ongoing or planned activities.

The precise goal of this Final Degree Project is to analyze to what degree did social media affect the rise and impact of the Arab Springs in Egypt and Tunisia. In order to get a better grasp of how was social media able to influence such a complex region in such complex times, this Final Degree Project will first look at some ideas that will provide a better context of everything, some base ideas to build conclusions upon.

This project will first look at the own nature of social media, the definition of the concept and the parameters of it. Once that what social media is has been defined, there will be an analysis of the main social media channels and how they are able to engage with the viewer in a successful and appealing way. Then, this project will observe how these social media platforms allow the user to engage with other users to discuss all sorts of topics, creating communities that revolve around specific ideas or goals. After having learned about the basics of how social media engages with people and connects them, there will be an analysis of the episode of the Arab Spring itself. In order to better grasp how social media disrupted the societies of Tunisia and Egypt, it is key to better understand the context in which these revolutions happened, both politically and socially. For that, the historical backgrounds and contexts where the Arab Spring rose and the contrast between the previous censorship imposed by the ruling governments and the ample freedom of expression that social media offers will be looked at.

After that, in a more in-depth approach, there will be an analysis of different social network services and how they interact with large groups of people, especially when it comes to political activism. Once the main ideas regarding the use and influence of social media and

the background and development of the Arab Spring have been assessed, this Final Degree Project will proceed to relate these two ideas. Two case studies regarding the Tunisian and Egyptian backgrounds in the Arab Spring will be looked at. To end the Final Degree Project, there will be a section of conclusions, where the project will assess the real impact of social media on the political and social movements that took place in Tunisia and Egypt during the Arab Spring.

This Final Degree Project assesses a truly interesting topic. Now, more than ever, social media is gaining power to unprecedented levels and even taking the form of an alternate reality, with Facebook's metaverse taking a more solid form (Kraus, Kanbach, Krysta, Steinhoff & Tomini, 2022). The world as we know it has just crossed a major threshold in terms of communications. A few decades ago, it was impossible to think that communications could be so fast, so engaging and so effective when it came to appeal a massive audience in such a personalized way. This seeming impossibility has become an undeniable reality in a bit over a decade - a huge shift in a very short amount of time. What this may mean is that, as a society, we are still trying to cope with these changes but are not fully aware of the potential that these new communication forms have (Bashir & Bhat, 2017). A great example of how these channels can have more power than expected is the Arab Spring. With this in mind, it might be possible to look at future communications with the notion that they are more powerful than some may come to think.

2. Current state of research, theoretical framework and methodology of analysis
2.A Current state of research

The current state of research will attempt to analyze the information that has already been published, from an academic point of view, in this specific topic. This current state of research, however, dives deeper and not only attempts to find out what has been said on the relation between social media and the Arab Spring; it will also briefly assess what has been said on social media as a whole, its importance and what has been said about the Arab Spring. This

will provide a general feeling of where the academic research is at in the different fields discussed by this Final Degree Project.

Firstly, this project will look at the most backed ideas when it comes to the influence that social media has had in the Arab Spring from an academic point of view.

As one could have already expected, there is a considerable amount of interest behind the idea that social media could possibly bring very big impact on society, especially on social movement and action for change. This potential behind social media is explained by the nature of this idea. Social media, being a fast, efficient, cheap, versatile and influential means of communication, presents itself as a tool with huge potential for creating change at a larger level. On a more practical approach, social media platforms allow the user to take advantage of a tool that allows an easy way to distribute information, raise discussions that may appeal to many, participation in recruiting processes and activities like the raising of funds to support a cause (University of Canada West, 2019). As academics Jennifer Earl and Katrina Kimport argue, these elements are key to understand the true power of social media for creating change (Earl & Kimport, 2012). While it is true that many things have been written on the potential for social media platforms to generate change at a societal level, the approaches primarily focus on a more general approach to this influence, not taking into account the events that took place during the Arab Spring. However, the approaches given on a more general basis may very well fit in the Arab Spring case, so these opinions are worthy of looking at.

When it comes to the positions on how powerful can social media really be for social change, we can see two main groups on a more superficial level; the group that gives it a higher enthusiasm and a group that doesn't think social media is that powerful as a tool of change. The first group believes in the competence of social media as a tool to give a voice and power to citizens of authoritarian states that would otherwise be deprived of a place to offer and receive information in a more uncontrolled environment. They see a lot of value in the contrast between the scarce means offered by the state to express ideas, associate and interchange information and the potentially huge stream of information and possibilities of communication that social media platforms offer. Represented by authors like Clay Shirky,

this group also values the speed and adaptability that these platforms offer to the user, allowing new strategies for change to shift and adapt to the ever-changing status quo and not fall into obsolescence (Gladwell & Shirky, 2011). On the other hand, there is the group that takes the potential of social media with a higher degree of cynicism. This group of academics, formed by authors like Warren and Morozov play down the importance of social media in societal shifts. For this, they argue that the use of these platforms of quick and seemingly effective communications gives the user an unreal sense of involvement that leaves it on the sidelines of the protest and keeps it from really participating in the protests (Morozov, 2011). Following this ideological line, some authors like Sarah Joseph have even defended the theory that these communication tools act as forms of repression (Joseph, 2011).

What all these authors actually do have in common is that they all give a great importance to the context in which these social media platforms work. Many of these authors portray the actions carried out in these platforms as just one more piece of the puzzle of the causes of the Arab Spring. Author Eva Bellin boils the whole political process down in a very interesting manner. She argues that, in both Tunisia and Egypt, there are four main reasons that explain the political uprisings; these reasons are the long-standing grievances, emotional triggers, a sense of impunity coming from the ruling class and an access to new social media platforms (Bellin, 2012). As shown here, the factor of social media platforms is just one more piece of the equation.

What this research leads up to is the idea of the undeniable importance of social media, but just seen as one more gear of the complex event that the Arab Spring was. This position, labelled as contextualism, is defined by author Keith DeRose as "a wide variety of more-or-less closely related positions according to which the issues of knowledge or justification are somehow relative to context" (DeRose, 2009). Adjusted to the idea of the Arab Spring, authors Gadi Wolfsfeld, Elad Segev and Tamir Sheafer, state that contextualism has the aim of "using a comparative approach, emphasize the impact that political, social, and economic variations have on the role of the social media in collective action" (Wolfsfeld, Segev & Sheafer, Page 118, 2013)

Having discussed the current state of research and seen what are the main currents of thought when it comes to the influence of social media in the Arab Spring, it is time to take a look at the theoretical framework of this Final Degree Project.

2.B. Theoretical framework

2.B.i To what extent did social media influence the outcomes of the Arab Spring?

When it comes to the final idea, the influence of social media in relation the Arab Spring, this Final Degree Project will be mainly based on the ideas portrayed by authors Gadi Wolfsfeld, Elad Segev and Tamir Sheafer, as well as the ideas offered by Sabiha Gire. When making their research article *Social media and the Arab Spring: politics comes first* and *The role of social media in the Arab Spring*, they defend the position of contextualism (Wolfsfeld, Segev & Sheafer, 2013).

This approach, taking into account the great importance of the whole political, economic and social context behind the event of the Arab Spring, offers a more realistic and holistic analysis of the issue. Author Sabiha Gire, in her article *The role of social media in the Arab Spring*, portrays these complexities by casting a light on the different outcomes that each country ended up having, something that shows the heavy importance of context in the outcomes of this event and how the factors that were not related to social media were so important that the outcomes ended up being radically different (Gire, 2015). This is why, on the more general conclusions, this Final Degree Project will have these authors and articles as its ideological pillars.

2.B.ii Definition of social media

As to the definition of social media and the parameters into which this term fits, this Final Degree Project will be based on a defined set of ideas. Being the ample term that it is, it appears to be necessary to set some sort of boundaries in order to define the concept of social media. By having denoted a clear and unified idea of what social media is and it's not, the real impact of social media in the development of the Arab Spring will be easier and clearer to discuss.

At a first glance, some authors like Jimmie Manning offer a short and concise definition, a definition that is usually presented as something along the lines of "the term often used to refer to new forms of media that involve interactive participation" (Manning, 2014). On their part, authors Andreas Kaplan and Michael Haenlein define social media platforms as: "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content" (Kaplan & Haenlein, page 61, 2010)

While not incorrect, the definition of social media could be given in a more complete way that takes in all the perspectives that such a complex idea may have. When defining what social media is and is not, authors Jonathan Obar and Steven Wildman identify two distinct and interesting challenges: the fast rate at which technology expands and evolves and the overlap that exists between social media services and the functions covered with the facilities offered by other communication channels (Obar & Wildman, 2015).

When it comes to the first problem, Obar and Wildman point out that, in the last two decades, platforms like Facebook, Twitter or Instagram have come to existence and gained a very notable popularity. Facebook, which was launched in the year 2004 has now over 2.9 billion users and is present in 156 countries. Twitter, a social media platform that came to existence in the year 2006 has now 229 million users per day, a number that is growing at a fast pace. Instagram, which was launched in 2010, has now over 815 million monthly users, a statistic that is expected to grow to 1.2 billion users by 2023. The point behind Obar and Wildman sharing these statistics is to show that the social media world is expanding at an extremely quick rhythm, something that implies constant evolution and change, especially with the periodical launch of new and popular platforms (id.)

On the other hand, Obar and Wildman discuss that social media platforms offer ways of communication that are similar to the ways offered by other communication technologies. For this, they ask that, if social media platforms offer the capacity to bring people together and make communications and collaborations easier, could communication tools like the telephone, email or the fax machine also be considered as social media platforms? It is an

example to show the diluted limits behind the concept of social media. With these problems in mind, a solid and complete definition will the fundamental in order to set some defined boundaries to an ever-changing and relatively 'ethereal' term.

As a solution, Obar and Wildman synthesize four ideas that end up creating a defined and complete definition for the term of social media. They first state that "currently, social media services are Web 2.0 Internet-based applications." (id.). What this means is that the communication that has to take place in the social media platforms is bidirectional. More than a consumer of information, the social media platforms user is both a consumer and a producer, a term that is actually known as "prosumer" (Collins Dictionary, 2022). These platforms come to existence with the idea of enabling the users to "create, interact, collaborate and share in the process of creating as well as consuming content" (Obar & Wildman, 2015). Obar and Wildman bring another key idea to the definition of social media with a statement defending that "user-generated content is the lifeblood of social media." What they mean with this is that, if Web 2.0 is seen as the idea behind social media interactions, the content created by the users is what makes the social media itself work. Without content created by users, social media platforms would be condemned to failure, as they would not be tapping into the most basic demands of what social media is supposed to offer. The third statement Obar and Wildman make is that "individuals and groups create user specific profiles for a site or app designed and maintained by a social media service." (id.). What this means is that, at almost all times, social media platforms would allow the user to create an account that represents them in an exclusive way, giving it an identity and differentiating it from the rest. Finally, Obar and Wildman state that social media services "facilitate the development of social networks online by connecting a profile with those of other individuals and/or groups." Social media platforms put the user in a situation where connecting with other users is a simple and sometimes encouraged act.

With these ideas and definition stated, this Final Degree Project will base the idea of social media platforms and their defining features on what has previously been discussed.

2.B.iii <u>Ways and examples of different popular social media platforms and their success in appealing to the general public and creating engagement.</u>

In short, it could be said that there are some features that make social media platforms appealing for the general public to join and to stay on the long term. Ideas like establishing a network, creating and maintaining relationships of all type and being able to both produce and consume a wide range of content in different forms are arguably the main ways for successful platforms in today's era. Apart from the key necessities that social media platforms cover, there are other features that add to improve the image of a certain platform. Elements like a nice, intuitive and cohesive design do certainly help when it comes to making a social media platform attractive, but the appeal these platforms have goes beyond these initial concepts. On the next few paragraphs, this Final Degree Project will take a look at the main reasons that explain why different popular social media platforms are so appealing to the general public - starting with Facebook.

A study carried out by the American Psychological Association concluded that Facebook draws and maintains its large number of users for three main reasons. While it is true that these reasons are relatively superficial, it provides a decent picture of the main ideas behind the success of Facebook over the years. On this study, psychologist Lea Winerman States that, while Facebook serves a wide variety of purposes and caters to an extremely large demographic, it's so popular due to its ability to boost self-esteems, satisfy the need for connectedness and maintain offline relationships as well as creating new ones using the platform (Winerman, 2014). The widespread success of Facebook can be explained through basic psychology as, according to psychologist Abraham Maslow, the needs for belonging, love (in whatever form may it be presented) and self-esteem are one of the most primal elements humans need for living a meaningful life (King, 2009).

There are many ways in which Facebook materializes these ideas of belonging and self-esteem, mainly through the different engagement tools that the platform has. As author Thom Tracy argues, Facebook does take a serious interest in engagement, even using the term "engagement rates" in many of its strategic operations (Tracy, 2022). At Facebook, the engagement rate is defined as "the percentage of people who viewed a post and either liked, shared, reacted, or commented on the communication" (Facebook, 2022). Since a higher engagement means a large number of connections between accounts, there is a reachable

conclusion that some benefits can be drawn. This entails that Facebook will try to make its platform as engaging as possible in order to create connections and subsequent benefits from them. For this reason, Facebook has invested extremely large amounts of money in web programming and algorithms that make their platform as efficient and as connective as possible. As a consequence, Facebook and its success can be better pictured, since they target some of the main human necessities and do so in a very sophisticated and efficient way.

On the other hand, there is Twitter, another of the biggest social media platforms in the current world. Before getting into detail, it is convenient to remark that Twitter shares some of the features that make Facebook another popular social media channels so popular. Not only does it target basic human needs like belonging to a community or taking care of the user's self-esteem, but it does so in a very sophisticated way that incorporates elements such as a carefully crafted design or a highly developed algorithm for engagement. However, despite sharing some similarities with Facebook, Twitter has some very defined features that make it so popular among social media users while differentiating it from its competitors. Author Ben Woollams identifies three main reasons behind Twitter's popularity (Woollams, 2021). According to this author, Twitter is a platform with a highly sociable and authentic DNA. Since its creation, Twitter has been a very social platform, where the target of belonging to a community is undoubtably the one that's most worked on. It is a platform where users can create conversations on virtually any topic and develop this conversation at a very fast pace. This idea connects with the second reason behind Twitter's popularity, which is its capacity to keep up with the latest trends and news. Being such a fast-paced platform, Twitter has established itself as the main place where users discuss about trendy topics, breaking news or other fast-paced ideas. As a third element, Woollams identifies what, to him, is the feature that most separates Twitter from the other popular platforms: close collaboration with creators. In August of last year, Twitter announced that it would be "launching an exclusive research community just for creators" (Twitter, 2022), an initiative that would reward proactive collaboration between users and Twitter itself. This initiative, added two other ones like the "Super Follow feature or their highly effective customer service, is one of the reasons that explains why Twitter has stayed at the top of the social media industry for so many years. While other platforms have been criticized by users for implementing changes

that were uncalled for, Twitter has put the user and his interests at the very core of their strategy, something that has played off quite successfully.

It becomes quite clear that social media platforms like Facebook or Twitter are very logical and comfortable places to create communities, express one's ideas and connect with each other. When it comes to the Arab Spring and the process that it entailed, both Facebook and Twitter very successfully covered the communication necessities that came up due to the reasons previously explained. These explained ideas behind Facebook and Twitter's success in strengthening different communities during the Arab Spring will be taken into account when analyzing the impact of social media platforms during the course of the Arab Spring in the upcoming chapters.

2.B.iv <u>Arab Spring: definition and causes</u>

Having looked at the basic ideas behind social media platforms, their definition, the different ways in which they appeal to the general public and in which they create engagement, it is time to look at the historical event of the Arab Spring. This chapter will analyze several ideas regarding this social, political, cultural and economic process. It will first take a look at the definition of the concept and then perform a brief analysis of the causes behind the Arab Springs of Tunisia and Egypt.

When it comes to providing a definition of what the Arab Spring actually was, the Britannica Encyclopedia offers a rather simple yet detailed one. According to them, the Arab Spring is the "wave of pro-democracy protests and uprisings that took place in the Middle East and North Africa beginning in 2010 and 2011 and challenging some of the region's entrenched authoritarian regimes" (Britannica, 2022). Added to this initial definition, Britannica also makes a very interesting and brief explanation of the main concept behind the discourse of the Arab Spring, stating that "the wave began when protests in Tunisia and Egypt toppled their regimes in quick succession, inspiring similar attempts in other Arab countries. Not every country saw success in the protest movement, however, and demonstrators expressing their political and economic grievances were often met with violent crackdowns by their countries' security forces. For detailed coverage of the Arab Spring in individual

countries, *see* Jasmine Revolution (Tunisia), Egypt Uprising of 2011, Yemen Uprising of 2011–12, Libya Revolt of 2011, and Syrian Civil War."

Author Iffat Idris Makes a very interesting and well-informed analysis of the main causes responsible for the rise and intensity of the Arab Spring. Idris differentiate between two types of factors: structural and proximate factors (Idris, 2016). While structural factors are the ones that appeal to political, social, economic and cultural conditions at regional or national levels, proximate factors are the ones with a more immediate form that not always originate from internal issues.

When it comes to the structural factors, Idris points out the following ideas. Firstly, she explains the concept of authoritarian bargain or contract, a practice where the state provides benefits like employment or subsidies for food and energy in exchange of political support. While it is true that this unorthodox practice created a notable middle-class in many countries of the region, as the contract started to break down due to a sum of internal and external problems, the original beneficiaries saw a deterioration in the quality of their lifestyle. Such a deterioration can be seen in quite a few statistics on life quality and satisfaction, which show that, in the last years of the 2000s, people in Tunisia and Egypt were one of the least happy in the world (University of Columbia, 2015). This created a loss of legitimacy of the regimes and a sense of discomfort and anger among the population that didn't or couldn't benefit from this authoritarian contract and a sense of decay and anxiety on the people who actually benefited from this deteriorating contract. As a reaction to the breakdown in the authoritarian contract, under which Egypt and Tunisia were functioning for the last few years, governments had to resort to oppression and violence in order to maintain a rather calm society and impede social upheaval. This would multiply the already existing anger among Egyptians and Tunisians towards the power figures. Following that, there is a demographic reason behind the Arab Spring as, in the previous years, there was a demographic boom that was not followed by consequent structural reforms (Kwiatkiewicz, 2018 ; (Winckler, 2013). Issues like the lack of jobs and the poor quality of the existing ones paired with higher rates of education that led to unemployment created frustration throughout the working population. There was also an element of frustration behind the recently introduced austerity measures as a result of the programs created for structural adjustment due to the 2008 global

crisis. This led to high prices that meant worsened living standards and economic struggle. On top of all that, this region suffered from multilayered corruption by members of the government and powerful institutions at an increasingly larger scale. The difference and contrast between the deteriorating realities of day-to-day people and the lavish lifestyles of the countries' rulers created an even stronger public anger throughout both Egypt and Tunisia.

In short, the regimes existing in Egypt and Tunisia, as well as in many other countries of the region, have a set of characteristics and ways of functioning that were fueling public anger at increasingly worrying rates. Concentration of power in the hands of a small number of people that were all supportive of the cause of the government, a lack of rights such as freedom of expression and organization and a use of force for oppression of opposition added to abuses towards human rights, a high unemployment rate, corruption and inequality created a status quo that was keen for social turbulence to take place at a national level. All this, added to a better access to information, that gave access and visibility to cases of flagrant abuse of the human rights of fellow nationals led to a generalized sense of injustice and consequent anger.

Having looked at the structural problems that caused the Arab Spring, it is now time to look at the proximate factors behind this political movement. As explained previously, the proximate causes of a conflict are the ones that present themselves at a more recent time and that change at a faster pace; they have the potential of accentuating the structural problems that a country already has, escalating into a violent conflict if a combination between both types of factors are unbearable for one of the parts (Herbert, 2017).

In the case of the Arab Spring, there were five main proximate factors that, added to the structural issues that have been already looked at, escalated into such a way. The first and most immediate factor came with a response from the state to the protests that were rising and the way in which they handled them. The governments of both Egypt and Tunisia responded to these protests in a harsh and heavy-handed approach, resisting to the opposition in an overreacted way that aimed to crush it. This governmental response had the opposite effect of what was expected and ended up creating more anger and making the protests happen in higher frequencies and with more force. Another reason behind the quick

expansion of the Arab Spring among the countries North Africa and the Middle East was the demonstration effect that took place starting in Tunisia (Dictionary of Cambridge, 2022). People in other countries, through means of communication such as social media platforms, saw that the protest in Tunisia was having some real effect in the situation of the country and were inspired to start a revolution inside their own borders. Another very important element behind the success of the Arab Spring is the general and generalized identity of the protests and claims made by the protesters. The Arab Spring did not have a specific ideological background nor was it led by anyone in specific, there were no prominent political figures or parties involved in the process. The demands made were so general that almost every segment of the population could get behind the cause, something that created a strong sense of community and a clear division between the ones who held power positions and the rest of the population. In terms of hard power, the national militaries also played a key role, especially in the cases of Tunisia and Egypt. In these two countries, the militaries joined the cause and sided against the national government, something that made presidents Ben Ali and Mubarak quickly resign their roles of Prime Ministers in their respective countries. While this was not the case in Egypt and Tunisia, in other countries the military didn't take a full stance against the government, something that ended up creating civil wars in countries like Libya or Syria (Brooks, 2017).

On top of these proximate factors is the influence that communications channels such as social media platforms provided to orchestrate the movements in the different countries. These platforms played a crucial role in raising awareness towards the human rights abuses made by the government, like the cases of Muhammed Bouazizi in Tunisia or Khaled Saeed in Egypt – particular cases which will be discussed further on. These platforms also contributed in the organization and mobilization of protesters and in establishing a community of free communications where everyone could be listened and feel part of a group.

Having briefly analyzed the definition and causes behind the rise and spread of the Arab Spring in the countries of northern Africa and the Middle East, it is now time to pose a question that is key to understand the proposal of this Final Degree Project. In the following chapter, this paper will try to analyze whether if state-imposed censorship helps to create political obedience or if it creates political rebellion.

2.B.v Does state-imposed censorship create political and societal obedience or does it create political and societal rebellion?

One of the questions posed by this Final Degree Project revolves around the relation between censorship and social obedience. It is a fact that, at a larger or smaller level, there was some sort of censorship in every state affected by the Arab Spring. Having already discussed in a general way the role of social media in this political upheaval, there is an even more abstract question that needs to be addressed: does state-imposed censorship create political and societal obedience or does it create political and societal rebellion?

Before addressing this question, it is necessary to define in a more concrete way what does censorship mean in our current context. According to the Britannica Encyclopaedia, censorship is "the changing or the suppression or prohibition of speech or writing that is deemed subversive of the common good. It occurs in all manifestations of authority to some degree, but in modern times it has been of special importance in its relation to government and the rule of law." (Britannica, 2022)

It is logical to assume that censorship may be one of the main ways to reduce the right of freedom of speech to a person or society. However, there are more effects to an imposed censorship from the state towards society. Author Daniel Bar-Tal makes a rather interesting reflection on the main ways in which state-imposed censorship affects societal behaviour. The main conclusions of his research state that, on a societal level, censorship tends to reinforce the creation and reproduction of certain dogmas and practices for the plain reason that the truth is being held from the public. His last idea is the consequence of a public debate status quo that has been impoverished, something that leads to public ignorance as well as poor decision-making in both individual and societal actions. He also adds that censorship may cause a deterioration in the morale of society and a sense of anger towards the entity that's holding the information if there is knowledge that the censorship is taking place. (Bar-Tal, 2017).

This last paragraph applies in a very familiar way to the process of the Arab Spring in both Tunisia and Egypt. Egyptian and Tunisian societies, having the authoritative and opaque governments that they had, lived in a state of ignorance, where public debate about topics of national interest were impoverished and where morales were low due to a consciousness that public information was being held by the governments. The state of ignorance created a set of dogmas that were given a negative aspect due to the discontent among the population towards the ruling class. These dogmas reinforced the ideas of inefficiency, corruption and overall poor governance that were one of the main reasons behind the Arab Spring.

If the situation was already unfavourable to the Tunisian and Egyptian governments, there is a study carried out by researchers Stephen Worchel and Susan Arnold that worsens things even more. On their article *The effects of censorship and attractiveness of the censor attitude change*, these authors study the effects of censored communications in regards to a group of people. The study draws some conclusions that further the explanation on the causes of the rise of the Arab Spring

After carrying out several tests such as focus groups and psychological tests and having discovered the results of their study, Worchel and Arnold arrived to a main conclusion. The authors state that, when faced with an explicit censorship, the audience adopts two main positions: they are majorly in favour of getting rid of the censorship in question and their desire to know what's being concealed gets noticeably higher. These effects are deeply rooted in the behavioural nature of humans and does not experiment major changes when cultural differences come into play. While it is true that the desire to unveil the truth can be diminished by the fear of governmental repression, the urge to find out the truth will be present regardless (Worchel & Arnold, 1973).

In the specific cases of Tunisia and Egypt, these conditions were also present in the year 2010, when the Arab Spring was born. As mentioned in the previous paragraphs, there was already a situation of anger and discontent towards the oppression and censorship carried out by the governments of both countries. Societies in both countries knew that their governments were hiding information from them, but they also were aware that their governments weren't as

repressive towards oppositionist behaviours as other authoritarian regimes. What this means is that, having the curiosity to find out and dismantle the opacity of the government, they weren't as afraid as other countries would be to do the same thing. All these ideas put into context and added to the presence and influence of social media as a communication facilitator, serve also as an example of why the Arab Spring took place at relatively the same time in two countries sitting over 2000 km away from each other.

It could be said then that, in the case of Egypt and Tunisia during the Arab Spring, the pre-existing censorship created an atmosphere of political rebellion, since the anger against the censorship that was being carried out wasn't met with an equivalent sense of fear that would impede citizens from taking action.

2.C. <u>Methodology</u>

There have been different sources of research and analysis involved in the crafting and making of this Final Degree Project that are certainly worth discussing. For that, this chapter will describe in a clear and detailed way the procedure of analysis that has taken place in order to craft this Final Degree Project and fulfil the different investigations involved in it. It will serve as a tool to identify the way in which the original question of the project has been developed into a final conclusion that will offer a solution to said question.

Due to its own nature, the methodology for this Final Degree Project will mainly consist in the revision of critical and analytical bibliography and its subsequent examination, with the aim of answering the original questions posed by this investigation. As a part of this research, the methodology will consist on the study of different academic articles coming from various authors and researchers with different backgrounds and opinions. These academic articles, however, are based on a plethora of sources, ranging from empirical and measurable data coming from data banks, to primary sources found all over the Internet, to research activities made by the authors themselves, to previously written studies on different topics. It is a wide range of sources that will assure that the Final Degree Project has a diverse and solid ideological basis. Some of the ideas coming from the different authors whose work is part of

this research process and the ideas drawn by this project will be backed with pieces of primary sources such as links to videos, screenshots that support the displayed ideas and other sorts of audio-visual content that will make the research more illustrative and detailed. These ideas will serve as a basis to draw a further personal analysis and conclusion of the exposed facts.

By combining these different conclusions, opinions and pieces of primary evidence found on the Internet, this Final Degree Project will aim to offer a clear answer that assesses the true impact of social media platforms in the rise and consolidation of the Arab Springs in Egypt and Tunisia.

3. Looking into social network services

As a recap, along the different chapters included in the theoretical framework, this Final Degree Project has discussed a variety of topics relating social media, its influence on the Arab Spring, the very definition of the term of social media, how the different social media platforms engage and appeal to the general public, the definition and causes of the Arab Spring and a brief debate on whether if state-imposed censorship creates political obedience or a lack of it. With the basics of each of the main ideas covered, it is now time to develop the idea of social media. Specifically, this following chapter will discuss the impact that social media platforms have on our current society at a more generalized level when it comes to political influence and agenda setting. It will try to draw some come to conclusions that will aim to give a better feel of how embedded social media culture is in our current society.

3.A. Impact they have on the agenda-setting in our current society

As discussed in some of the previous points, social media has cultivated a remarkable success due to a set of very defined characteristics. Features like allowing the user to express its opinions and being able to hear what others are saying, establishing communities and creating links between users are concepts that, before social media, didn't exist with such sophistication on the Internet. Among other reasons, these features can explain why, in a bit under two decades, social media users are counted in billions. These platforms have become so popular that they are now able to be among the top actors in many of the areas that they compete in. Being communication platforms, it wouldn't be wrong to assume that they are

also fundamental actors in many areas of the sector of communication.

This is a strong truth when it comes to the creation and spread of news and information of all sorts, a field where they now are competing head-to-head with traditional media channels like newspapers, television programmes or radio broadcasts. These traditional media channels - which have been responsible for giving a voice to the topics of importance since their creation - are now being challenged by an outside force that's gaining a very fast growth. The new situation has put these traditional channels in a place where they have to coexist with the new forces and assume their loss of total influence (Vowe & Henn, 2016).

Many theorists have tried to weigh the influence of social media platforms when it comes to deciding what topics or current issues have a higher or lower degree of importance and if they should be put in the front row of relevancy or stay at a more low-key plane. This activity, crucial in communication as a whole but even more so in political communication, could also be worded as agenda setting. Agenda setting is a theory of political communication proposed in 1972 by academics Donald Shaw and Maxwell McCombs. In a very interesting way, these authors explain the concept of agenda setting with the following ideas: "In choosing and displaying news, editors, newsroom staff and broadcasters play an important part in shaping political reality. Readers learn not only about a given issue, but also how much importance to attach to that issue from the amount of information in a news story and its position. In reflecting what candidates are saying during a campaign, the mass media may well determine the important issues—that is, the media may set the "agenda of the campaign." (Shaw & McCombs, Page 176, 1972).

The concept of agenda setting and this chapter as a whole can be considered of high importance when it comes to the influence that social media had over the rise and spread of the Arab Spring. As explained in previous chapters, a great part of the Arab Spring happened following a protest effect, first in Tunisia and, from there, in other countries of the region. In Tunisia -and partly through social media platforms – citizens started saying that some protesters were taking the streets to vindicate their frustration towards the Tunisian government. Since the Tunisian traditional means of communication were backed by the government, they didn't put a lot of effort in covering these initial actions, so there was only one large channel that would have the task of giving a voice to these protesters: social media.

Soon, users from all over the country and from the international community started seeing the reasons why Tunisian protesters were motivated to act. In short, not only were they seeing that some citizens were out on the streets protesting, they also started to read in more depth about the reasons why this was happening. The topics of these protests started to be more discussed between Tunisians and the international community. This process soon started taking place in other countries that followed Tunisia in protesting against their government and seeking for long-term change in the political atmosphere. It becomes rather clear that social media had a decisive role in the agenda setting of this process and the further political changes brought by it. While, as seen in previous chapters, there is a general consensus on the notable influence of social media platforms in the setting of agendas, this Final Degree Project will try to analyse the ways in which this process functions for social media channels and the true impact that they have an agenda setting.

Tunisian protesters taking the streets in protests against the government, a pioneer act in the region that would soon serve as inspiration to other nearby countries.

Before seeing the real impact that social media platforms have in agenda setting, it is very helpful to understand the process that social media platforms undergo in the activities of agenda setting. The following paragraphs will explain the ways in which Facebook and Twitter

engage its users to information of public interest. Specifically, the way in which it conglomerates the many ideological and interest clusters into just a few and makes a large percentage of the users engage with a small number of social, political and economic topics. This homogenization of a web where the interests of users are complexly fragmented is key to set agendas, as now these topics of interest will be looked at by a large percentage of the billions of users that social media platforms like Facebook or Twitter have.

Apart from the already discussed methods of the trending topics, liking and hitting *favourite* or reposting tools used by platforms like Facebook or Twitter, the main way in which social media platforms tend to make certain topics be acknowledged by a large group of the population is demonstrated by a study carried out by several Italian academics. After analysing a sample of 1.2 million Facebook users from Italy, the six researchers discovered that there is a correlation between experiences of users across different contents in matters of ideology and the number of Facebook friends following similar patterns of material consumption. This term, known as homophily, exists to give a concept to a tendency that Facebook has; it shows similar types of content to users that are either friends, have the same person as a friend or are in similar contexts regarding geography, lifestyle or social life (Anagnostopoulos, Bessi, Caldarelli, Del Vicario, Petroni, Scala, Zollo et al., 2014). What homophily does is that it creates separate and distinguishable groups that are more or less homogenized and can be targeted with information of interest. The creation of a few distinguishable groups follows a rather simple logic, as it could not be feasible to expect that every single user will be willing to consume one type of information, therefore these ideas have to adapt to the different groups that end up forming in Facebook as a result of this homophily. If one group is shown a pattern of information that clashes with the pattern of information shown to another group, the consequence of this will be the creation of a polarised system where there is an opposition of groups based on ideological assumptions. As discussed, the normal consequence of polarization is the separation of a progressive nature of different homogeneous groups that end up clashing with each other (id.) This is the case in many contexts and societies, where there are uncountable examples all around us, be it in politics, culture, religion or many other aspects.

A very interesting approach to this polarization is showcased by South Korean researchers Yonghwan Kim and Youngju Kim, who carried out a study to show the attitude presented by readers in relation to the kind of posts they receive in their feed (Kim & Kim, 2019). The study distinguished between two types of posts, the ones under the umbrella of civility and the ones that fell under the category of incivility – meaning, the posts that incited obedience towards the ruling establishment and the posts that encouraged political insubordination. Another factor was the level of factual backing that each post had, meaning that some posts offered more backup information and some posts didn't have any sources or additional content related to it. The study showed two main takeaways that demonstrate a clear link between social media, agenda setting, polarization and the political upheaval that came with the Arab Spring (id.). The first one is that, when being exposed to comments under the uncivilised category, users saw an increase in their anger levels and a decrease in the interest of reading other opinions on the idea. This last part doesn't mean that they didn't want to read more at all, it just means that didn't want to contrast the received information with other points of view. This increase in anger and decrease in interest of expanding the view, added to the term of homophily, where users from similar backgrounds receive similar blocks of information, creates a very delicate situation in terms of social attitudes. Kim and Kim also reach the conclusion that the posts having or not having supporting evidence or further content, didn't have any significant effects on the outcomes of the levels of anger or interest to expand one's knowledge levels (id.). To summarise, not only are there groups that are clearly identified and that share similar views on different topics, but they also feedback on each other with similar posts, lose interest in reading all the posts and see their levels of anger on the rise, a clearly identifiable vicious circle towards polarization (id.).

However, in some cases – especially in politics – this vicious circle of enraged, close minded and homogenised groups goes to a further extent. In some cases, these different groups start to be overridden by a single ideology, which starts to line them behind a unified great dimension; this experience is two-faced, though, meaning that this trend of unification follows two axis that end up creating two opposed ideas. This term, which has the name of pernicious polarization, is very interestingly defined by authors Jennifer McCoy and Tahmina Rahman. When talking about pernicious polarization, they define it as an event when "these differences become aligned within (normally two) camps with mutually exclusive identities

and interests.". They add that, "at the extreme, each camp comes to perceive the "Other" in such negative terms that a normal political adversary with whom to engage in a competition for power it's transformed into an enemy posing an existential threat to be vanquished." (McCoy & Rahman, Page 2, 2016). In some occasions, this confrontation is so big and misbalanced that it ends up basically amounting to an extremely large percent of society against an extremely small percent of society.

The case of Egypt and Tunisia in the Arab Spring is a very good example of how social media shifted the agenda to a point where there was an extremely large homogenous group that antagonized the government. By having such a large percentage of society on the same ideological and rhetorical standpoint, social media platforms made this group create a loop of feedback and a situation of polarization, where almost everybody escalated their negative position towards the government. This whole idea is a very good example of how social media took a role on the rise and spread of the Arab Spring in Egypt and Tunisia, among other countries. Users from platforms like Facebook or Twitter started sharing content on the abuses, corruption, inefficiencies and irregularities that their respective governments were carrying out. Soon, these posts started getting more explicitly directed against the government and showing content with a more intense and generalised appeal to other users. As time passed, these posts started turning into calls for action, ranging between small parades, to large demonstrations and, soon enough, to violent revolts.

Therefore, it can be said that social media platforms do affect the process of agenda setting, something that reached the extreme case of pernicious polarization in the process of the Arab Spring, seen in Egypt and Tunisia. Now that this paper has discussed the main ideas revolving around social media, the Arab Spring, the relation between both terms and the ways in which social media can influence political activism, it is time to see how these ideas apply to real case scenarios. For that, as it has been previously explained in various chapters, this paper will take a look at two specific cases, which are the processes of Egypt and Tunisia during the Arab Spring. The paper will take a look at particular cases that showcase the level of influence that social media platforms had over the political process that took place a decade ago. It will start by looking at the events that took place in Tunisia and then the ones that took place in Egypt, two countries where the Arab Spring had a huge impact on their political, social and

economic paths.

Through threads like this one, Egyptian and Tunisian citizens started escalating their points of view against the government, now, apart from spreading information, people started calling for action

4. Social media and the development of the Arab Spring
    a. Case studies: particular outcomes in the main affected countries and the role that social media had in each place

        i. Tunisia and the Jasmine revolution

Looking at the process and discourse of the Arab Spring, Tunisia can't be left out of the equation. As it is the country that started this whole historical event and, along with Egypt, the country that saw the most major changes to its status quo, it may result quite logical to begin by looking at this country. As this paper has already mentioned, there were many causes behind the Arab Spring, in Tunisia and in other countries. Elements like a poor democracy, an extended plutocracy, poor freedom of expression and organization, abuses towards human

rights, economic stagnation and unemployment, corruption and a multi layered structure of inequalities were very present in society, something that citizens of the different countries had been suffering for years. Concentration of power in the hands of a small number of people that were all supportive of the cause of the government, a lack of rights such as freedom of expression and organization and a use of force for oppression to opposition added to abuses towards human rights, a high unemployment rate, corruption and inequality created a status quo that was keen for social turbulence to take place at a national level. All this, added to a better access to information that gave access and visibility to cases of flagrant abuse of the human rights of fellow nationals led to a generalized sense of injustice and consequent anger. In this complex and detrimental scenario, social media was one of the main tools that allowed the Arab Spring to have the intensity and spread it had. This chapter is going to showcase two examples that will give the whole exposed theory a practical scope, showing how social media helped in the process of the Arab Spring.

The first and probably most important case in Tunisia and the Arab Spring comes with the event that is stated by many to be the trigger of the Arab Spring itself: the case of Mohamed Bouazizi (Lageman, 2020). This case shows in a very clear way the abusive tendencies of the autocratic regimes present in northern Africa and the Middle East at the start of the 2010s. His death led to a process that concluded in the step down of Ben Ali, who had been president of the country for the last 23 years; the success of the Arab Spring in Tunisia, known as well as the jasmine Revolution, was seen as a very successful movement and soon served as an inspiration for other countries of the region to undergo similar processes. According to the New York Times, he is widely regarded as one of the "heroic martyrs of a new North African and Middle Eastern revolution" (Worth, 2011).

As a context to understand the story of Bouazizi, it is necessary to understand that he was a 26-year-old vegetable merchant on the streets of Sidi Bouzid, a figure that many find relatable and can identify with the average worker of Tunisian society. At the time, Bouazizi was the only member of his family of eight that was earning a salary and economically sustaining his household. In mid-December 2010, in an apparently very avoidable way, Bouazizi was intercepted by a public officer that took away his cart and produce. After a failed attempt to

bribe the officers and avoid the situation from escalating (a common activity in countries with such a rate of corruption), a quarrel broke out that ended up with him getting beaten by a police officer. Extremely upset by the whole situation, Bouazizi showed up at the provincial headquarters of his government to register a complaint about what had just happened and trying to get his working means back. There, he was completely ignored by the public workers and was refused an audience. Less than an hour had passed since his failed interaction with the officers at the public office, when Bouazizi showed up to the same building, drenched himself in a flammable liquid, struck a match and immolated himself. Public anger soon erupted after this event, something that led to protests that same day. Both the immolation and the violent response of police officers to the protests of that day, the following day, the intensity of the activities carried out by the protesters saw an increase. Social media platforms had already started to spread images of Bouazizi burning and the first protests being carried out, but it all stayed under the radar. In an attempt to avoid further escalations, President Ben Ali showed up to the hospital where Bouazizi was staying at, an action that he took advantage of and spread through his controlled media channels. A few weeks later, Bouazizi passed away. With the aid of social media platforms to call for action, set details and organize, thousands of people attended to his funeral, where attendees were banned from marching through the place of the immolation. There, some chants started to appear, saying "Farewell, Mohamed, we will avenge you. We weep for you today. We will make those who caused your death weep." – things were starting to escalate in Tunisia (France 24, 2011).

An uneased Ben Ali visits Bouazizi in his hospital bed to show consternation for his action, he of course entered the room surrounded by reporters that would broadcast his action to the rest of the country.

Social media was key in this escalation as, despite the attempts of the state-owned media channels to suppress what had happened, these platforms served as a tool for the Jasmine revolution to take place. All of a sudden, people started seeing content on YouTube, articles in Facebook and Twitter and joked about the dictator through SMS, blogs or other channels. This happened in a place and time where, previous to this event, the main channel for criticism against the government came from the blogosphere, with sites like Nawaat taking the lead on the digital opposition, something that was controlled in a higher or lower degree by the government. Other platforms like social media had a secondary role in political activism at that time. An example of this control over the blogosphere came when Nawaat published a series of pictures of the president's private plane parked near exclusive shopping destinations throughout Europe, an activity that they accused Ben Ali's wife of being a part of. When these pictures were leaked, the government carried out a crackdown of this and

other blogs and temporarily put a stop to this online activism. (Tavaana, 2020). However, the new identity of these protests was defined by a multi-channeled process in which they were carried out, following a recent tendency where there wasn't just one main channel that was calling for change. After the death of Bouazizi, these criticisms didn't just stay in the digital realm, they were carried out to the streets.

Ben Ali's government tried to stop this process, attempting to ban social media channels like Facebook, Twitter or YouTube and jailing a group of bloggers in early January 2011 (Madrigal, 2011), but this was an even more complex matter. This relates to the multiplicity of layers that these communication channels had, since there were so many ways of distributing information and calling for action that there was no clear leader on the streets, and identifiable leading figure of the opposition or charismatic mass mover to call for action. It is true that there were some prominent figures like artist Slim Amamou (who later became a member of the new government), Tunisian exile Sami ben Gharbia, who kept track of the censorship efforts by the government and shed a light on different communication alternatives or rapper El Général, whose song *Rise Lebled* has been described by many as the anthem of the Jasmine Revolution, but none of them had a determinant role in this process (Hebblethwaite, 2011). The multiplicity of channels, the lack of a clear leader and the ways in which the Tunisian people were managing to get around the censorship efforts put President Ben Ali in a very complicated position. On January 14, a bit over a month after Bouazizi's death, Ben Ali fled Tunisia for Saudi Arabia in search of political exile. In other countries of the region, political upheaval had already started, taking a serious stance in countries like Oman, Yemen or Jordan and meaning minor political instability in places like Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Sudan or Mauritania. A very important part of the Tunisian revolution for the region is the digital scope it had, as other countries of North Africa and the Middle East were now actively educating themselves in the digital world. This education was given especially from a partisan point of view, as these technological adaptations were made to create political change. We see then that, in Tunisia, not only the tools that social media offered were important, but also the multiplicity of channels and the government's struggle to impose censorship on such a complex and dynamic way of communication (Howard & Hussain, 2013). With this being said, it is time to take a look at how the revolution went in Egypt, a country that used social media platforms in a more explicit way in the process of a change in society and politics.

ii. Egypt and the 25th of January revolution

It is true that the revolution in Egypt officially started after the one in Tunisia, but the many conditions for its success had already been brewing for quite some time. To start with, the digital landscape in Egypt was way more favorable than the one existing in Tunisia as, after Iran, the country had the region's second largest population of Internet users (United Nations, 2009). On top of that and, as previously mentioned, the revolution in Tunisia had already served as a precedent for Egypt to be inspired by. The government, in a not very reluctant way, spread the news that Ben Ali had already fled Tunisia, but decided to omit the larger scope of the protests and demonstrations that were starting to take place in Cairo. Similar to Tunisia, the world of digital political activism also existed but, since the Egyptian government struggled to maintain a state of censorship in these spheres, they were more popular and developed against censorship in this country. Having the status quo in terms of digital development that Egypt had, it could be feasible that it followed a holistic process of political rebellion, in a more exaggerated way than what happened in Tunisia. However, what turned digital activism into a full-on revolution was a Facebook site in memory of a murdered blogger, Khaled Said. Wael Ghonim, an Egyptian Google executive, created a Facebook group with the name of *We Are All Khaled Said* as a tribute and a way to keep him in public memory. Said, an Egyptian blogger, was arrested and beaten to death by police officers after attempts by his part to expose the corruption of his country's government (Logan, 2011). As it had happened with Bouazizi, a picture was taken of Said at the morgue by his brother; the picture was a close-up of his face, totally disfigured by the severe beating that he had received that day. This picture went from the phone of Said's brother to thousands of other cell phones in a matter of hours. In the next few days, Said's memorial page started to become a hub of people expressing their condolences, but also hub of community and political organization. From here on, Ghonim stepped up as the new leading figure of the political movement in Egypt, in both national and international spheres. Through this page and the logistical efforts made there, the first demonstrations in Tahrir Square started to take place.

Protesters waving a poster showing Khaled's face before and after his encounter with the Egyptian police. Not only was this event a very big scandal but his death homage page served as a center of operations for the protests of the Egyptian Arab Spring.

A big part of the protesters in this process were members of the middle class that had a rather advanced level of education but lacked an access to jobs in a system that was structurally unable to provide them (The World Bank, 2015). This level of education meant that the protesters were able to manipulate digital platforms and social media channels in a quite effective way. Through platforms like Facebook or Twitter, users established communities, sent help to each other in different ways and called for real action, further away from just the Internet. This profile of protester is the one that had the protagonism on the Internet; they shared news and interventions made by president Hosni Mubarak, responses from leaders of the international community and witness testimonies from citizens all over the country. Through these means, protests started to get more intense and frequent and President Mubarak started to see the real danger that this was meaning towards his government.

Mural of a beaten Khaled Said, who's figure became a national symbol of the uprising and whose Facebook memorial page served as the main channel for users to engage with each other.

By the end of January of 2011, a growingly upset Mubarak tried to disconnect his country from the Internet, something that didn't have the results that he expected (BBC, 2011). This was unsuccessful due to reasons like the anticipation of technology experts that this was going to happen and the preparation for overcoming this inconvenience by pre-securing Internet from the outside. Another factor was the inefficiency of the public institutions to unplug themselves from the Internet at the same time, something that users took advantage of. Apart from the inefficiency of the government to simultaneously shut down its country from the Internet, they also had to face economical backlashes, as many public agencies took a stab from being wiped out of the international network for a few days. However, the most notable effect that this had was that the middle-class users that were so involved with digital platforms, as a lack of a connection to Internet, actually started going out to the streets in massive numbers. Soon after this and after having assured that he would not leave his

position as president until the elections of September, Vice President Omar Suleiman announced that President Mubarak had resigned (Kirkpatrick, 2011) – the revolution in Egypt had been deemed as a success. In the case of Egypt, it is seen that social media platforms like Facebook or Twitter had a very important role on the outcomes of the Arab Spring. Not only did it trigger a cascade of political upheaval across the country, but also served as a platform for organization, logistics and activism that was key to overcome the difficulties imposed by the Egyptian government. Social media was more present here than in Tunisia for several reasons. Firstly, Egypt had a more developed sphere of digital presence, meaning that more people had access to the Internet and was familiar with social media platforms like Facebook or Twitter. Added to that is the demography of the protesters which, unlike Tunisia (where the protesters were more demographically distributed), consisted of a large percentage of middle-class young citizens that were informed on the situation and had a better condition of how to exploit social media platforms for political activism and organization. Lastly, they had the precedent of Tunisia, a country that inspired the population to rise against a dictator that had been in power for 30 years but also showed them the ways in which an autocratic government could impose censorship on the population. Another difference between Tunisia and Egypt was that, in Egypt, there were more concrete places from which the revolution developed. This unification of messages and calls for action meant a higher effectivity in the process of the Egyptian Arab Spring, a process that put an end to an autocratic regime that had been deeply rooted in Egyptian power for as long as many could remember.

7. Conclusions

   a. What was the real impact of social media on these political and social movements?

After having taken a look at the main general theories and how they apply to the case studies of Egypt and Tunisia in the Arab Spring, it is now time to assess a conclusion on how social media platforms really affected the process of these different Arab Springs. As mentioned in the theoretical framework, different authors attributed a different level of influence to these platforms in the political processes of both countries. Alternatively, this paper has reached the idea that this influence needs to be assessed separately, as the Internet and social media platforms didn't have the same function and influence in the two analyzed countries. For that, it will compare some of the main aspects in which the revolution and the social media platforms interacted and then apply each idea to the scope of Tunisia and Egypt, showcasing the different results that each other had. In the end, the paper will make a final conclusion of a more general nature.

To begin with, the digital atmosphere in each country was different and had a different degree of presence, being more developed in Egypt and starting to truly develop in Tunisia. The demographics were also an important factor, as the main percentage of the population behind the Egyptian revolution were young Egyptian citizens coming from an educated middle-class. What this means is that, not only were they more aware of the corrupt system, the inefficiencies and injustices that were part of the regime, but they also had better skills to manipulate digital communication channels for their benefit. On the other hand, in Tunisia, the demographics behind the protests came from a wider social and demographic background and were less prone to successfully use these channels, making them less efficient and giving the Jasmine Revolution a more chaotic organization. This is both reflected in the differences between both countries regarding a lack of presence of clear leading figures and digital places where messages were spread and action was organized. While in Tunisia the protests were organized via random posts on Facebook or SMS messages and blogs like Nawaat, Egypt's political activism was mainly done through the Facebook page dedicated to commemorate Khaled Said. Such a different status quo in the organization of communications had positive

and negative aspects for each country. For Tunisia, this lack of organization made the government struggle more in order to impose censorship, as there was not a clearly identifiable choke point for them to squeeze. On the other hand, for Egypt, the downside of an identifiable target to oppress was compensated by the prevention and expertise that users had in order to keep safety in their communication tools. As a matter of fact, both governments attempted to ease down the situation through the use of censorship but, once again, similar actions carried out different results. While in Tunisia it didn't have much of a result, in Egypt it backlashed in the form of economic difficulties for public bodies working for the government and an increase in real life participation due to a lack of digital activism. As a final idea of the comparative analysis, it is also convenient to mention the timeframe in which both revolutions happened, as Tunisia served as a precedent for Egypt to be inspired by and analyze the actions carried out in the former country. What this means in terms of social media usage is that, in Egypt, they were used in a more sophisticated way, anticipating the actions that an autocratic government would carry out in similar cases. This sophistication, added to the concentration of messages and calls for action in varied communication channels, means that the revolution in Egypt can be attributed in a higher percentage to the role of social media than the Jasmine Revolution.

On a more general scope, there are also some conclusions that this paper has come to on the real role that social media platforms like Facebook or Twitter had on the discourse of the Egyptian and Tunisian Arab Spring processes. After having exposed and analyzed all the ideas around which this paper revolves, it can be said that the amount of influence that social media had on this process is rather debatable. To put it in a clear idea, these platforms did what they were designed to, they facilitated communication and connected people, giving them the opportunity to be part of a group following a tangible goal. It is true that this is a very important part of the process itself, but social media had nothing to do with the Arab Spring from an ideological point of view. As logical as it may seem, it was not the existence of Twitter or Facebook what triggered the Arab Spring, but rather the structural problems the region had been suffering for quite a long time. Issues like a chronic lack of employment, corruption at almost every level of power, huge inequalities or an inefficiency in the distribution of public income had already created a generalized atmosphere of anger and resentment towards the ruling establishment. A great percentage of the Tunisian and Egyptian populations had

already had enough of their governments and figures of power - they just needed a way to unite and organize in order to seek change. This reflection can be put in a more metaphorical way; it could be said that, while all these structural issues were the content of the Arab Spring, the use of social media contributed to the continent of the process, meaning that it just served as a tool to canalize the wishes of these populations for a better society. Be it in a more organized or chaotic way, both countries used these channels for organizing protests, sharing information and expressing opinions and, in that way, they can definitely be seen as influential. As a matter of fact, nine out of ten Egyptians and Tunisians affirmed on a survey that they engaged with Facebook to organize protests, share information and spread awareness of what was going on (Huang, 2011). However, if these channels didn't exist in that region at that time, sooner or later the populations would probably have had enough and looked for alternative ways to carry out this political process. This is the reason why the statement of the rather relative influence that social media channels had in the early spring was expressed, as they did help the process and made it successful but their existence didn't change for better or worse the initial status quo that led to a state of anger in the region.

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