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Digital media and the acceleration of resistance

– *Findings from the 2010/11 Tunisian revolution*¹

Abstract

This article is concerned with providing empirical evidence relating to the use of digital media and resistance during the so-called Arab Spring events. These events have been widely acknowledged as a case where digital media significantly contributed to the successful attainment of movements' objectives. The use of such innovative technologies has been tied to the characteristics and, ultimately, the ends of these movements, with their 'youthful', 'leaderless' and 'spontaneous' nature reflecting Western-orientated practices. However, the analysis presented here utilises interview data obtained from participants in the 2010/11 Tunisian Revolution, detailing their perspectives and explanations of digital media's role. The data and analysis show that while such technologies were a useful tool, their prominence has been exaggerated and offers a flawed understanding of the events. Rather, the social change being pursued during the Tunisian revolution was profound. Therefore, the deeper implications of the common emphasis on digital media in the literature is explored, with Rosa's (2015) assessment of social acceleration being informative for elaborating on the nuances of these technologies' use during the 2010/11 events. With technical acceleration linked to the prominence given to online networks' utility for resistance, Rosa's analysis of such acceleration in relation to acceleration of social change and the pace of life helps to clarify why looking beyond online technology for the implications of resistance during the so-called Arab Spring is so important. In this regard, one of these implications is introduced, namely the constructive forms of resistance that may provide a space for alternative understandings of modernity.

Keywords: Tunisian revolution, Arab Spring, resistance, acceleration, grounded theory

SOME OF THE explanations of the so-called Arab Spring, or the 2010/11 West Asia North Africa (WANA) events, have placed particular emphasis on the role and contribution of digital media for the activists and movements involved. As well as being considered useful tools, social media in particular has been deemed as fundamentally shaping and accelerating dynamics of organisation, mobilisation and opposition. This

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position is too simplistic, and I seek to show why this is the case. Accordingly, a key focus of this article concerns how the use of digital media in relation to resistance during the 2010/11 events is far more complex, as revealed through the analysis of interview data from the Tunisian context.

Relatedly, this article focuses on assessing the deeper implications of the common emphasis on digital media in the literature, with Rosa's (2015) theory of social acceleration being applied in this regard. Technology as an aspect of modernity has been analysed in relation to concepts of acceleration and indeed power, for example Curtis' (2016) fascinating assessment of 'hypernormalisation', or chrono-politics in relation to orientalism (Mignolo, 2011: 178). However, Rosa's (2015) *Social Acceleration: A New Theory of Modernity* is a particularly useful means of exploring the actual significance of digital media as a signifier of modernity in relation to the 2010/11 WANA events. Thus, a further focus of my research here is positing one example of important action outside of the digital media emphasis, namely the constructive forms of resistance during the Tunisian revolution that may provide a space for alternative understandings of modernity.

Below I begin by broadly introducing digital media and resistance during the 2010/11 WANA events generally, and how the centrality of such technologies as defining resistance at that time and subsequently has been solidified as a narrative. Subsequently, Rosa's theory of social acceleration is outlined followed by an explanation of my grounded theory research method. After this I detail some of the interviewees' accounts of the role of digital media, then return to discuss Rosa's theory and the deeper implications of an emphasis on such technologies. Considering digital media not just in relation to Rosa's aspect of technical acceleration, but also acceleration of social change and acceleration of the pace of life, enables a much deeper critique of such technologies' role.

Digital Media and Resistance during the 2010/11 WANA Events

The 1994 Zapatista uprising in Mexico received significant attention for its exploitation of digital media and interaction with transnational civil society, being defined as a novel 'netwar' (see Holloway & Peláez, 1998: 9–10; Arquilla & Ronfeldt, 2001). Thus, although the focus on digital media during the WANA revolutions is not new, it did mark a significant trend in the media and literature. This may have reflected a quest for rapid, simple narratives around identifiable, perhaps 'westernised' figureheads, such as Google employee Wael Ghonim in Egypt (Giglio, 2011; Parvaz, 2012). Ghonim's (2012) personal account is somewhat more nuanced, emphasising aspects of communication beyond social media (143–148). In Tunisia, it was proposed that online activism merely reflected what was occurring offline (Filiu, 2011: 51,53). Ultimately however, the sense from early research on the 2010/11 WANA revolutions (see Ayari, 2011; Filiu, 2011: 51,53,66; Castells, 2012: 3,235,238,294; Fisher, 2011: 151) is an emphasis on two strands of digital media's role. First, alongside mobile phones and satellite TV, government and regime repression and brutality was more

easily exposed, typically via citizen journalists. Secondly, protest organisation was facilitated.

One dynamic to consider is how technology may have accelerated resistance at other times, and that digital media's use was not distinctive to the 2010/11 WANA revolutions. Thus, whether spatially or temporally, the notion of a linear 'learning' process is not necessarily apparent. The Zapatistas case has just been pointed to; notably, Stephan (2009) referred to a "so-called Facebook revolution" concerning WANA region activists' activities some years before the 2010/11 WANA events, while stressing that physical action on the ground would be necessary for change (308; Filiu, 2011: 9). Concerning the adoption of innovative communication technology alongside traditional networks such as mosques, this has been commonplace for example in Iran (Sazegara & Stephan, 2009; Salvatore, 2013: 9) and Egypt (Mansour, 2009: 210; Stephan, 2009: 10–11; Salvatore, 2013: 3). Indeed, Bamyeh (2012) noted whether in Iran in 1979, Palestine in 1987 or Tunisia in 2011, "the revolution appears to have taken place not because it had resources[, rather] when there is enough reason for it, a revolution invents the resources that are appropriate for it" (50; Stephan, 2009: 308; Zunes, 2011: 399). Thus, utilising digital media is just the current manifestation of this process (Filiu, 2011: 51).

Manuel Castells (2012) provided a prominent early theory of digital media's significance during the revolutions, noting the advantages posed by the rapid spread of information and ability to organise beyond governmental control (2–3). In Tunisia, he went as far to suggest that the "*preconditions* for the revolts was the existence of an Internet culture, made up of bloggers, social networks and cyberactivism [emphasis added]" (27). It is apparent that the emphasis on digital media is also tied to the impression of spontaneity, both in the leaderless sense (Castells, 2012: 17–18; Ghonim, 2012: 293; Manhire, 2012) and a lack of planning and organisation (Bamyeh, 2012: 50–51; Ghonim, 2012: 293). In this regard, academic articles have continued to quote heavily from news sources years after the events (Alvi, 2014: 39).

Tufekci's (2017) more recent analysis has solidified some of these earlier analyses, where 'acceleration' appears to be a significant aspect of the advantages of digital media, allowing "networked movements to grow dramatically and rapidly" (xiii). This is premised on the ability to act with a lack of prior planning, the "leaderless nature of these movements ("horizontalism")", as well as "dealing with issues only as they come up, and by people who show up ("ad hococracy")" (xvi).² Nevertheless, Tufekci identified that this creates problems for movements relying on internet technologies, as a lack of "prior building of formal or informal organisational and other collective capacities" can result in being ill-prepared for "inevitable challenges", while undermining tactical flexibility and "the ability to respond to what comes next" (xiii,xvi). Tufekci continues that such "tedious" preparation work "performed during the pre-internet era" played a significant role in that "it acclimatised people to the processes of collective decision making and helped create the resilience all movements need to survive and thrive

2 This reflects the perspective of one of my own interviewees in relation to 'actocracy'

in the long term” (xiii). Thus, some form of ‘hollowing out’ of movements heavily orientated around internet technologies seems apparent, which may indicate deeper problems signposted by narratives of ‘internet revolutions’; whether the prominence and significance of such technologies is accurate must continue to be questioned, as we seek a way out of these more deleterious effects.

Accordingly, the long arc of discontent and resistance in Tunisia and the wider region is pertinent, with the events in 2010/11 underpinned by committed and organised activists who have campaigned around long-standing political and economic grievances (Mair, 2011: 185; Nepstad, 2011: 485). The resistance culminating in the 2010/11 revolution has been traced back in ‘waves’ or ‘phases’ to at least the early 2000s in some research (Ayebe, 2011: 468; Khiari, 2012 :229; Chomiak, 2014: 25,30), including campaigns for internet freedom, with interlinking of activists and mobilisation strategies emerging (Chomiak, 2014: 26,30; see Brown, 2019: 158–161), Concerning internet activism, a prominent initiative was 404Ammar, which on 22nd May, 2010, held *Tunisie en Blanc*, or *nhar a’la a’nar*—Day against Censorship—including a protest in front of the Ministry of Technology in Tunisia, in addition to a, ”widespread citizen engagement calling for supporters to dress in white and have a coffee in one of the many cafes on Avenue Habib Bourguiba” (Chomiak, 2011: 73–74). Chomiak (2011) argued that the movement was notable for its ability to mobilise thousands of Tunisians both inside and outside the country, while utilising Facebook as a, ”medium and space that was shielded from the government’s unilateral oversight and control” (74). Again, the *Tunisie en Blanc* campaign had transitioned from social media into an innovative street protest, with complementary protests in cities across Tunisia (Chomiak, 2014: 37).

Acceleration

The suggested quickening of the revolutionary processes during the 2010/11 events due to digital media is worthy of consideration itself; was this actually the case? Marking some development in the nuance of explanations, Tufekci (2017) has noted that offline action cannot be overlooked, nor its interrelationship to online action (xxvi). However, why acceleration as a concept, and specifically Rosa’s (2015) theory of social acceleration, is useful to consider in relation to the 2010/11 events is exemplified by a statement in Tufekci’s (2017) work. The apparent quickening of time is strongly connected to a shrinking of space, as in Gezi park: ”I was seeing the product of a global cultural convergence of protester aspirations and practices [...] I felt that it could have been almost any twenty-first-century protest square: organized through Twitter, filled with tear gas, leaderless, networked, euphoric, and fragile” (xxiv). Regarding Tahrir Square, Tufekci suggests ”Digital connectivity had warped time and space, transforming that square I looked at from above, so small yet so vast, into a crossroads of attention and visibility, both interpersonal and interactive, not just something filtered through mass media”, whose pictures ”felt cold and alienating” (xxv). The implications of this go beyond the simple utility of digital media as tools, raising deeper social questions elaborated by Rosa (2015).

The broad introduction I provide here to Rosa's *Social Acceleration* also focuses on the technology aspects. The pertinent implication of 'frenetic standstill' within Rosa's theory is also explained, with implications returned to in the discussion in light of the primary data findings. While Rosa suggested that 'everything going faster and faster' is not accurate, as there are related tendencies of slowdown and forces of inertia, he proposed that there are, "three fundamental dimensions of social acceleration, which are mostly not differentiated from one another in contemporary discourse about acceleration [which] can be distinguished in a way that is both analytically and empirically illuminating" (301). First, there is "the phenomena of *technical acceleration*, that is the intentional acceleration of goal-directed processes. From this perspective, the acceleration history of modernity essentially represents a history of the progressive acceleration of transportation, communication, and production" (301). Such acceleration:

does not only bring about an alteration of the spatiotemporal patterns of usage, movement, and settlement and the very experience of space (space seems literally to shrink and lose significance in comparison to time). It also changes the quality and quantity of social relationships, practices, and action orientations. In short, technical acceleration always harbours a tendency to transform the objective, the social, and (mediated through these) the subjective world, because it implicitly transforms our relations to things (i.e., to the material structures of our environment), to our fellow human beings, and to space and time. For this reason, it also alters the form of our relation to ourselves and hence the mode and manner of our being-in-the-world. The linkage of growth and acceleration thus implies a tendential loosening of concrete ties to particular persons, places, or things as a result of increased speeds of change and exchange (304)

Therefore, the implications of increased use of digital media based on Rosa's assessment may be to make connections somewhat transient among individuals acting within a movement for change.

While the 2010/11 events in Tunisia will be considered in relation to this effect, there are deeper social implications given technical acceleration's interrelationship to two other phenomena of acceleration described by Rosa. Thus, the second is acceleration of social change, concerning "associational structures, knowledge (theoretical, practical, and moral), social practices, and action orientations", which may relate to anything from fashion to political affiliation (301). Thus:

The intervals of time for which one can assume stability in the sense of a general congruence of the space of experience and the horizon of expectation (and hence a secure set of expectations) progressively shrink in the various domains of society, whether these are understood in terms of values, functions, or types of action (301).

This produces acceleration as increasingly transient action-related experiences and expectation in addition to ever-shorter time frames characterised as ‘the present’ (301). Acceleration of the pace of life is the third type, concerning “a reaction to the scarcity of (uncommitted) time resources [...] expressed in the experience of stress and a lack of time [...] an increase in the number of episodes of action and/or experience per unit of time” (Rosa, 2015: 301). Acceleration of social change and in the pace of life are worth bearing in mind in relation to technical acceleration as the interviewees’ perspectives of digital media are related. Given the simplistic portrayals of digital media’s role, the concept of ‘frenetic standstill’ is also relevant: “a *posthistoire* diagnosis in which the *rush* of historical events only provides scant cover for (and ultimately, in effect, produces) a *standstill* in the development of ideas and deep social structures [original emphasis]” (15). This has deeper implications for explaining the prominence given to digital media in ‘western’ treatments of the 2010/11 events.

Research Method

The primary data used in this paper was originally collected as part of my PhD research, which focused on the methods of protest during the 2010/11 Tunisian revolution. I followed a grounded theory method (GTM) as a means of collecting and analysing the data. Within peace and nonviolence research, which is the field my thesis was primarily situated in, the use of in-depth interviews has established use (Reed & Foran, 2002; Stephan, 2009; Pearlman, 2011: xi; Richter-Devroe, 2012), including grounded theory-based approaches (Eddy, 2012: 186). GTM involves the collection of data and developing analytic codes and categories from it, as opposed to fitting data to preconceived hypotheses (Charmaz, 2006: 2–3,5).

Ultimately, through my GTM I have sought to engage with grassroots forces of resistance (Khiari, 2012: 227), aiming to contribute to the emergence of a more open, bottom-up picture of the revolutions, while to the greatest extent possible reducing the chance of confirmation bias and avoiding my personal (mis)conceptions directing or influencing the participants’ recollection or outlining of events (Bryant, 2017: 358). The researcher may consider themselves as an ‘acknowledged participant’ in the research process rather than being an objective observer, which means reflexivity is crucial (Clarke, 2005: xxiii; McCreddie & Payne, 2010: 787,790). Mindful of the need to avoid simple and uncritical replications of assumptions about the 2010/11 WANA events such as the critical role of digital media, I followed Charmaz’s (2006) constructivist and pragmatist variant of GTM (also Bryant, 2017: xi). Through the open questions used during the interview process, interview participants were able to relate what they believed were the salient issues, thus broad and diverse yet detailed data was subsequently collected on the Tunisia event. This has enabled me to draw on the collected data and its analysis to explore an array of topics and phenomenon.

The coding of interviewees’ responses allows the identification of salient issues, in a process of “iterative moves between data gathering and analysis” (Bryant, 2017: 30). In this regard I undertook three stages of data collection based on participant interviews,

with initial or open coding of the first stage interviews being undertaken and the process of ‘memo’ writing, which is part of the constant critical engagement, reflection and analysis of the data, in order to develop preliminary categories or themes across the interview data. Subsequently, focused coding was undertaken during the second and third stage interviews to expand and refine these categories into ‘theoretical concepts’ (Charmaz, 2006: 11; Bryant, 2017: 32). Ultimately, what GTM offers is the systematising of long-practiced trends in qualitative methods (Bryant, 2017: 18,364,383); through my original research and for this paper, I considered the development of significant concepts as akin to positing ‘assertions’ rather than grand theoretical claims (Saldaña, 2015: 14–15).

In terms of the data collection process, this received ethical approval from Leeds Beckett University’s Research Ethics Committee, and I participated in ethical research training as part of the PhD process. Non-probability, purposive sampling of Tunisian activists involved in the 2010/11 events was followed (Bryant, 2017: 32). Nevertheless, particular criteria guided the participants’ initial selection, with the aim being to interview an equal number of Tunisian males and females from varied social backgrounds. Overall, I conducted 22 English language interviews with 10 females and 12 males in Tunisia, with a further three male interviewees who different participants had invited along with them being translated for from Arabic to English. Most interviews were between one hour and an hour and twenty minutes, with the shortest being approximately 25 minutes and the longest over 1 hour forty minutes. The three stages of interviews I carried out in Tunisia were: in October 2014 in Sousse; in March 2015 in Tunis, and December 2015 in Sousse.

During the initial interview stage, snowball sampling was also adopted (Clark, 2006: 419; Cohen & Arieli, 2011: 424–425), as within Tunisia’s post-authoritarian context it was highly uncertain how willing participants would be to discuss their experiences and the level of established trust their participation would require. Given that three individuals provided contacts for my first stage interviews, then four of my first stage interviewees put me in contact with several other participants during the second and third stages, this helped to avoid the possible problem of insufficient representativeness, enabling “parallel snowball networks” to form (Cohen & Arieli, 2011: 428). Moreover, this provided the flexibility to determine where there was a lack of representativeness in my sample, for example women and interviewees from Tunisia’s interior regions. Accordingly, I was able to reach prominent activists in Tunis during my second stage of interviews—permitting data collection on the 2010/11 events in the capital and the role of ICT—and during the third stage to reach participants who had been in the interior during the 2010/11 events, thus enabling a host of dynamics relating to resistance to be corroborated.

With fairness in representation in terms of class, income, ethnicity and religion factored in, a significant number of participants hailed from the interior of the country, from cities such as Gafsa and Sidi Bouzid, or from disadvantaged neighbourhoods of Tunis and Sousse. This fairness in representation was facilitated by the generosity and patience of certain interviewees translating for others who they introduced me

to. This assisted with mitigating a problem often identified in discussion with peers, that my limited Arabic knowledge may hinder inclusion, with interviewees' English language abilities potentially reflecting a higher level of education or particular class background. In the interests of transparency, I made my position clear as a PhD researcher, as well as being open about having not carried out research in the WANA region previously. The nature of the purposive sampling and open questions ensured that my main research focus, on the methods of protest, emerged within a rich data context, with various perspectives gained on nonviolence and many other issues.

Here I have returned to the relevant raw interview data on digital media and related issues, as well as my codes, categories and conceptual development to extract the information interviewees felt was pertinent. Interviewees are indicated in italics followed by a number, indicating relevant memos. Having not re-analysed specifically with acceleration and other concepts in mind, this is actually a useful means of assessing any significant issues that emerged relating to these issues in a more 'detached' manner.

The Use of Digital Media in Tunisia

Regarding the use of digital media in Tunisia, three major interlinked dynamics developed from the interviews: the established use of digital media both as a tool and space for activism in Tunisia; its significance as an information conduit for the population during the 2010/11 events, in addition to the activities of activists and their utilisation of digital media during the 2010/11 events. These findings will be considered in relation to acceleration below.

Pre-Revolution Use of Digital Media

When considering the phenomenon of acceleration in response to Tunisia's revolution, it is worth noting the long arc of digital media's use as a means of resistance in the country, and how this intersects with the waves of resistance noted above. *Ehsan* explained that when he left Tunisia to study in France, "I was making part of the earliest groups of young Tunisians [using blogging... By] the end of the 1990s there was the famous blog called Takriz that started to desacralise this regime" (*Ehsan14*). *Achraf* related how he began social blogging in 2003, with a significant politicisation of the movement during 2005: "I think that I am one of the first Tunisian bloggers in Tunisia. And I start blogging in English" (*Achraf2*). *Mariam* noted there was a collective of bloggers, which *Achraf* suggested was a "core [...] about 20, 30 people maximum" (*Achraf2*, *Mariam10*). Rather than suggesting this negates a sense of 'acceleration', these early efforts that developed along with digital media's evolution do serve to contextualise the variations on a theme of 'Facebook Revolution'. Moreover, they qualify the sense that digital media and specifically online social networks are an immediately 'successful' tool without precedent or context.

Mariam's explanation of the 2008 Gafsa region protests—ostensibly over job allocations in the phosphate mining industry—was instructive, suggesting a process of learning and adaptation in its wake. Having begun blogging in 2007 "mainly to

express myself”, *Mariam* politicised her blog in 2008, realising blogging’s importance to challenging the regime-controlled media’s manipulation (*Mariam1*). *Mariam* outlined how bloggers took a collective decision over this, suggesting collaborative activities. Furthermore, *Mariam* related how post-Gafsa, the usefulness of social media became apparent in being more difficult to censor than blogging (*Mariam12*; *Achraf11*; *Ehsan26*). This indicates that communication was simplified via such means, as opposed to being fundamental to the 2010/11 protests’ success. *Ayoub* rejected that social media’s adoption was a significant difference between the 2010/11 protest outcomes and Gafsa in 2008 (*Ayoub(3)1*). Yet although *Nader* suggested the Gafsa region protests where “bigger than this event [2010/11]”, the dearth of traditional media coverage and capacity of the regime to regulate information online, “meant there was no revolution [...] Al-Jazeera did not talk about, media did not talk about. Also Facebook, if you just think about, talk about it in about 15 minutes you find the police in your house” (*Nader/Ayoub4*). However, the increasing anger with the regime during 2008–2010 may have made the adoption of social media and the success in deposing Ben Ali partially coincidental. Indeed, various formal and informal networks, groups and communication technologies were already known, understood, established, operating and adopted prior to and during the Gafsa protests (see Perkins, 2016: 104). Instead, the 2008 Gafsa events offered opportunities for understanding to be honed by different activists and organisations, regarding how online networks may be utilised and regime control evaded.

A prominent aspect even of the early blogging efforts was the shunning of anonymity, as stressed by *Ehsan*, *Ridha*, *Mariam* and *Achraf*, all of whom were prominent bloggers. Although this does not seem linked to acceleration, it still established a visible example in terms of open resistance, showing tenacity and courage despite the severe risks. *Mariam* explained the importance of shunning anonymity as, “I usually want that people see me with them on the street, because it’s easy to stay at home behind the screen and tell people to act” (*Mariam10*). From 2009, these bloggers and others began to challenge the regime more directly, with *Achraf* explaining: “I had no fear, because for me it was over, you know. I can’t support it anymore” (*Achraf11*). The evident mutual impression of a growing malaise *Ridha* related as causing a convergence of activism in December 2010. Moreover, *Mariam*’s emphasis on the transition to and imperative of physical action on the streets is essential. Based on *Mariam*’s experiences and those of other ‘online activists’, the emphasis here should be ‘activist’, with the online sphere being a tool for organisation and information dissemination. Physical space seems particularly important in this regard.

The 404Ammar movement noted above is an example of this, which *Ehsan* described as a “nonviolent group, which was trying to oppose [internet] censorship” (*Ehsan24*). While dissent was vocalised via social media, a physical demonstration was also organised for 22nd May 2010, with *Ehsan* relating how “you announce these events you know on Facebook and you get, you have the demonstrators going to the ground”. The subsequent demonstrations that entailed “wear[ing] a white shirt and then we sit in a café and have a drink” confounded the policemen who, “went totally paranoid,

you know they were chasing everybody wearing a white shirt". *Ehsan* continued that the police, "did not know how to handle all this movement", especially because they were not in the trend of "classical political opponents", meaning the Marxists and traditional leftist groups (*Ehsan23*). This confounding seemed to continue into the 2010/11 protests that removed Ben Ali, with the regime being thrown off-balance by the 'irregular', non-ideological movement.

The 2010/11 Events

The above narratives indicate that the duration of digital media's use was longer than previously thought, as well as showing the relationship with 'space' and spaces—physical sites of protest—prior to the 2010/11 events. However, there is still the question of a facilitation and acceleration of the fall of Ben Ali due to digital media and online communication networks, in terms of an 'expedited' process.

Digital Media as an Information Conduit

One aspect of this dynamic concerns how digital media may have sped up the process of mobilisation. *Ehsan* related that "from the very first day when Bouazizi immolated himself, I started writing actively on Facebook and sending emails and videos", including of protests at the faculty. This also involved sending material to "European deputies, politicians abroad" (*Ehsan14*; *Bassem14*). Notably therefore, regardless of regime actions like blocking phone and internet signals in Sidi Bouzid (*Nader29*), information relating to unrest was rapidly disseminated. *Ehsan* suggested in terms of mobilisation, "the good thing about social media is that you start from social media then you go to the street" (*Ehsan22*). Interviewees suggested that the regime's decision not to censor Facebook was a big mistake (*Kenza4*, *Bassem23*), because, "all it took was a communique, pass it on the internet [...] as people were logged on the internet like twenty-four seven" (*Bassem23*). Similarly, *Ayoub* explained social media's utility in contacting those in the interior in places like Kasserine: "In this period we're in contact all this time. You can't get in [physically...] It was blocked by police" (*Ayoub(2)13*). While *Bassem* believed protests in Tunisia were largely organised via Facebook and bloggers, he stated that there was a, "through the networks, word of mouth" component to organising protests (*Bassem23*), also reflected in *Eya's* explanation of how one discovered protests (*Eya8*). These were physical networks, with the internet simply providing another useful medium.

The ability to disseminate information and expose events was clearly linked to mobilisation. The internet enabled, "sharing the pictures of the people you know massacred by the Ben Ali police regime, that people started to be aware of the ugly face of dictatorship. And then they said enough is enough" (*Ehsan19*). *Ayoub* recalled how Facebook, YouTube and Instagram's utilisation enabled "other people watch what's really happening in Tunisia" (*Ayoub45*). Tunisians were not the only audience:

People were from all over the world [...] supporting us because they were seeing I mean, people who were shot, directly in the head. I mean you could see half of their brains, coming out in front of your eyes. So this I mean, shocked people. And people went out in the street (Nazir27).

Nazir indicated that the shock factor of the graphic videos moved people to act, while emphasising the importance he attached to social media: "Thank God we had Facebook. Without Facebook we couldn't excite people or incite people or mobilise people" (Nazir27). *Hamza* also believed that without social media, the revolution would have been unsuccessful (*Hamza17*), which is ultimately unprovable. However, *Nazir* reminisced: "Imagine, a video being spread widely" (Nazir27), evoking the potential of such acts, alongside the satisfaction or surprise at the process' influence and innovativeness.

Actions of Citizen Journalists

Given that the traditional Tunisian media was state-controlled, established bloggers and 'social media activists' were considered to have made a particular contribution to exposing events and disseminating information, in the role of 'citizen journalists':

Lina Ben Mhenni [...] travelled to Sidi Bouzid and she announced it everywhere. 'I'm staying here and I'm taking pictures and making the videos, and I'm sending it all around'. And this is when we realised, we got touch of how brutal it was, and how serious it was (*Bassem15*).

This, *Bassem* argued, developed some kind of consciousness for the citizens, you started having the opposition parties moving you know, that is issuing communiques underground, once again but, on internet you could get it", alongside, "Tunisian opponents to Ben Ali in Paris talking about it" (*Bassem15*). When combined with more traditional reporting actions on the ground, online methods appeared most efficacious when used to disseminate information about these events. Thus, the term 'social media activist' is excessively reductive, which was clarified by interviews with high-profile bloggers *Mariam*, *Ridha* and *Achraf*, who confirmed that online activism was a beneficial tool, as opposed to *the* prominent dynamic. 'Citizen journalist' will be used below as more accurately reflecting their activity.

Reflecting what a traditional media organisation would claim, *Achraf* suggested that bloggers in particular "are really good to write, argue, correct information" (*Achraf4*). Indeed, *Achraf* considered his fundamental role to be engagement with traditional international media organisations, in addition to the use and expansion of his established national network of contacts to determine, "which police stations were burnt. What was the situation in any town. At some time I was having a map of Tunisia with all of the information" (*Achraf14*). *Achraf*, *Mariam* and *Ridha*, all communicated with international media organisations, believing they had a mutually supportive role; the international media gained access that would otherwise have been difficult, whereas

activists could expose protests and evoke solidarity (*Achraf5*, *Ridha19*, *Mariam6*). Exposing regime violence was stated by *Mariam* as being especially crucial, while challenging the regime's narrative of gangsters, violence and chaos (*Mariam6*).

Nevertheless, the bloggers expressed differing priorities. Although *Achraf* and *Ridha* stressed foreign media engagement, *Ridha* also emphasised how galvanising protests and overcoming fear was pursued (*Ridha19*). However, spreading "what I think is intelligent propaganda [...] to bring people with me", *Ridha* stressed "was not planned [to] have the people of the ghettos rise up" (*Ridha14*). Rather, having viewed online videos and other material people, "started calling each other what the fuck is going on, we have to do something". From that, "there's a demonstration in the passage, OK let's go" (*Ridha12*). This indicates a fluid, dynamic and symbiotic situation. The seeming ambiguity in 'incentivising' yet 'unplanned' activity, *Ridha* explained best himself, that "our revolution was a perfect act of actocracy. It's acts that decide what's going on" (*Ridha12*).

Although *Achraf* and *Ridha* were both involved in protests, *Mariam* most clearly emphasised her activist role—"demonstrating as a Tunisian citizen"—while covering events journalistically (*Mariam2*). *Mariam* became renowned for her international engagement during the revolution, yet she touched on this almost as an aside (*Mariam2*). Ultimately, *Mariam*'s journalistic activities were more internally-focused and directed towards Tunisia's citizens. *Mariam* also gained considerable recognition for directly reporting from Sidi Bouzid and Kasserine in early January, subsequently covering "the poor neighbouring areas of the capital where people were dying" (*Mariam5*). Again, *Mariam*'s concern was marginalised communities and exposing the regime's brutality via first-hand reporting. Other activists-as-citizen journalists also travelled to the interior, such as *Achraf* (*Achraf14*).

Concerning *Mariam*'s focus on marginalised individuals and groups, as well as the regime's violence, we come to a crucial statement regarding the role of internet activism. *Mariam* rejected the term "Facebook or internet revolution", stating the:

people who took to the streets who faced teargas and live ammunition, with bare chests, did the revolution. And we helped those people. Well, I'm one of the people who took to the streets, I did. But we don't have to limit it to internet. Because we can't do a revolution of internet, we have to be on the ground to make a revolution (*Mariam7*, also *Ines20*).

Therefore, as much as *Mariam* fulfilled the journalist role, it was as a demonstrator within the wider movement of people taking action on the ground where she situated her biggest contribution. Likewise, *Ridha* stressed his two roles as activist and journalist (*Ridha5*, *Ridha6*), recalling *Ehsan*'s activities. The prominent bloggers I interviewed clearly contextualised their reporting activities within the protests, as a means of disseminating information and exposing the regime, rather than internet activism and technologies being emphasised as indispensable. Thus, citizen journalism was a much more engaged and situated process, rather than comprising of distinct 'tools', such

as social media. This leaves an impression of a movement clearly grounded in street protests (*Mariam*7; see also Sebystyen, 2011b).

The imperative requirement for digital media seems exaggerated, in light of the discussions of mobilisation and organisation beyond this which have been outlined above and the activities on the ground by individuals and organisations, for example mobile phone communication and activation of existing physical networks (*Bassem*14; *Noman*2; *Nabil*7; *Dalia*8; *Nader*38). Nevertheless, it is convincing that online tools proved particularly useful for communication and information dissemination, for example in circumventing the state-controlled mainstream media and its disinformation (*Hamza*15, also *Ines*20). Such rapidly and seemingly widely available communication means may have played a role in mitigating the regime's narrative of demonstrators as 'violent' terrorists and criminals, while exposing the regime's violence as comparatively more brutal. Given that Tunisians then seemed to be galvanised to act by the regime's violence, the means of exposing such violence were evidently useful; *Hamza* believed they contributed to a 'snowball' of protests (*Hamza*16; *Emna*12; *Bassem*16).

Participation and Post-2010/11 Problems

Although post-Ben Ali Tunisia's political, economic and social problems are incredibly complex, and can by no means be blamed on an overreliance on digital media and its typically assumed related characteristics—'spontaneity' and a lack of direction—it is worth considering its effect before returning to Rosa's (2015) broader assessment of acceleration. Although one may talk of online 'armchair activists', without dismissing this problem I would tentatively suggest that digital media may have broadened the sense of participation for those who could not physically attend protests. In Tunisia, this may have included younger individuals, perhaps females in particular from conservative families, or individuals with close family members in the regime's political structure, as with *Kenza* (*Kenza*6; also Tufekci, 2017: 9). One effect may have been to broaden the sense of 'ownership', inclusion and of having a stake in the revolutionary processes (*Kenza*3), alongside wider collective efforts and solidarity, thus positively shaping the post-Ben Ali movement. Another effect may have been in exacerbating the exploitation of online activism for misinformation and manipulation following Ben Ali's departure (*Nazir*35, *Ehsan*22).

Where digital media are concerned in this regard is the proliferation of information and the desire for information rapidly; the more immediate post-Ben Ali period seemed to herald issues that have become more salient in societies globally, 'post-truth', fake news and the ability to verify information. First, it should be noted how most interviewees stressed the strong sense of unity during the 2010/11 protests, and lamented its loss following Ben Ali's departure (*Bassem*33; *Khouloud*6). *Emna* explained it was "actually the first time we got to shout and start feeling that I'm Tunisian at heart", yet "later on when I saw the different factions in the society, this is not what I was part of" (*Emna*9).

Focusing strictly on how digital media potentially contributed to the loss of unity, it

is notable that *Nazir* suggested that despite social media playing a positive role during the revolution, post-revolution:

Things started to become negative. Because you couldn't even know what was going on, what was true or false. Because as soon as Ben Ali left, people with different interests, people with different tendencies came to lead the country if you want. Because the youth had no leaders (*Nazir35*).

Tufekci (2017) spoke to activists who also "confirmed that such fake news—often aimed at discrediting dissidents—had gone viral in their countries too" (266). *Ehsan* focused on Islamist groups' use of social media, which produced, "a kind of deviation due to the whole violence thing, propaganda pages here and there" (*Ehsan22*). Yet he also acknowledged that, "actions started from Facebook and social media against the fundamentalists of Ennahda" (*Ehsan23*). *Nazir* described how post-revolution, "people started to classify. Islamists, Marxists, liberals, secularists [...] this is wrong. This is divisive" (*Nazir65*; Tufekci, 2017: 266). Thus internet activism appeared to be a transient space for unity and solidarity, one where identities crafted in relation to a negative perception of a dialectical opponent could be played out

Freedom of expression and freedom generally were evidently cherished as positive outcomes of the revolution (*Eya1*; *Emna14*; *Arwa*; *Khouloud*); *Ehsan* stated outright that:

Lots of positive things did take place. The most valuable thing is freedom of expression [...] I think that it is a real bless, to wake up every morning to know that you have the right to write down whatever you want, without being persecuted (*Ehsan1*).

In the context of Autumn 2014 when my first stage of interviews were carried out, a tentative unity government was in power and elections were about to be held. At this time, *Taher* suggested that freedom of expression had also compounded tensions, divisions and ideological clashes in the political sphere:

Everybody now is free to express himself, or express herself without any control and without any problem, you know. And this is the problem you know. Well we are not used to this kind of debate, you know. It is not like Europe where you have this tradition where you can say what you want (*Taher2*).

Taher was conscious that there must not be a descent into identity-based politics, "that people stop just criticising the other group you know, you are right or you are wrong or you are this or that. Because it's not what we need here in this country" (*Taher21*). In December 2015, *Emna* suggested Tunisians are "obsessed about one another, we're obsessed. I think that's the main cause, the main cause for this disunity" (*Emna14*).

Discussion

Dynamics introduced through the interviewee accounts, such as the long-term emergence of internet technologies' adoption, the interplay of offline and online methods of organisation and mobilisation, and the heavy emphasis reputed bloggers placed on offline action, qualify the simplified narrative regarding digital media use during the 2010/11 WANA events. As with the 'colour' revolutions that in Eastern Europe were perceived as marking a shift towards West-European liberal democracy and capitalism, the 'internet' revolution narrative of the 2010/11 WANA events in its modern youth-orientated and spontaneous nature was fundamentally perceived as 'western'-orientated (Noueihed & Warren, 2012: 6; Laiq, 2013; Zemni, 2013: 127–128), despite perhaps reflecting more grounded, grassroots and context-specific dynamics. Here it is fruitful to return to technical acceleration in relation to some of Rosa's (2015) dynamics of acceleration of social change and the pace of life (301), pointing to where their implications are relevant to challenging the digital media narrative in the Tunisian context.

Given Rosa's explanation of the dynamics of technical acceleration above, the basic essence of its effect reflects Bauman's (1997) explanation of the liquid state of modernity, with a transformation and "tendential loosening of concrete ties to particular persons, places, or things as a result of increased speeds of change and exchange" (Rosa, 2015: 304). In terms of acceleration of social change and focusing accordingly on Rosa's belief that the more contingent intergenerational and intragenerational identities that are produced through the process of acceleration may have implications for "cultural reproduction and social integration", and the "passing on of cultural knowledge" (305–306), such identities are interesting in the Tunisian context. Economic issues have proven so disruptive that some conflation of inter-generational discontent has resulted in the expansion of the 'youth' generation; the youth's problems of unemployment and unfulfilled social expectations are a wider malaise afflicting a much broader population. This does not negate the significance of acceleration dynamics but is a symptom in this particular context. It is one reason why we need to look beyond social media, technology and 'youth'-orientated revolutions. Moreover, through a simple emphasis on technology, assessments of the deeper change sought are actually hollowed out, deeper changes that may run counter to 'Western' processes of late-modernity and capitalism.

The second implication associated with this recalls the 'Machiavellian moment' (Trejo-Mathys, 2015: xvi), which Pocock (2003) originally defined as the point in time when a republic confronts its finite existence, realising it faces constant moral and political instability due to continuous, random threats of destruction (viii). In this regard, Rosa (2015) deemed modernisation as "an accelerative project of national states" and their military apparatus as "nothing more than the political striving to preserve and accumulate power within a system of competing national states that took shape after the Treaty of Westphalia" (311). While Rosa suggested that the state is now in contention with "the very dynamising forces they themselves helped to unleash" (312), the state and democracy particularly in its north Atlantic conception remains domi-

nant as an apparent force of progress and modernity, and one analysis of this process has focused on how contingent securing within time and space (see Dillon, 2008; Dillon and Lobo-Guerrero, 2008: 275) includes biopolitical approaches "concerned with the administration of the conditions of life of the population [...] interventions are made into the [vital life processes of] health, habitation, urban environment, working conditions and education of various populations" (Dean, 1999: 209; Foucault 2000: 217; Dillon & Lobo-Guerrero 2008: 267,275). As an exclusionary process of certain individuals and populations (Agamben, 1998: 101; Wahnich, 2012: 11), potentially as interminable threats (Dillon, 2008; Dillon & Lobo-Guerrero, 2008), this posits global liberal governance as, "the only remaining standard bearer of political modernity as a governmental project" (Dillon & Lobo-Guerrero 2008: 275; Rosa, 2015: 304). With these processes synonymous with a singular ideology of capitalism (Mignolo, 2011: 303; Dabashi, 2012: xx,245; Sayyid, 2014: 65,72) and its manifestation of neoliberal economics, exclusionary processes are also joined with acceleration's pressure on individuals to maintain pace with a particular way of being, "the *fear of missing things* and the *compulsion to adapt* [original emphasis]" (Rosa, 2015: 306). This is something technology has promised to fulfil once and for all, yet ultimately compounds this process as transient and contingent (308–309). Ultimately, these processes can narrow the existence of alternative practices; by focusing on digital media as emphasising technical acceleration and its purported advantages during the 2010/11 events, as a signifier of a particular conception of modernity, there are other processes of resistance being overlooked.

Indeed, this understanding appears as almost a self-fulfilling prophecy of 'frenetic standstill' (15). The portrayal of the 'Arab Spring' has at times been with a sense of inertia or an inability to change without intervention from 'the West' (Bradley, 2012; Brown, 2016; Mignolo, 2011: 296), and yet Dabashi's (2012) compelling exploration of the 2010/11 WANA events' significance suggested they marked a comprehensive paradigm shift, potentially transcending the false and violent binaries of 'East' and 'West', as well as 'Westernism' and 'Secularism' against Islamism' (243, Sayyid, 2014: 59). This evokes Sayyid's (2014: 59) belief that 'the West' should abandon or at least share the 'centre' in the act of decolonisation in the pursuit of 'multiculturalism'. Of course, this is a term not without controversy, but if multiculturalism is taken to concern concerted engagement and dialogue, spaces for such activities are essential.

Therefore, an important example of action outside of the digital media emphasis, which may offer a space for alternative practices under modernity, is the constructive forms of resistance during the Tunisian revolution. Both in terms of the unity that interviewees lamented was lost after Ben Ali departed—with politics descending into a manipulated split between secularists and Islamists (*Bassem32; Ehsan2(1); Nabil31; Emna4*)—and as a space for dialogue regarding deeper social revolution (see Johansen, 2007: 158) and ongoing resistance, the round of Kasbah protests and Councils for the Protection of the Revolution (CPRs) offered direct engagement and participation of the population and conferred advantages of unity, momentum and cohesion (*Norman11; Dalia9*) This reflects similar innovative structures emerging across the wider

region during 2010/11 and coalescing from grassroots activities during the Occupy movements and around Podemos in Spain, where "decision-making structures [...] align with their participatory impulses (Tufekci, 2017: 277).

Underlying all of these movements has been the marginalisation more recently linked to 'globalisation', yet the deeper tensions in the Tunisian context prior to the 2010/11 revolution reflects the issues stemming from global neoliberal frameworks (Amin et al., 2012: 6–9,17; Challand, 2013: 176; Zemni et al., 2013: 905; Rogers, 2016: 181–182,196), linked to the growth and acceleration problems inherent in capitalism (Rosa, 2015: 299–300,309). Incidentally, Barrie and Ketchley (2018) recently suggested that protests in Tunisia might "channel disaffection" over economic marginalisation and prevent radicalisation of mostly young men by the Islamic State. The language of the 'safety valve' and lack of any sense of a failed democratisation process aside, this study further validates the suggestion that Tunisia's deeper problems would have benefitted from resolution in 2011, through such structures as the CPRs and protests at that time.

The implication for resistance is an orientation towards areas of research such as that of constructive work and programmes that is seeing greater attention in the nonviolence research, most prominently in the area of resistance studies (Chabot, 2015; Vinthagen, 2015). Accordingly, Sharp's (1973) advocating of constructive programmes and parallels organs of government to tackle structural violence and secure fundamental social change (5,430–431; Sharp, 1980: 58,152–153), drawing heavily on Arendt's (1963) criticism of liberal democratic structures originating with the French and American revolutions, as well as her emphasis on action as a manner of reinsertion into the political sphere in opposition to the people's disempowerment (239,247–248,272; Sharp, 1979: 78–79; Sharp, 1980: 146–147,152–154,220; Wahnich, 2012: 12; Bilgic, 2015: 277), should be seriously contended with. Significantly, the most prominent resurfacing of Arendt's position has come in relation to the 2010/11 WANA revolutions via Dabashi's (2012) radical appraisal (246; Arendt, 1969: 179–180), although the formation of alternative and parallel political, economic and social structures has occurred during various resistance campaigns (see Sharp, 1973: 803–804; Sharp, 1979: 81; Pearlman, 2011: 103,107; Norman & Hallward, 2015: 207; Vinthagen, 2015: 33,162–163). Moreover, they have been considered as offering a counter to economic neoliberalism's associated structural violence (Johansen, 2007: 157; Garton Ash, 2009: 377; Chabot, 2015: 246–247).

Conclusion

Drawing on the first-hand experiences of Tunisians of their revolution, I have contextualised the role of digital media in resistance. It was a useful tool, although it did not define the events, and to focus on digital media is to overlook important complexities. Some of these complexities relate to digital media itself. Since the 2010/11 WANA events the role of online technologies has continued to develop, which of course requires serious engagement and analysis. As the common narrative of the 2010/11

events shows and Tufekci (2017) has noted, digital media appears to offer exhilarating potential at times, with a common narrative emerging that quite disparate individuals and groups can come together rapidly on digital networks and act in a spontaneous or leaderless manner to foment political change. At the time of writing, a contemporaneous iteration of this narrative is the nascent media explanations of France's 'gilet jaunes' protests (BBC, 2018; Williamson, 2018; Fourquet & Manternach, 2018). Yet as with the immediate explanations for the 2010/11 WANA events, it may be found that dynamics such as 'actocracy' that I have identified from my empirical findings may better explain these events, with comprehension of these processes important to activists' learning. Given the complexity, contingency and what Tufekci (2017) acknowledges is the human tendency to have little grasp of the implications of new technology (263), actually overlooking these dynamics and offering simplified narratives may compound acceleration as modernity, playing into the process of 'frenetic standstill'.

Therefore, the deeper implications of the narrative surrounding digital media's centrality to resistance have been explored here. Although there may not be anything especially nefarious about some of the literature's over-emphasis on digital media, my empirical research has shown clearly the nuances of the activists themselves, perspectives which must be heeded. These perspectives, combined with the understanding of Rosa's (2015) theory of social acceleration, which thoroughly presents how technology is fundamental to Western processes and narratives of late modernity and capitalism, shows how the narrative regarding digital media's centrality during the 2010/11 events is deeply problematic. It reduces impressions of the pursued 'ends' to limited conceptions of European or North Atlantic states' political and economic modernity. In the context of this study, and perhaps in terms of practical action to respond to the troubling trends that have emerged particularly with regard to recent 'technical acceleration' through digital media, a prominent contribution from Rosa (2015) is his stress on:

A critical diagnosis of *temporal structures or relations of time*. For these designate the site at which systemic imperatives are transformed into cultural orientations for living and acting, as it were, "behind the backs of actors" although reflective in individual collective identities or self-relations (315).

In an era where 'post-truth' and 'fake news' is considered exacerbated by digital media and seems to taint public discourse and social relations—which Tunisian interviewees also touched upon as interlinked with a rapid decline in unity in the country following Ben Ali's departure—the significance of physical spaces of engagement that increase popular participation to resolve political and economic discontent are increasingly necessary.

In this regard, the implications of the 2010/11 WANA events for resistance beyond the digital media narrative are significant, and one example was presented above. This relates to constructive forms of resistance, which in the Tunisian context were the decentralised, bottom-up democratic structures developed during the revolution in the form of the CPRs. The demands and aims that were manifested in these structures

were diverse and did not solely comprise of alternatives to capitalist and state-orientated systems—given that an internal weakness was their deference to established political parties. However, having a diverse space of political inclusion and exchange is an achievement in itself, as well as in the WANA context being a tangible challenge to orientalist discourse and framing of the region. In this regard, my findings from Tunisia build upon the open nature of Rosa's (2015) hypotheses on the ultimate implications of acceleration as modernity; mindful of Rosa's suggestion that "uncontrolled violence" is likely among "the masses excluded from the processes of acceleration and growth" (322)—and continuing the parlance of acceleration—such sites of social change may have posed some manner of brake on the direction of modernity, signposting a possible alternative to this descent into violence.

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Author presentation

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